

**FULL COUNCIL,
MEMBERS' QUESTIONS**

1 Decent Homes Monies

To the Cabinet Member for Housing, Councillor D White

By Councillor June Alexander

Would the Cabinet member provide a comprehensive breakdown of what Decent Homes monies have been provided to this council, how this money has been spent and what monies are still available to be spent by the end of this current financial year?

Answer:

The Capital Programme has been supported and supplemented by the Decent Homes funding since the 2011/12. The national Decent Homes Programme was extra funds provided for by the GLA and targeted to areas with the largest number of non-decent homes. The extra funds followed a re-bidding process in 2010.

The Capital Programme from the Housing Revenue grant and funds from Decent Homes money are spent focusing on the following key areas:

Decent homes: This work is targeted at non-decent homes to bring them up to the Government set standard. Work includes replacement of windows, kitchens, bathrooms and central heating units etc.

Upkeep works: This includes major repairs, structural works to properties, asbestos removal and management.

Improvements and remodelling: This work includes aids and adaptations to properties depending on tenant need (for example if someone has a physical disability we would installed level access showers.

The programme has been spent as follows:

2011/12

Funding for decent Homes – £11.8m. £8 million from decent homes fund.

Upkeep works – £2.8m

Improvements & Remodelling - £453k

2012/13

Decent Homes – £22.6m. £15m from decent homes fund.

Upkeep works – £5.8m
Improvements & Remodelling - £505k

2013/14

Decent Homes – £22.6m. £15m from decent homes fund.
Upkeep works – £5.9m
Improvements & Remodelling - £692k

2014/15

Decent Homes – £29.1m £23m from decent homes fund.
Upkeep works – £6.1m
Improvements & Remodelling - £600k

The 14/15 programme is fully allocated and committed.

In response to a supplementary question, the Cabinet Member indicated that approximately 3% of Council properties would not have reached Decent Homes standard by the time the funding had ended. He would supply further details on this to the Councillor concerned.

2 **Consultation**

To the Cabinet Member for Financial Management, Councillor Barrett

By Councillor Hyde

When there are government consultations on particular issues would the council agree that it is good practise to make all members aware of them

Answer:

Policy briefings are regularly circulated to Heads of Services and other key staff which include details of current key consultations. The expectation is that these staff would highlight these to their Lead Member and agree a response with them where relevant.

Where a consultation is issued that would have significant implications across the Council, arrangements would be made for appropriate consultation to take place with Members prior to any response being issued on behalf of the Council.

Going forward, arrangements could be made for the details of the more significant Government and other consultations to be included in the regular Calendar Brief. We could also look at using the Members area on the Intranet to feature consultations, if that would be helpful.

In response to a supplementary question, the Cabinet Member agreed that it was important that communications of this type to Members did in fact take place.

3 **Chafford Swimming Pool**

To the Cabinet Member for Culture and Community Engagement, Councillor Wallace

By Councillor J Tucker

Following discussions between the Chafford School Headteacher and Council Officers, Chafford have submitted a planning application to expand their educational facilities and provide a new swimming pool.

What strategy has been agreed between School and Council to ensure the new pool will be built?

Answer:

We're working in partnership with The Chafford School to secure the necessary funding for a new swimming pool on the school site. The planning application submitted by the school shows where the new pool will be built, should the funding be secured.

The Council has, with the school's agreement, included the management of the school sports facilities (including the pool) in the sports and leisure management specification, which is currently being tendered by the Council. Those companies tendering will be invited to submit investment proposals for the school sports facilities as part of their bid. Assuming such bids are received and both the Council and the school are supportive of them, this could be the mechanism for securing the funding that will allow a new pool to be built on the school site.

First stage tenders for the sports and leisure management contract will be received in the summer, so we'll know then if any viable proposals have been submitted.

In the meantime, we'll continue to explore other funding opportunities that might be available through Sport England, the Department for Education and any regeneration programmes in the Rainham area.

In response to a supplementary question, the Cabinet Member confirmed that the cost of the new leisure centre in Romford was approximately £22 million.

4 Performance Packs

To the Cabinet Member for Financial Management, Councillor Barrett

By Councillor Ray Morgon

Would the Cabinet Member confirm his plans to ensure that Members Performance Packs have comprehensive information on each service, including appropriate data, targets, financial performance, and where appropriate, on an annual basis benchmarking against other London Boroughs?

Answer:

As part of the corporate planning framework, the Corporate Plan will be refreshed for 2015/16 and all indicators and proposed targets will be reviewed by the Overview & Scrutiny Board prior to Cabinet on the 4th March.

