

COUNCIL

THURSDAY 22 SEPTEMBER 2016

COUNCILLOR QUESTIONS WRITTEN RESPONSES

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LONDON BOROUGH OF HARROW

COUNCIL MEETING -

22 SEPTEMBER 2016

QUESTION WITH NOTICE

A period of up to 15 minutes is allowed for the asking of written questions by Members of Council or a Member of the Executive or the Chair of any Committee.

Questioner: Councillor Susan Hall

Asked of: Councillor Sachin Shah (Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Strategy, Partnerships and Devolution)

Question 1:

“Does the Leader believe the introduction of the brown bin charges has been a success for Harrow residents?”

Answer:

Yes, this has been a major success compared to other local boroughs which have introduced the scheme. Approximately 36% of Harrow households (who have the 3 wheeled bin service) have signed up for the scheme, making it the most successful in West London. This compares to 15,000 in Ealing and 16,000 households in Brent.

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Question 2:

“Is the Leader of the Council ashamed by Harrow’s decline in recycling rates?”

Answer:

There has been a national decline in recycling due to less packaging being used. Plastic bottles are replacing glass and newspapers are now in decline due to news being read online.

The recycling rate from household collection on the three wheeled bin and food caddy scheme is 47%. As members of the West London Waste Authority, we have held three WEE (Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Recycling) events and numerous Pop Up Road Shows, showing our continuous commitment to improving the borough’s recycling rates and promoting a cleaner and greener Harrow.

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Questioner: Councillor Barry Macleod-Cullinane

Asked of: Councillor Glen Hearnden (Portfolio Holder for Housing and Employment)

Question 3:

“How have the new council homes, built by your Administration, contributed to tackling homelessness problems since 2014?”

Answer:

As you know, the council has started building the first council homes which are due for completion in 2017 and has a pipeline of new homes being progressed. Taking into account the time taken to build new homes from scratch we have also implemented a house purchase programme with 8 family homes purchased and let in 2015/16 and 30 homes now purchased for use as temporary accommodation. We also continue to ensure a proportion of new homes on private developments are made available as affordable housing. Since 2014 over 250 new affordable homes have been completed providing housing opportunities for households in priority housing need as well as low cost home ownership opportunities for those unable to afford outright home ownership.

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Questioner: Councillor Richard Almond

Asked of: Councillor Adam Swersky (Portfolio Holder for Finance and Commercialisation)

Question 4:

“Would you describe one “robust” measure you have already taken to tackle revenue over-spending?”

Answer:

The quarter 1 monitoring position was reported to September Cabinet. We have taken swift and robust action to address the financial challenges, including the rapid implementation of spending controls. It is essential that we are as lean and efficient as possible in everything that we do. To this end, all budgets have been reviewed to identify immediate opportunities for further in-year efficiencies and reductions in spend. So far, these robust actions have delivered just over £1.1m.

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Asked of: Councillor Christine Robson (Portfolio Holder for Children, Schools and Young People)

Question 5:

“How do you propose to bring Children’s Services revenue spending within the budget by the end of the current financial year?”

Answer:

The Council has been transparent in identifying financial pressures as reported to Cabinet in September as part of the Q1 budget monitoring, reporting an estimated council wide net pressure of £3.793m. It is crucial to balance the 2016/17 budget while doing everything possible to protect frontline services. To achieve this, a plan is being put in place to be as lean and efficient as possible. Specifically, this will include the implementation of spending controls, a review of non-essential spend, the improved use of assets, and a range of other efficiency and effectiveness initiatives.

Within the overall council pressure there are pressures of £1.599m associated with demand and complexity in Children’s Services and work is underway to minimise this as far as possible. However, it is anticipated that the Council wide budget will report a balanced position by the end of the year, whilst accepting that there will be pressures and opportunities across the directorates.

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Question 6:

“How many people employed by the Borough, either directly or indirectly, earn less than the London Living Wage?”

Answer:

For our permanently employed staff, we are committed to paying the London Living Wage to staff directly employed by the Council - currently £9.40 per hour compared to the £7.20 per hour National Living Wage. None of our directly employed workforce earns less than this.

