

LONDON BOROUGH OF HARROW

COUNCIL

16 FEBRUARY 2012

QUESTIONS WITH NOTICE (ITEM 11)

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 Barry Macleod-Cullinane

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

Question: With the small fall in RPI inflation since the government's rent determination, will the Council pass on this fall to tenants terms of its rent demands for 2012/13?

Answer: I admire your thirst for education as this is the identical question which you asked me at last weeks Cabinet. I have no reason to change what is in my written answer to you in reply to this same question. I hope you will not find it too confusing.
(answered by Cllr Bill Stephenson)

As you will be aware the Government has a fixed formula for determining the maximum rents to bring about 'convergence' as laid out in the February Cabinet papers. It is RPI (in September) + .5% + £2. RPI in September 2011 was 5.6% and this gives an average rent increase of 6.74% and average increase of £6.45 to £102.15 a week. The lower rate of RPI is therefore irrelevant.

Consultation with TLRCF took place on 30th January 2012. Tenants accepted the increase but had concerns regarding the ability to pay rents following benefit reforms. The additional resources freed up by the Housing Finance reforms will enable investment in services, subject to further consultation, some of which are expected to be targeted to support those most affected by the wider welfare reforms.

The Council has just passed the budget in any case where the rents have been set as above as determined by the Government.

2.

Questioner: Councillor Susan Hall

Asked of: Councillor Phillip O'Dell (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Environment and Community Safety)

Question: "Your administration reduced police numbers by cutting the Council-funded team. Why did you not use this budget as an opportunity to correct said cut and both restore and increase the size of the team, thanks to the 2-for-1 offer from the Metropolitan Police?"

Answer: The good work which the Council-funded Police team is recognised by everyone. This administration is fully committed to providing appropriate and affordable support to the Police as our leading partner in crime reduction. However, as we must all also recognise, the Council's financial position has changed radically since the original agreement was signed which I wish to remind Cabinet members that Cllr. Hall for got to renew. We were therefore able to take advantage of the "2-for-1" funding scheme that has been welcomed as it has allowed us to continue to provide significant of support to the Police in the face of our current circumstances which I know they value. The number of officers provided was determined in consultation with the Police Borough Commander, as were the operational objectives that underpin the new agreement. I remain satisfied that this arrangement offers a sustainable solution which benefits both the Police and our community at large.

3.

Questioner: Councillor Paul Osborn

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

Question: "Why have you not extended to us the same courtesy I always extended to you to ensure you were always briefed on business cases before they were passed and why, in relation to the Mobile and Flexible Working, did the Corporate Director move the arranged briefing to 22nd February on the basis it wouldn't go to Cabinet until March?"

Answer: I am sure you will recall that under your administration the Business Transformation Panel did not meet regularly and you introduced an irregular ad-hoc arrangement.
(answered by Cllr Graham Henson)

I assume that your question regarding business cases, relates solely to the transformation programme Mobile and Flexible Working Project, as you have not advised me of any concerns

regarding the many and various business cases that are produced by officers, as part of our normal business as usual processes.

Unfortunately the Mobile and Flexible Working Project Manager, is on leave this week, so I do not have access to all of the information which I would liked to have used, to respond to this question.

As we all know the Mobile and Flexible Working Project has been ongoing for some considerable time. I have been advised by the Project Manager, that he has maintained good communications with regard to this project and I know you met with him on 17 October 2011, where you also discussed the experience of Mobile and Flexible working at another Council. The subject matter alone suggests to me, that wide ranging dialogue was well established. I have been given to understand that Members within your Group have made a really positive contribution to the development of the project through contact with the Project Manager.

I am therefore really disappointed that you are suggesting that we have not sought to involve your Group in this Project, that is a key building block for a modernised Council, and the success of which, is crucial to the transformation of the Council's business.

The Forward Plan documents, issued from November 2011 to February 2012, have all shown the Mobile and Flexible Working Project, as being presented at Cabinet on 9 February 2012.

