

## LONDON BOROUGH OF HARROW

### COUNCIL MEETING

7 JULY 2011

#### QUESTIONS WITH NOTICE (ITEM 15)

Fifteen minutes will be allowed for Members of the Council to ask a Portfolio Holder a question on any matter in relation to which the Executive has powers or duties.

1. **Questioner:** Councillor James Bond

**Asked of:** Councillor Bill Stephenson (Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Finance and Business Transformation)

**Question:** “Last year, Harrow’s Citizens Advice Bureau helped over 12,000 people, an increase of almost 80%. It has the second lowest core grant of all 32 London Boroughs, now under £80,000, which is less than a third of the average.

The CAB’s Chief Executive tells me that with a grant of this level, its future financial viability is at risk.

Given that the service is mainly delivered by 39 local trained volunteers who donate time which if paid for would have cost the council more than £225,000, is this the right time to have cut their grant by 27% and leave the CAB facing potential closure?

Should we not instead make a special case for the CAB and actually be working to expand their service to meet the inevitable increase in demand for their services by the most vulnerable members of the population?”

**Answer:** The CAB does a fantastic job and it is totally over-stretched now and it will be even more totally over-stretched with the effects of the Government’s reforms on housing benefits.

The Council also supports its residents. We have our own Housing Advice Bureau and a Recession Busting Group helps the unemployed and helps people with debt problems.

The CAB receives funding of 2 streams. One from the Main Grants Programme but also receives an SLA from the Council. The Main Grants Programme is an annual competitive funding round and again as I have pointed out, has a large number of applications for a relatively small amount of money, £600,000. It is my view that the CAB

should not be part of that process. It is the wrong way to do it and that is why we are moving towards the idea of commissioning. Nevertheless, they got 73% of what they asked for, that is £72,000.

Adults and Housing commission advice services from the CAB and they have a Service Level Agreement of £91,000 added to the £72,000 and again, it seems to me, commissioning is the right way forward.

Harrow Strategic Partnership has received an application from the CAB for support to enable it to expand its capacity in a sustainable way for the immediate recruitment of additional volunteers and a training officer to recruit and train further volunteers for the future.

Harrow Strategic Partnership will be considering this application on 12 July 2011 and I can confirm that Harrow Chief Executives have recommended that the CAB's application is supported in full and that will give a grant of £70,000 and they will be training volunteers to train other volunteers and help make that sustainable.

It still is not a very satisfactory situation and yes, I will be asking the Adults and Housing to look carefully about commissioning. CAB does a fantastic job and we must support them.

**Supplemental Question:** I take on board everything Councillor Stephenson says and I am sure he is very sincere in this, I know he is. I just believe that the Citizens' Advice Bureau should stand alone by its very alone. By its very name "Citizens' Advice", it is there for all sections of the community to call upon and it should not be put through this again.

We heard in earlier debates in the Council this evening various pots of money that cannot just be used willy nilly but I would strongly urge, my question to Councillor Stephenson is, can we not use a small portion of other monies to add to whatever is being committed to ensure that this service is expanded because I truly believe that is what is necessary for the community.

**Supplemental Answer:** Commissioning seems to me to be the way forward and I just pointed out to you that they are likely to get a grant of £90,000 from the Harrow Strategic Partnership to make them a lot more sustainable with more and more volunteers. To remind you, the Council itself does provide services, the Housing Advice Centre and also the Recession Busting Group does a lot of work with the Credit Union. We are doing our very, very best to help those who are most in

need. The real problem is that the Government is causing the problem with their reforms on housing benefits and rents etc.

**2. Questioner:** Councillor Susan Hall

**Asked of:** Councillor Bill Stephenson (Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Finance and Business Transformation)

**Question:** “Can you confirm whether, in the Council's meetings with NHS Harrow over the £2.1 million that has been received under a s.256 agreement, the possibility of giving some of that funding to service-providing voluntary groups was discussed, which s.257 of the Act suggests may be possible?”

**Answer:** I was not at the actual negotiations but I am advised that prior to and following the signed Section 256 on 29 March, regular meetings took place with appropriate officers of the Council & NHS Harrow to discuss opportunities of integrated working offering positive outcomes for vulnerable people in the community. Within these specific meetings there was no discussion of passporting this specific funding to the voluntary groups although there are a variety of initiatives in the Adult Social Care Department that offer opportunities to the third sector.