Regarding our Agency workers, we pay the National Minimum wage and above to all our agency workers from the first day they work for us. Starting with their 12th week of working for us, the parity applies via the Agency Worker Regulations and we pay them in line with our internal grades (which are at or above the London Living Wage).

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Asked of: Councillor Sachin Shah (Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Strategy, Partnerships and Devolution)

Question 7:

“The average salary of residents in Harrow is just over £31,000 per year. Does the Leader of the Council believe it is right to award pay rises to officers already earning over £100,000 at the expense of residents earning a third of that?”

Answer:

One of the first asks of our Chief Executive was to reduce the Senior Management costs which he did saving over £1m a year for our residents. The issue referred to in the question is where two officers received an increase in their salary but the overall changes actually resulted in a reduction in Senior Management costs by a further £88k, as we were able to delete a further Senior Management post.

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Asked of: Councillor Adam Swersky (Portfolio Holder for Finance and Commercialisation)

Question 8:

“What steps are you taking to ensure that the HRA is balanced, given the 1% year-on-year reduction in rental income, following the change in Government policy – a risk of HRA regime change that Scrutiny previously warned about?”

Answer:

The HRA is in a balanced position despite the 1% reduction but there were consequences of the reduction and the service has been developing new initiatives and new ways of working to ensure that the HRA remains in balance.

In reality, the service has had to stop some of the creative work that it commenced on estate regeneration and purchasing new properties. They needed to stall consultation on 2 estates and stopped buying new properties using HRA resources. The Department has also developed a programme of service reviews aimed at increasing efficiencies and a programme of commercialization projects with the intention of generating new income, e.g. providing kitchen and bathroom sales to staff and private sector tenants.

Consultation has started on options for service reviews and reductions to manage the longer term impact of the 1% reduction; and providing the service can withstand future welfare changes, and that it can manage the impact of continuing costs transferred into the HRA, then there are no changes being proposed at the moment which will have a major detrimental impact on tenants, but this might change dependent upon the success or otherwise of the initiatives to generate income and emerging financial pressures from elsewhere.

Positively though, and despite the 1% reduction, the service is still able to drive the largest estate regeneration programme at Grange Farm and a programme of nearly 100 build infill properties, as well as delivering a newly agreed Better Homes standard which is a far better standard than the old decent homes standard

.It is a shame that the Government reneged on the self- financing settlement that Scrutiny did indeed warn about; Clearly reducing the housing benefit bill for 60% of our tenants who will not benefit a single penny from the reduction, was more important to them than building more homes.

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Question 9:

“Does the Leader of the Council agree with me that the key to social mobility is in providing every child with a good education?”

Answer:

I wholeheartedly agree with you. Although it is not the only factor at play in social mobility, for many young people and their families' education plays a key part in improving upward social mobility, especially for those most disadvantaged. The decline nationally in social mobility in recent years has been a cause of concern to all those interested in challenging disadvantage and helping all our young people live independent and fulfilled lives that contribute to the wider social good as well as to their own. Where social mobility is poor talent is being wasted. Societies with greater disparity in wealth between groups tend to have less social mobility, especially in times of economic hardship.

Harrow is, and has been over many years, a high performing education authority. Its educational standards at all key stages are very high compared to the national average and, more importantly for social mobility, Harrow schools add significant value overall in every key stage of education. This is not easy to achieve and not often replicated across the country. At Key Stage 5 we retain a greater percentage of students than any other borough in school sixth forms. At Key Stage 4 Harrow has been one of the top 10 highest

performing authorities for young people in receipt of free school meals, an important proxy for disadvantage.

In Harrow our education system, under all administrations, has played an important part in contributing successfully to the long term well-being of our citizens. The long tradition of common purpose in supporting a strong education system has brought immense benefits. Our secondary system is based on a comprehensive model and its success, both in terms of attainment and value added, is premised on the right of every child to have the best possible opportunity in the best schools. Almost without exception our secondary sector has been judged good and outstanding repeatedly over time. We have the lowest percentage of young people in the country who are not in education, employment or training after leaving school. In contrast, where there is selection there is often a tail of underachievement, as Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools has indicated, and less opportunity for upward social mobility.

