

COUNCIL

16 FEBRUARY 2012

PUBLIC QUESTIONS (ITEM 6)

A period of up to 15 minutes is allowed for the asking of written questions by members of the public of a Member of the Executive or the Chairman of any Committee.

1.

Questioner: Jessica Lawrence

Asked of: Councillor Phillip O'Dell, Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Environment and Community Safety

Question: "When is an investigation going to be undertaken regarding the expenditures of the arboricultural department and the manner in which payments are made to contractor Gristwood & Toms and an investigation into the dissatisfactory works they carry out in mismanaging the trees in the borough which in my neighbourhood of West means pollarding in an excessive and particularly unsightly manner"

Answer: Written answer as follows to be provided as questioner not present.

Gristwood and Toms are a respectable tree maintenance company who have worked for the London Borough of Harrow for a number of years and also hold maintenance contracts with other boroughs in West London. I see no particular reason to investigate the financial arrangements of this contract. However, by co-incidence the tree maintenance contract has been scheduled this year for a routine internal audit. Once completed the audit will contain recommendations that the Council will action according to our financial procedures.

2.

Questioner: Dennis Foxley on behalf of non-teaching staff from Cannon Lane Junior School

Asked of: Councillor Brian Gate, Portfolio Holder for Schools and Colleges

Question: "What consideration has the Council given to the detrimental impact the proposed changes to terms and conditions, (or reductions in salary) to non-teaching staff employed in schools,

would have on the education of children in Harrow schools?

Non-teaching staff have already suffered a pay freeze for 3 years whilst teachers have enjoyed annual increments. A further loss in salary would be divisive, resulting in a demoralised workforce and would erode support that is given to teachers. Without the commitment and goodwill of the non-teaching staff there would be a decline in the provision of high quality teaching and learning in Harrow schools.”

**Answer:
(Provided by
Cllr Henson,
Portfolio
Holder for
Performance,
Customer
Services and
Corporate
Services)**

Thank you for the question. It gives us an opportunity to explain more around the terms and conditions. As you will be aware, the economic climate remains very challenging and like all councils, Harrow has to deal with the Government’s public spending cuts at the same time as addressing an increasing demand for our services.

During 2012/13 and beyond, as shown in the Corporate Plan that is on the agenda tonight, the Council will need to continue to look for efficiency savings to meet the exacting financial targets set by Government. Indeed, as the extent of the cuts to public spending and the Government’s agenda for public service reform became clearer, it plainly showed that the Council is facing some big changes which required us to drive radical thinking about the future shape and size of the Council.

Harrow Council has been challenged to make £62m savings over four years which is equivalent to a third of our controllable budget and every part of the Council needs to contribute to the savings if we are to help protect frontline services.

In their autumn statement last year, the Government announced that there was likely to be a further two years of cuts requiring £10m per year of further savings to achieve in 2015/16.

In the past the Council has a record of being extremely effective in achieving savings for improved efficiencies without the need of extensive service cuts or large scale redundancies that many other councils have had to implement.

Meeting these challenges has involved some highly innovative work that has enabled us both to improve the services we offer and save money and I am proud of the transformation and modernisation that we are delivering across our services. We are also saving money through reducing our property costs, moving staff into the Civic Centre from other premises and reviewing and renegotiating all our contracts for supplies and services, but these measures alone will not achieve the necessary reductions in costs we need to make.

When we set the budget last March we agreed there had to be a

balance between changes to services and changes for staff. Staff costs are one of the Council's largest areas of expenditure, and therefore we have had to look at where we could make savings in our terms and conditions of employment. In considering options it is right that we also take the opportunity to modernise and improve what we offer as well as to save money. Many non-teaching staff would see a benefit from some of the options being considered. This contrasts with a number of other councils which have imposed blanket pay reductions for staff.

We value the contribution of all our staff and we recognise that the tough economic climate has affected all staff and for non-teaching staff the public sector pay freeze, which we now face for a third consecutive year and it is very difficult. We also value the significant contribution non-teaching staff make to the high standards of achievement in our schools.

Unlike most other councils who have implemented variations to terms and conditions of employment with the prime objective to reduce costs, we are taking a more balanced approach to modernising terms and conditions of employment so they effectively support the future needs of the Council, extend choice to individual employees in their employment package and simplify and reduce administration whilst at the same time, reducing employment costs. Indeed, the driving principles that have been set are to modernise, simplify, reduce costs and give greater choice.

Importantly, we recognise that schools' staff are employees of the Council and therefore it would be wrong for us not to consult them when we are considering changes to terms and conditions. Teachers are not being consulted because their terms and conditions are determined by the Government and not the Council.