Under the refreshed regime, the performance reports will include appropriate data, targets, financial information and progress towards longer terms objectives. Some benchmarking data is already included in the current quarterly reports – the next of which is due in March – and benchmarking will certainly continue in the future, where it provides helpful and meaningful comparison to other Boroughs.

In response to a supplementary question, the Cabinet Member confirmed he would liaise with officers and overview and scrutiny chairmen in order to make certain that the agreed timetable for the revision of the performance packs was followed.

5 Briar Road Housing

To the Cabinet Member for Housing, Councillor D White
By Councillor Hyde

How many of the new homes in the Briar Road development have so far been let to local (Briar Road) residents?

Answer:

To date, a total of 53 newly built Notting Hill Housing Trust properties on the Briar Road Estate have been let. In all cases, the Briar Road Local Lettings Policy has been applied. This Policy gives top priority to households currently living on the Estate, so long as they are eligible for the type and size of property they have bid for through choice-based lettings, followed by other Harold Hill residents, then others from Havering.

Of the 53 properties, nine have been let to an existing Briar Road Estate resident. Another 41 properties have been let to an existing resident from elsewhere in Harold Hill, with three homes let to residents from another part of the borough. It can be seen that the new homes are providing much needed housing opportunities for people already living on the Estate and in the wider Harold Hill area.

The Local Lettings Policy has been widely publicised - including sending details to every single household on the Estate. Whenever the top bidder is from the Briar Road Estate, is eligible for the type and size of home, and does not owe the Council significant arrears, the property has been offered to them.

The Local Lettings Policy also gives Briar Road Estate residents the added benefit of having top priority for existing council properties on the estate as they become vacant.

In response to a supplementary question, the Cabinet Member confirmed that the majority of properties on the estate had gone to Harold Hill residents. Rents would be reviewed yearly and he wished to ensure these were at an affordable level for the local area.

6 **St George's Day Events**

To the Leader of the Council, Councillor R Ramsey

By Councillor G Williamson

Havering Council's annual promotion of St. George Day in Romford is to be applauded, but can the promotion be extended to Hornchurch with themed events being held and bunting displayed in the Queens Theatre, Fairkytes, Library and High Street?

Answer:

St George's Day celebrations in Romford are centred around the market – and are always very popular with local people. .

Hornchurch Library does mark the occasion each year with decoration, and I know Fairkytes will do the same this year too.

As you will be aware, the budget proposals include quite a significant cut in funding for events. We've prioritised those that we want to protect, including the St George's Day celebrations in Romford Market, but we're not in a position to allocate additional funding. However, we would support businesses wishing to celebrate St George's Day by putting up their own bunting, or residents who may wish to hold street parties.

In response to a supplementary question, the Leader of the Council felt that such events would need to be considered in light of the other financial priorities of the Council. It was not necessary to have a working party on the issue but Members were welcome to raise the matter at overview & scrutiny if they wished.

7 **Quality of Housing Stock**

To the Cabinet Member for Housing, Councillor D White

By Councillor J Alexander

Would the Cabinet Member confirm what steps are in place to monitor the quality and effectiveness of reactive repairs and capital projects to the council's housing stock?

Answer:

The monitoring arrangements for the repairs service are embedded in the Councils performance monitoring frame work. Members and the Corporate Management Team receive monthly reports on key indicators associated with repairs being completed on time and the levels of complaints received relating to the service. In addition, operational review meeting are structured on a bi-weekly and monthly basis with the senior management teams of both the contractor and the Council meeting on a quarterly basis.

The Breyer contract started in April 2014 and they initially had 20 members of staff from the TUPE transfer, with the rest being sub-contractors. They did this to monitor the amount of repair jobs that were called in and the complexity of work so that they could gauge their staffing levels effectively.

This process of monitoring the amount of repair jobs reported in allowed Breyer to increase their staffing levels to fit the needs of the contract. However, during this recruitment period this did impact on their performance. This was raised by us and Breyer took appropriate corrective action.

More staff were then employed during this time and to date 29 additional members of staff have joined the team, with 19 of them being from the Borough.

In addition, we have put in place more effective monitoring of repairs that are called through so that they are allocated correctly.

We do expect that this will show through in the Spring report.

In response to a supplementary question, the Cabinet Member indicated he was happy to meet with the Councillor concerned to discuss specific cases where kitchens or bathrooms may not be of a satisfactory standard.

8 Breach of Planning Regulations

To the Cabinet Member for Regulatory Services, Councillor Dervish

By Councillor L Webb

When the council is notified by a resident of a breach of planning regulations what is the time scale for instigating enforcement action?