I will certainly ask that consideration be given to this when we come to consider the next Section 256 agreement which will deal with the £2.4m which has been assigned for 2012-2013.

**Supplemental:** Proposed supplemental was ruled by the Mayor to not be related to the question.

**3. Questioner:** Councillor Susan Hall

**Asked of:** Councillor Phillip O’Dell (Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Environment and Community Safety)

**Question:** “While I'm pleased to see the town centre police team is being retained, I am still concerned that the size of the team is being cut by two. Given the success the team has had at combating pick-pocketing and other such crimes, can you clarify how the newly sized team can operate as effectively as before?”

**Answer:** Thank you for your question Councillor Hall. We would just like to remind Members of Council that the previous

agreements for funding for the additional police officer in the Town Centre had expired. The old scheme had been successful in reducing crime in Harrow Town Centre but during discussions it became clear that the Metropolitan Police Authority, the local police service in Harrow and the Council wanted a new scheme to be put in place.

It is proposed that these officers support principally to the main retail areas in Harrow Town Centre and the Wealdstone Corridor but should operational pressures demonstrate need, the team could be deployed in any of the retail and business areas of our borough. This will be a way of supporting a wider number of businesses and help keep the vitality in our hard pressed shopping centres and therefore we and our partners are confident that the new arrangements will be as effective as the old.

**Supplemental Question:** It is unfortunate that the dithering that happened for the whole year did not mean that the team was kept as it was and it was guaranteed by our administration that it would but, as ever, loads of things took so long that it was too late.

Given that you are proud to say you want to keep the neighbourhoods clean and green and safe, how on earth can you justify this by reducing money towards the specific team that did so well?

**Supplemental Answer:** I would like to add my congratulations to the team that did so well. However, if it was not for my previous predecessor in this, she would have actually signed the two year contract that would have kept the Town Centre team. It was we who inherited another piece of gross incompetency by the last administration that they failed to sign the contract to keep this going and it was our fortune that we inherited the scheme that we could benefit from the Mayor's generous office to match funding. So therefore only would we provide an effective team in partnership with the Harrow Police Service, we will actually save the Council Tax payers of the London Borough of Harrow £93,000 a year. Will she join me in the congratulation of saving that money?

**4. Questioner:** Councillor Barry Macleod-Cullinane

**Asked of:** Councillor Bob Currie (Portfolio Holder for Housing)

**Question:** "Can you please confirm how much external decoration work to the Council's housing stock was completed in 2010-11?"

**Answer:**

In 2010-11 decision was taken not to progress the external decoration programme because we wanted to make sure that:

- (a) the property really needed decorating; and
- (b) we wanted to make sure we charged leaseholders properly using Section 20.

For the first time this year we have made a really good start and the current year's programme has already started and is progressing well, in good weather. A positive move not to be decorating in the winter, which I have raised many, many times in the past before.

237 properties are being decorated this year. Having looked properly at the conditions of the properties we have identified that significant repairs need to be undertaken due to the history of not complying decorations in previous years. As a result we are now developing the new approach to external decorations that has the following strands:

- Wherever possible, removing the need for external decorating;
- Use of a plastic and other timber products, fascia, gutterings and downpipes will wherever practical be low maintenance;
- Scaffolding a building only once and undertaking comprehensive overhaul of the external decorations of the building;
- Focus our spend on internal decorations, making properties bright and more attractive;
- We only have 175 properties with timber frames and 59 blocks with communal timber windows left. All possible wooden window replacements will be made by 2012.

In summary whilst we didn't do any external decorations last year or the year before, we have now started a good programme at the right time of the year and I am optimistic the programme will start rolling properly from now on.