However, the Council also recognises that the employment position is different for staff in schools. Therefore if, following consultation, the Council decides to offer new terms and conditions; the Council will recommend that schools also implement the new terms but ultimately that decision would be made by each school's Board of Governors.

Supplemental Question: Non-teaching staff in schools do not enjoy the same terms, conditions and benefits as other Council staff (i.e. overtime, car allowance, flexi time and paid holidays). Why are they being grouped together with other Council workers? Non-teaching staff were excluded from all previous consultations on this matter; the staff survey in March 2011, briefings in August and September which we heard nothing about. Headteachers only informed staff in our school of the proposals in January 2012.

Supplemental Answer: The consultation, last year, was dealing with the Council staff and was looking forward to modernising terms and conditions. As we have now moved into a wider sphere, it is only right that we also consult with the non-teaching staff in schools as they too are employees of the Council. All staff should be encouraged to respond to the consultation so those views can be taken on board. At the end of the consultation a number of the options will be revisited and looked at. I will say that at the end of the day for the school staff, non-school staff, it is down to the actual school governing bodies whether they wish to bring those changes in, not the Council.

The Council make a recommendation one way or the other but some of the things that were looked at in the previous consultation, also looked at bringing people up to the London Living Wage which will affect people in schools. It will also look at increasing annual leave, around some of the terms that some people have, not all have annual leave, I appreciate that but some do and it would look at addressing some of those anomalies that are around parts of the Council. The consultation is going to be genuine and I would urge you to respond to it. We can always have discussions later, once the consultation is finished.

3.

Questioner: Jeremy Zeid

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

Question: "What are the costs and revenue implications of Bailiff Incentives that have now come into practice and what is being done to monitor and regulate performance while also protecting those at the receiving end from ill-treatment and unreasonable charges?"

Answer: Firstly, I wish to clarify that we are in the process of tendering for bailiff services. The current contract that we have was set in place in October 2007 and the existing arrangements have not been changed, they are not new.

The existing contracts allowed for bailiff firms to pay back to the Council, on a voluntary basis, a percentage of the fees which they have collected from debtors. On the basis that this is already being done, a new tender will formalise this and make it a contractual obligation for a small percentage to be paid back to Harrow, which will provide an extra guaranteed income stream for the future.

The contract itself contains a section which asks contractors to

set out their fees for different actions and the level of those fees. Bailiffs will only be allowed, and I emphasise, will only be allowed, to charge these fees which have been agreed in the contract. Additionally the evaluation matrix for the contract weights fees more favourably the lower they are set, providing contractors with an incentive to keep them as low as possible.

We already have regular contract liaison meetings with our contractors and this will continue. More formal contract meetings are held quarterly as are meetings with the CAB which brings issues to us for our attention. This together with a complaints register which the bailiffs companies must hold under the contract, provides case studies and lessons for us to learn which are fed back into the process to improve operational efficiency whilst providing safeguards against vulnerable clients.

The contract lays down strict guidelines to ensure that all debtors are dealt with in a professional manner and in order to achieve this, the tender includes sections on customer care and the bailiff code of conduct which must both be met and adhered to.

We are aware that the recession will lead to increase indebtedness, increased unemployment, increased incidents of mental health problems, family breakdowns and increased incidents which may well bring more residents in contact with bailiffs. To counteract this and to ensure the right approach is provided by future contractors, officers will be setting up workshops with any new contractors to ensure extra safeguards are put in place as may be relevant.

It should also be noted that a recent Scrutiny report about indebtedness found that the Council's debt collection was very professionally run and we are looking to suggestions made in their report as to how we can deal with the most vulnerable people, particularly those with mental health problems.

Supplemental Question:

Bailiffs have been given enhanced powers under the last Government and I personally watch the action of some of these professionals (no identification, white van). I am aware of a person who ended up paying £850 for a £60 parking ticket. The bailiffs would not come back to release the clamp for a whole day. They were very threatening, extremely nasty people and had been licensed.

Now would you not agree that these strong arm tactics and charges are, in fact, a disgrace and the public cannot even get to Northampton to challenge these things in the clearance centre there? They are disproportionate and unjust. How many other Harrow residents have suffered this legal extortion, with menaces?

Supplemental Answer: As I indicated to you, I hope that you raised that case with us immediately. It sounds disgraceful, it should not happen and there are safeguards we put in place where bailiffs do not carry out their obligations that we deal with them very strictly. However if people do not report them and if we do not have the reports, we cannot deal with them, so I do not know whether you took it up. If you did not, you can get in touch with me.