Answer:

We do not have a set timescale for instigating action as the nature of breaches reported is varied.

We assess the harm caused by the breach and try to negotiate a resolution, either by asking for a planning application to be submitted or removing/stopping the breach.

In cases where planning permission would clearly not be granted, formal action would be taken as appropriate. In most cases, it's not always clear whether planning permission would be granted so it's better to ask for a planning application.

A retrospective planning application enables the Council to fully identify details of the breach and allows neighbouring occupiers to be notified and submit comments. Also, if the development is acceptable in principle, planning conditions can be imposed to alleviate any harmful impacts.

Where formal action is justified, an enforcement notice would be served. This would be because of the type and degree of harm identified, because a retrospective planning application had been refused or because those responsible for harmful development failed to submit an application.

9 **Council Tax**

To the Cabinet Member for Financial Management, Councillor C Barrett

By Councillor David Durant

The Local Government Minister has announced that a local council tax referendum must be held if councils propose to increase council tax by 2% or more! This will require some soul searching from the Conservative/EHRG Coalition Administration [and from all councillors] because the public budget consultation proposes extensive cuts and a 2% increase in council tax.

This means the Administration will need to hold a legally required referendum costing about £250,000 or reduce the increase to below 2%! But this would mean more cuts because the Council Leader Cllr Ramsey has said the reserves can be used to pay for a referendum [a one off item] but not to off-set the [ongoing] cuts.

In view of this will the Administration 'bite the bullet' and seek cross-party support to hold a council tax referendum for a figure of 2% or more to ameliorate the cuts and help keep our borough green, pleasant and secure?

Answer:

There will be no need to hold a referendum. The Cabinet report outlines that the proposal is to raise council tax up to 2 per cent; thereby avoiding the need to pay out for a costly referendum.

An increase of 1.99% would not trigger a referendum and would be consistent with the assumptions included in the Financial Strategy approved by Cabinet in September.

Responses from our residents in the latest consultation, showed that they did not want to increase council tax above this threshold. Therefore our proposals reflect our residents' priorities, without the need to have an expensive referendum.

10 **Section 16 Local London Authorities Act**

To the Cabinet Member for Environment, Councillor R Benham

By Councillor Wood

Would the Cabinet Member confirm why this council is reluctant to use powers under Section 16 of the London Local Authorities and Transport For London Act 2003 to ensure that drivers do not cross the footway without a properly constructed crossover?

Answer:

Working according to Section 16 would take officers away from their primary objective of taking action to reduce waste tonnages, and thereby limit increases in waste disposal costs, which currently cost the Council around £12m each year.

There are certain difficulties in applying the Section 16 legislation, so we try and tackle the problem of people driving onto a kerb or along a grass verge in a way that's not as resource intensive.

Under section 16 enforcement action becomes possible 'where the occupier *habitually takes a vehicle across a kerbed footway or verge or knowingly permits a vehicle to cross a kerbed footway or verge*'.

So we'd need to establish that it's a regular occurrence, which means we'd have to go and observe the vehicle several times before we could class it as an offence and enforce against it.

Only then can a notice be given, which can then be appealed at court. If the resident's appeal isn't supported by the court, we can install a dropped kerb at the Council's expense, and then seek to recover the costs through a civil debt.

This is very resource heavy and long-winded, I think you'll agree, and we simply don't have a big enough team to look for and enforce against the offence in this way.

So what we currently do is, we write to the occupiers and invite them to apply for a crossover (dropped kerb). This usually resolves the issue and is much less time-consuming. If this continues, we would then take enforcement action.

In response to a supplementary question, the Cabinet Member confirmed that problems at a specific site he had visited with the Councillor concerned had been due to issues relating to the ownership of a private forecourt. It was also not possible to install bollards at the location due to the need to ensure disabled access.

11 **Legal Status**

To the Leader of the Council, Councillor R Ramsey

By Councillor L Webb

Does this council agree that we are all equal under the law?

Answer:

Yes.

In response to a supplementary question, the Leader of the Council confirmed he was happy to discuss in more detail the Member's concerns that parking enforcement action was not being taken against foreign registered vehicles.

12 **Road Accidents**

To the Cabinet Member for Environment, Councillor R Benham

By Councillor J Ganly

Given the increasing number of incidents where children have been injured, some seriously, near to schools and colleges, would the Cabinet Member confirm what action the council intends to take to improve safety around schools?

Answer:

Firstly, I'd very much like to know where you heard that the number of accidents where children have been injured are increasing, as we believe the numbers are actually very small.