I accept that there was discussion with Officers, which considered presenting the Mobile and Flexible Working Project at March 2012 Cabinet. However, this was never agreed, as it was in my considered opinion, essential that the project report was presented at Cabinet, at the same meeting at which we agreed the budget, revenue and capital.

I am aware that Scrutiny Officers were asked to arrange a briefing meeting to discuss Mobile and Flexible Working. I understand that you asked to participate in this meeting and that the Project Manager immediately agreed to this request.

The meeting was originally scheduled for Tuesday 24 January, to follow a discussion involving Councillors Anderson and Wright, and Place Shaping Officers, on another matter. However the meeting had to be rescheduled, as the Project Manager was unable to make the agreed date.

Scrutiny Officers coordinated the revised arrangements, with Wednesday 22 February being agreed. I was unable to make

the other date proposed of 29 February.

The arrangements for the meeting were coordinated by Scrutiny Officers and the Corporate Director, Place Shaping, had no involvement whatsoever, in directing or influencing the date and timing of the meeting. I am sure that if you had asked for a briefing, once you had received last week's Cabinet agenda that this would have been provided without hesitation.

As I have already said, the Mobile and Flexible Working Project is crucial to the development of the Council's business. More importantly it is crucial to the development of the services, which we provide to our customers, the residents and businesses of Harrow.

I really do hope that Councillor Wright will continue to work closely with Councillor Bill Philips and I because their knowledge and expertise in particular, is highly valued, and Paul I would welcome your positive support and assistance, and would enjoy the opportunity to work cross party to deliver a successful outcome for this project.

At this stage we have agreed the budget resources necessary to enable the implementation of our Mobile and Flexible Working Project. This decision has been made subsequent to careful and comprehensive evaluation of available technology, but more importantly the experiences of other organisations, in particular other Councils.

Following tonight's decision in respect of the revenue and capital budgets, we are now ready to initiate our project, and I am very keen that from the outset, that we work in a transparent and collaborative way, utilising all available expertise.

So, not only do I want to act courteously, by ensuring that you have access to information, much more importantly, I hope that you will feel able to work positively and closely, with me, so that together, we can ensure the success of this project.

We are both scheduled to attend the Scrutiny meeting next Wednesday 22 February, and we can agree at that meeting arrangements for the way forward.

4.

Questioner: Councillor Kam Chana

Asked of: Councillor Margaret Davine (Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care, Health and Wellbeing)

Question: It was reported this week that the majority of people in Lambeth who receive Discretionary Disabled Freedom Passes will lose them as a result of new eligibility criteria. Can you confirm both the number and the proportion of recipients in Harrow who will lose their Discretionary Passes as a result of your administration's new eligibility criteria – introduced last October?

Answer:
(Answered by Cllr Bill Stephenson) When we came to power we found that concessionary travel passes were in a mess. There was little or no consistency as to who got a pass and who did not. These decisions were often taken on the basis of doctors' letters contrary to the very strong advice of the Department of Transport. As part of the major Adult Social care consultation we came up with a set of clear criteria for the award of Discretionary Freedom Passes to ensure that anyone with a major disability physical or mental would quite rightly be eligible for such a pass. We did this only after consulting our users and stakeholder organisations such as HAD, CAB, MIND, AGE UK etc for almost a year and involving them in the drafting of the new policy and associated criteria.

We also introduced rigorous consistent tests along those already in place for the issue of Taxicards to ensure that everyone is treated fairly with an independent appeals system.

Our Discretionary Freedom Pass numbers were by far the highest in London at around 1888. Only two other councils award DFPs to over a thousand. Whereas our neighbouring councils Barnet (0), Ealing (9), Hillingdon (2), Hounslow (3) offer less than ten each and 14 overall

Undoubtedly some residents who previously had a Discretionary Freedom Pass will no longer be eligible for one under the new eligibility criteria. In order to ensure that anyone in this position will have plenty of time to make alternative arrangements, we have implemented an 18 month notice period which in effect means that no one will lose their current Discretionary Freedom Pass until March 31 2013. We will send out several reminders starting in May to ensure those affected are reminded to plan for the change.