4.

Questioner: Joan Penrose

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

Question: “Five of the six users and carer members of the Mental Health Day Care Steering Group put questions to the 6th February Cabinet meeting complaining about the current consultation on mental health day services.

What are you going to do to address our many concerns which include:

1. Consultation questionnaire fails to ask stakeholders (users, carers and staff) what their needs are;
2. Consultation questionnaire fails to state what proposals for new day services actually are – except in the most general terms.”

Answer: I would like to say first that I am very committed, as is everyone in my department, to ensure that the mental health day service consultation results in the best possible services for people.

(Provided by Cllr Margaret Davine, Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care, Health and Wellbeing)

You have raised two specific issues. The point about the questionnaire, it is concerned with the broad shape of the service. It is not concerned with the detailed service specifications, so it is not the right place to be discussing actual needs. It is about the framework and the shape of the service we will have after the consultation and we have received some really, really good feedback.

Last Thursday you asked to meet with the Leader and myself and we have arranged that meeting so we can discuss it there as well. We also agreed, because it was raised at the Cabinet meeting, that we will involve the Steering Group and other service users in the work to actually develop the service specification but that is not what this consultation is about at the moment. It is to get the people who use day services, views on the shape of the service they would like and that is the way, the

spirit, in which we are conducting it.

Supplemental Question: Speaking of the shape of the service, and thank you for that answer, the assumption in the consultation is that day services means day centres.

Now, some of you have heard of the service called "Confidence for Life". It is a new way of working with mental health service users and carers and this was mentioned many times by service users and carers in previous workshops and consultation events over the last few years. Yet, although this model of service is officially a day service, it is not mentioned anywhere as a possibility.

Stakeholders might have illuminating views on such an option for themselves were they to have a chance to consider it. We were hoping that the day centre review would encourage us to be part of a creative exercise in order to bring about much needed change. Could you look into that?

Supplemental Answer: I will look into that, I know a lot about "Confidence for Life". We are very keen to see that functioning in Harrow but, it is not what this consultation is about and you say that the consultation concentrates on day services in buildings, particularly to look and see if there is an appetite among our users to have maybe one Hub building and lots of other services out in the community to encourage and help and support mental health users.

So I will take that on board. It would have come up anyway at the point of doing the service specifications but, I certainly do not agree with you that we are concentrating just on buildings.

5.

Questioner: Ann Freeman

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

Question: "Why does Harrow Council continue to refuse the request to investigate the neglect of people living in the units in Weldon Crescent, Greenhill Road, Field End Road and receiving Floating Housing Support from the Supporting People Service, over 10/11 years, that is prior to change to the new Provider, Richmond Fellowship? (The new service is gradually proving to be everything that a person with mental illness needs to feel at home and to be given confidence and skills to live independently)."

Answer:
(Provided by
Cllr Margaret
Davine,
Portfolio
Holder for
Adult Social
Care, Health
and
Wellbeing)

Well, first of all, I am pleased that you are happier with the improving service which is being provided by the Richmond Fellowship. We discussed this last Friday and you told me there that you were pleased from that point of view.

On your wider point, I am not refusing to look at the services prior to that and the very reason that the new tender was put out to Richmond Fellowship was that we were aware that there were problems in some of those units and that is why we tried to work with CNWL. We were not happy about that and so we put out the new tender to Richmond Fellowship. We do have monthly meetings with Richmond Fellowship and they have not raised any of those concerns but we will ask them.

What I refused to do was to have an independent inquiry which would be costly. The resources I have to use for mental health services and to improve mental health services, I am not willing to spend any of that on an independent inquiry. We will of course continue to ensure that Richmond Fellowship are improving the services, and try to put everything right that went on before but we are nearly one year on and I am very pleased that people are finding that the newer service is an improving and better one.

Supplemental
Question:

Are you, Councillors not uneasy that the neglect happened? That the Council's own quality assurance framework did not stop it happening? That the people, the same people, managers, care co-ordinators, community psychiatric nurses and psychiatrist who had overall charge of those vulnerable Harrow residents in those units and Floating Support, they have mental illness if you do not know, remain caring in our Harrow Adult Mental Health Service now?

Supplemental
Answer:

I was very concerned that the service at the beginning of last year was quite sub-standard. I have tried my best to address that and it is now improving. I have said to you that if you bring me particular instances, I will look into that but, I am not going to pay for an independent inquiry. I am not going to start any kind of witch hunt around people that were serving. We are looking to improve the services step by step as best as we can.