However, in response to head teachers telling us the problems they face with inconsiderate drivers outside their schools, we've stepped up our road safety and enforcement activity significantly. In April last year, we implemented a completely new regime that focused on schools. We highlighted the most important areas and make sure we visit every three weeks as a minimum.

In addition, we have committed to maintain school crossing patrols, while many other councils have either cut them, or are considering stopping them.

Each and every school has a travel plan and we also proactively visit schools specifically to talk to children and parents about key road safety messages.

TfL Local Implementation Plan funding of £390,000 has also been allocated to accident reduction, which includes road safety awareness measures targeted at school pupils, and measures to reduce casualties on roads.

We run regular Smarter Travel events, in schools and every year at the Havering Show, to encourage children and parents to stop using cars and instead walk or cycle to school.

We're doing absolutely everything we can with the resources we have. Our enforcement officers cover an extremely large area, but residents should be assured that tackling parking and driving issues at schools is one of our main priorities.

In response to a supplementary question, the Cabinet Member confirmed that guidance from central Government on the use of CCTV cars at schools was currently awaited and there would therefore be no current change to the use of the cars in Havering.

13 **Money owed to the Council**

To the Cabinet Member for Financial Management, Councillor C Barrett

By Councillor Wilkes

Would the Cabinet Member explain why at a time when members are being asked to agree considerable budget cuts, has this council millions of pounds owing to it in many cases going back several years. (Cllr Julie Wilkes)

Answer:

We want to get the best value for money for every Havering taxpayer, and it is unfair on law-abiding residents that some people try to avoid paying council tax and business rates.

In the last financial year from March 2013 to March 2014, we reduced the total outstanding council tax arrears by almost £460,000. This year, our collection rate is 97.14 per cent, up from 96.98 per cent last year, and putting us the eighth best of all 32 boroughs in London.

Of course we'd like this to be 100 per cent, and to help achieve this we are going to focus on persistent non-payers, who run up the biggest debts. Taking the business rate collection back in-house, and introducing targets, has seen a reduction in arrears.

We monitor debt across the council through a Debt Management Board and have introduced a small, dedicated team to tackle the council tax accounts and work alongside external recovery and bailiff companies, to help recoup what is owed.

We can also make even more improvements through our partnership with Newham, oneSource, and are working towards a joint policy framework for debt management, where we can share best practice. As part of a OneSource review we established a joint business rate service, which will help further increase performance.

There is a lot of good work going on to recoup money owed, and we're not complacent, we'll continue to pursue anyone who owes the council money.

In response to a supplementary question, the Cabinet Member confirmed that a report on the activities of the Council's bailiffs could be supplied. The debt management board was also looking at the issue of arrears.

14 **Albyans Court, Hornchurch**

To the Cabinet Member for Housing, Councillor D White, By Councillor Nunn

Would the Cabinet Member explain why the former sheltered accommodation site in Albyans Court, South Hornchurch has been left boarded up for a number of years with the loss of rent estimated to run into hundreds of thousands of pounds, together with additional costs to maintain and secure the site?

Answer:

Albyans Close was a former sheltered housing scheme, containing 35 units of accommodation, which was becoming increasingly unpopular and hard to let in 2011. When the Government introduced Self Financing for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) in 2012, the Council had to make a decision whether to keep the property, and try to let it, or demolish and dispose of it. If it was included within the properties owned by the Council at that date, the Government would assume that the income from the scheme would be available to the Council, and would expect the Council to take a share of the debt attributable to these properties.

The Council took the view at that time, that it was unlikely that this type of property would become popular, and therefore undertook to the DCLG to either dispose or demolish the properties, and this reduced the level of liability for the Government's national housing debt, on Havering.

When the Council was approved as a developer, by the Greater London Authority, we were able to bid for, and were successful in obtaining grant to demolish the properties, and build, in its place. We obtained £435,000 in grant from the GLA and we are putting £220,000 of our own Right to Buy receipts towards the scheme. We obtained planning permission on 23rd October 2014 to build 19 units – 10 x 2 bedrooled Leasehold for the Elderly properties, and 9 affordable rented properties for the elderly. We are currently tendering the building work, and expect to start on site as soon as we have received tenders and been able to award a contract for the building work.

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Obviously we regret the fact that the properties have been empty for a long time, but they had become unpopular and unlettable, and we have the good prospect now of replacing them with more up to date, and suitable units of accommodation.

In response to a supplementary question, the Cabinet Member confirmed that he would supply a written response to the Member concerned regarding the issue of the amounts of rent, Council Tax and maintenance charges lost to the Council due to properties being boarded up for six months or more.