We believe that by changing the policy we now have a very fair and equitable system which ensures we make the best use of resources to help the most vulnerable. We will keep the matter under continuous review.

5.

Questioner: Councillor Barry Macleod-Cullinane

Asked of: Councillor Mitzi Green (Portfolio Holder for Children's Services)

Question: "The funding for Children's Centres is to be cut by £1 million over the next two years. How have you assured that those residents who rely on the services the Centres provide most of all will not be affected by these cuts?"

Answer: We have already protected the Children's Centres for use by those residents who rely on the services by keeping them open after having to make £1.2million in cuts.

In considering how best this could be done to ensure maximum protection for those residents who rely on the services provided, a major staff, partner and user survey was undertaken, a full report of which was presented to Cabinet in December.

This independent report concluded that parents (97%), partners and staff 'all valued the Children's Centres highly'.

Over three quarters of parents said that they appreciated 'the helpful and welcoming staff' and were positive about the benefits of the co-locating of complimentary services.

Also covered by the survey were a number of focus groups, where there was the opportunity to offer suggestions as to how the Centres could be developed in the future.

Suggestions included, 'widening the age range to provide services for more children' and encouraging 'youth clubs, voluntary organisations and local groups of residents to use the centres'.

51% of parents 'supported charging for some services' and 70% were positive about the principle of parents 'getting involved in helping run services or volunteering themselves'.

In their conclusion the researchers stated that 'Harrow Children's Centres are a vital resource within the community ... and should not close'.

It is within this context that a staff consultation is now underway, looking at achieving 'a sustainable future for our Children's Centres' by introducing a hub and spoke operating model.

This should enable all 16 centres to remain open.

The detail of the model was also presented to the December

Cabinet.

It consists of four main hubs with linked delivery points.

- Four hub managers would be appointed (under the Council's Protocol for Managing Change) and some standardised job descriptions would be developed to increase flexibility and movement across the network.
- The hubs arrangement takes into account geographical location, size and usage of the existing centres and the nature of services currently provided.
- Duplication would be reduced and centres would open as and when needed - either longer or shorter hours than may currently be the case.

In addition to the financial and political imperatives, we have seen in recent years significant demographic changes locally and a raising of the standards necessary to meet Ofsted expectations of 'good' or 'outstanding' for the Centres.

The proposed model would allow us to target staff and resources at those areas where they are most needed and focus on those children, families and young people in the most vulnerable groups. This in turn will lead to improved performance and outcomes, particularly at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage.

In short, the proposal agreed by Cabinet, with any additions arising from the staff /union consultation (closing on Friday 24 February), will:

- Achieve the required savings.
- Sustain the 16 delivery sites.
- Provide a more effective and efficient model of service delivery.
- Ensure users get more of what they want.

Finally, as part of the new Quality Assurance, Commissioning and Schools Division within Children's Services, there will be an opportunity to increase the frequency of user monitoring and engagement. This will enable us to gauge the impact of the changes and further adapt as the local or national environment requires.

6.

Questioner: Councillor Susan Hall

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

Question: “Harrow has the highest average number of people per house in the whole of London. This is because we have solid communities with families sharing homes. Families need houses not flats. In the last 12 months the Council has approved over 400 flats but only just over 100 houses. The Council's own Annual Monitoring Report boasts that they have built “well above the target densities” - cramming people into densely built flats. As Chairman of the Major Developments Panel, why is your administration undermining the structures of family homes and open spaces that underpin much of what is best about Harrow?”

Answer: The Annual Monitoring report 2010/11 provides a summary of the decisions of the Planning Service and activities of the development industry in Harrow over the year. The report shows that during the year, 462 flats and 115 houses were completed. Of these a total of 142 provided 3 bedrooms or above with only 30 units as studio apartments.