**GUILLOTINE REACHED (the following answers were circulated after the Council, by written response, at the request of the Mayor)**

- 5. Questioner:** Councillor Paul Osborn
- Asked of:** Councillor Bill Stephenson (Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Finance and Business Transformation)
- Question:** “In December last year, you said at a Cabinet meeting that the cost of the 'Let's Talk' campaign to date was just under £13,000. Can you provide both an update on this figure and a breakdown of the areas of cost?”
- Answer:** The second phase of our successful Let's Talk programme has cost a total of £9,800.
- This can be broken down into £6,622 for the survey forms which will go into Harrow People, giving every household in the borough an opportunity to take part.
- The rest was spent on our stand at Under One Sky, banners, other marketing material, advertising and the pop up garden.
- Let's Talk is an important vehicle for this council to re-engage with residents and build trust. We are already seeing its impact on how residents view this Council as indicated in the results of our recent Involvement Tracker. They show an increase from 29% to 43% in the number of residents who think the Council takes account of the views. Proof that Let's Talk is a far better way of engaging and involving residents than Have You Heard!
- Let's Talk II launched at Under One Sky over a week ago and we carried out our second roadshow on Saturday in Harrow town centre.
- There are a further four roadshows coming up and thank you to all those councillors who have signed up to take part and I extend the invitation to take part in this important programme of engagement to my colleagues in opposition.
- 6. Questioner:** Councillor Kam Chana
- Asked of:** Councillor David Perry (Portfolio Holder for Community and Cultural Services)
- Question** “Can you please detail the cost (if any) to the Council of this year's Under One Sky event, as well as confirming the attendance figures?”

**Answer:** The attendance was 8,000 at this year's Under 1 Sky. The net cost to the council was £27,310 including waste/litter clearance and regulatory services/CCTV support. This does not include staff planning time where this is integral to staff post roles or staffing on the day where this operated on a TOIL basis, which we have never costed in the past.

7. **Questioner:** Councillor Paul Osborn

**Asked of:** Councillor Graham Henson (Portfolio Holder for Performance, Customer Services and Corporate Services)

**Question:** "Can you provide an update on when the Council is expecting to switch to the Exchange system?"

**Answer:** The move to the Exchange system will take place between August and the end of October 2011.

This is later than originally planned as a result of work to improve and de-risk the approach to transition. Obviously, as Capita are paid on the basis of delivery milestones, payments will follow the amended timetable.

8. **Questioner:** Councillor Anthony Seymour

**Asked of:** Councillor Keith Ferry (Portfolio Holder for Planning, Development and Enterprise)

**Responded to By:** Councillor Thaya Idaikkadar (Portfolio Holder for Property and Major Contracts)

**Question** "Can you please confirm that the North Harrow Library is to remain on its current site now that Children's Services are moving out of the first floor of the building?"

**Answer:** This administration is absolutely committed to "improving library services".

We made this commitment clear to the electorate in our manifesto, and our actions to date, during our first year in office, demonstrate proudly our commitment to this important undertaking to the residents of Harrow.

We are in a period of unparalleled challenge, and our Administration is rising to this challenge through strong leadership and making tough decisions in an open and transparent way.

Our aim is to develop library services. Our aim is to improve library services. Our intention is to ensure that library services meet both now, and perhaps more importantly in the future, the needs, of all our residents.

So Cllr Seymour, I will confirm that North Harrow, during the term of this Administration, will always have a library to serve the local community. I can confirm that we will work to modernise and improve the North Harrow Library service.

Will it remain in the current building? - to answer absolutely yes to this question, could prevent us from modernising and improving this really important community facility.

What I will say, is that we do not have plans to move the library at the moment, but if a compelling proposal can be developed to improve the service, and this involves relocation, we will off course consider this opportunity and engage fully with our residents and the local businesses, before any decision to relocate is taken forward.

We consider our libraries to be part of the Council family. We are proud of our libraries and we will work tirelessly to ensure that this key service is developed to benefit future generations.

- 9. Questioner:** Councillor Barry Macleod-Cullinane
- Asked of:** Councillor Bill Stephenson (Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Finance and Business Transformation)
- Question:** “After Harrow’s excellent result at the MJ Awards – winning Best Achieving Council – do you believe you have the best possible leadership team with you in Cabinet to continue and build on this success?”
- Answer:** Thank you for the congratulations. The Award was achieved very much by teamwork, ‘working together’ with our staff, our partners, VCS and local residents. I fully intend to continue to build on this success with my team of thirty four hard working and dedicated councillors.
- 10. Questioner:** Councillor Barry Macleod-Cullinane
- Asked of:** Councillor Bill Stephenson (Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Finance and Business Transformation)



**Question:** “Since you last updated us at May’s Cabinet, have you appointed any more members of the Labour Group as trial portfolio holder assistants and have any of them received backdated payments?”

**Answer:** No. If and when I appoint any portfolio holder assistants they will be announced in the normal way as at last May’s Cabinet.