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Questioner: Councillor Richard Almond

Asked of: Councillor Christine Robson (Portfolio Holder for Children, Schools and Young People)

Question 10:

“A report by the Children’s Society published last week highlighted some of the many difficulties facing children leaving care. What is Harrow Council doing to support this vulnerable group?”

Answer:

Harrow Council has a dedicated Leaving care team which offers comprehensive support to care leavers up to the age of 25.

This includes support and advice regarding education, employment and training, the provision of suitable accommodation and a robust independent skills programme including budgeting, health, relationships leisure activities and hobbies

10% of our care leavers are at University. This is 4% higher than the national average of 6%. There is a joint panel with Housing and Children’s services which addresses the allocation of independent Housing to Care Leavers. There is also a range of other accommodation available for those not ready to live independently including staying with their foster carers beyond the age of 18 if appropriate

We have an active Care Leavers Forum where young people have given feedback to the council regarding the services they have received. This has led to a Care Leavers Charter which outlines the specific details of support that will be provided, including financial support. A copy of this Charter is available on request.

All Care Leavers have their own personalised Pathway plan and their own allocated personal advisor who supports them in their transition into adulthood. General feedback from care leavers in Harrow is that they are satisfied with the services, resources and levels of support being made available to them.

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Question 11:

“The Secretary of State for Local Government and Communities said last week; “If we’re going to live with each other, work with each other and tolerate each other, we have to understand each other.” What steps is the Leader of the Council taking in promoting interfaith cohesion among residents in Harrow?”

Answer:

I support the Secretary of State’s aspiration for how our communities should live together harmoniously. We in Harrow have an excellent track record on this, and recently when we asked residents, 79% agreed that people in Harrow got on well together. If the Secretary of State is looking for places to come to understand how diverse communities can live side by side I’d be very happy for them to visit Harrow to see if there’s anything that the Government can learn for the wider country.

However, we as an Administration do not take this for granted and we support where we can the diversity of the borough, including the promotion of interfaith cohesion. We are one of the most faith diverse boroughs as the 2011 Census identified, and to date the council has supported the activities of Harrow Interfaith and their aspirations. The council has brought communities of different backgrounds together to reflect on Harrow’s response to national and international events and we also recognize that cohesion activities are most effective when communities are brought together over neutral activities such as sports and culture. The council continues to take a zero tolerance approach on hate crime, and continues to commission Stop Hate UK, which

covers all forms of hate crime including faith based hate crime. The Council's own internal staff Making a Difference Group has also made headway on this agenda, through for example creating a multi-faith room in the Civic Centre for all faith denominations to use.

Finally, there is also a duty on schools to promote British Values, which includes respect and tolerance of people from different faiths and backgrounds. The Council has supported this work, which I believe is important given our young people should be able to grow up in a fair and tolerant society, which is something this Labour Council fully endorses.

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Question 12:

“Why is this Labour administration incapable of staying within its own budget?”

Answer:

Since coming into power in May 2014, the Administration has contained spend within budget. In 2014/15 and 15/16 underspends were achieved to enable funding to be allocated to key priority areas and to support the authority in future years in light of the financial challenges. In the current financial year, despite significant challenges and a savings target of over £17m built into the budget, a plan is in place to achieve a balanced budget.

Financial performance is detailed below:

2014/15 Outturn

Underspend of £5.381m before transfers to reserves.

2015/16 Outturn

Underspend of £875k before transfers to reserves:

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Asked of: Councillor Graham Henson (Portfolio Holder for Environment, Crime and Community Safety)

Question 13:

“How much savings have been achieved to date in terms of reductions in crews, vehicles and staff numbers from introducing paid-for collections of brown bins, since the majority of households that had brown bins have not signed-up for the paid-for collection?”

Answer:

We are currently achieving a reduction of 1 crew, which equates to a pro rata saving of £75k over 6 months. As the seasonal scheme comes to an end, we envisage reducing this by a further 2 crews, which will give a further £150k saving, pro rata'd over 6 months.

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