(Answered by Cllr Keith Ferry)

Harrow has a range of housing needs, including large homes for families and smaller flats and apartments for young people starting out on their own and older residents seeking to downsize from larger family homes. The Planning Service and Housing Departments together work to negotiate with developers to secure the best the mix of unit sizes and tenure, having regard to the site location, design considerations, affordability, the Boroughs overall housing needs and commercial viability.

Alongside the adopted and emerging planning policies and the Councils housing strategy, the market is also beginning to respond to the changing pattern of demand in the Borough. By way of an example, I point to the recent application by Berkeley Homes in Stanmore – to seek to increase the number of larger flats and to remove entirely and reduce by more than half the number of studio and one bedroom apartments still to be built whilst increasing the number of 2 and 3 bedroom flats by 31 and 45 respectively. These proposed changes were welcomed and supported by the Planning Committee at their meeting in January this year.

The report also records average density of development over each year from 2002/3 onwards. In this regard I am pleased that as a result of an increasingly robust dialogue with

developers and reflecting the aspirations of the community at large, the report shows a significant fall in average density from 613 Habitable Rooms per Hectare in 2009/10, to 404 in 2010/11 for schemes of 10 + units. This figure does reflect a more dispersed pattern of new housing built at appropriate densities across the Borough but illustrates how officers and the Administration, are trying to manage growth needs alongside safeguarding the special character of the Borough.

The Council is also, I hope, adopting tonight a Core Strategy, that provides not only a long term vision for the Borough, but a clear roadmap for development to meet the Boroughs housing needs to 2026. The Council has been able to achieve this whilst safeguarding the green belt, residential gardens and open spaces from development.

7.

Questioner: Councillor Paul Osborn

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

Question: "In the last 12 months Harrow was the worst borough in West London in terms of job creation, and self employment dropped in the last 12 months to the lowest level since 2004. What is your administration doing to help this situation?"

Answer: Although there does appear to be a reduction in the levels of self employment in Harrow, this should be taken in context of the overall levels of Economically Active residents in the Borough and the levels of Employment of Economically Active residents - all of which are the highest of all the West London boroughs. In addition Harrow has the lowest levels of benefit claimants as a proportion of residents seeking work.

(Answered by Cllr Keith Ferry)

Based on figures from the Office for National Statistics, in Harrow, I am really pleased to be able to report, that the number of vacancies has almost doubled from 437 in December 2010 to 923 in December 2011

In comparison to the other West London Boroughs, the ratio between the number of Job Seekers Allowance claimants and unfilled vacancies, show that Harrow has the third lowest level in West London.

Unfortunately the figures from the Office for National Statistics do also show that the level of self employment amongst 16 to 64 year olds has decreased from a peak of 12.3% in 2006/7 to 9.6 in 2010/11.

Although the levels for self employment and job creation have dropped, it should be noted that Harrow:

- has the highest levels of economically active residents in West London;
- has the highest proportion of economically active people in employment in West London;
- and, has the lowest levels of benefit claimants as a proportion of residents seeking work in West London.

What is the Council doing to address employment levels?

Given that employment levels in Harrow are linked to the wider London economy, the Council has a target of maintaining the differential between the JSA claimant levels in Harrow and those of London.

The Council is working on a number of projects to meet this target including:

- helping residents find employment through the Xcite project and the Construction Training Initiative, with over 85 people into work this financial year;
- holding Xcite employment fairs, attended by local business and training providers and regularly attracting over 550 members of the public;
- adopting an Apprenticeship Policy and promoting the launch of the Apprenticeship scheme to promote employment and training opportunities within the Council and the Council supply chain;
- working with the Job Centre to promote the national Enterprise Clubs scheme;
- supporting Harrow in Business to help start up and grow existing businesses through the Transition Fund;
- supporting Reed's DWP ESF Families programme to help people with intergenerational unemployment;
- promoting Reed's Futures programme working with 16 - 19 year olds Not in Education Employment or Training.