

COUNCIL, 17th JULY 2013

MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

1 Fixed Penalty Notices

To the Cabinet Member for Environment (Cllr Barry Tebbutt)

By Councillor Brian Eagling

Question:

Motorists using grass verges for parking cause considerable environmental and structural damage which entails expensive reinstatement works. Would the Cabinet Member advise the number of Fixed Penalty Notices issued in each of the last two years for this offence and explain what other actions are being taken to tackle this practice.

Answer:

That's right, parking vehicles on grass verges can cause considerable damage, as does parking on some footpaths because they're not all made to bear the weight and movement of vehicles. However, with increasing car ownership comes a greater pressure on the availability of kerbside parking, and we recognise this.

Where we can, we will install footway parking facilities providing the surface can cope with vehicle weights and frequent movements, and that there's suitable space for pedestrians, pushchairs and wheelchair and mobility vehicle users.

In 2011/12 the Council issued 1151 penalty charge notices to people parked on a grass verge, and 291 were issues in 2012/13. That's a significant fall, which is very positive and shows that motorists are more careful not to park on grass verges.

In response to a supplementary question, the Cabinet Member explained that officers were sent to investigate reports of residents using grass verges or the footway to drive their cars into their front garden areas. Officers would give residents details of the cost of installing a cross-over for the property in question or would prosecute if necessary.

2 Bosworth Field

To the Deputy Leader of the Council (Councillor Steven Kelly)

By Councillor Denis O'Flynn

Question:

When will the proposed improvements to the Bosworth Field adjoining the Briar Road Estate be implemented.

Answer:

After consultation with residents it has been agreed to revamp Bosworth Field to include new play and recreational facilities for younger children as well as a new skate park, a multi-use games court and seating for all residents.

In June, the Council selected a contractor to carry out these works and they have already started to purchase the various pieces of equipment to be installed.

We expect the work to begin in August. This is another promise kept by the Administration.

In response to a supplementary question, the Cabinet Member clarified that the land in question was not part of the Green Belt. Discussions about the area had taken place approximately seven years ago which had resulted in the conversion of a number of garage sites into new housing.

3 New Leisure Centre

To the Cabinet Member for Culture, Towns & Communities (Cllr Andrew Curtin)

By Councillor Jeffrey Tucker

Question:

During the Leader's Speech Debate, my colleague Cllr Durant said, "The new Leisure Centre is an expensive gamble, because putting an ice rink above a swimming pool is **almost** never attempted, because the heat from the pool melts the ice"!

Cllr Tebbutt responded by saying, "You're wrong to say never, because there is already such a facility operating in Southwark. I don't know its name, but it's in Southwark"!

To re-assure Members about the viability of our scheme, can the Cabinet Member provide details of the exact location, opening times and cost to the local Council of the 'Southwark' facility?

Answer:

Unfortunately Cllr Tebbutt was misinformed about the location of the ice rink and swimming pool facility. The facility that is currently being built in London is in Streatham, which is in Lambeth. It is similar in design to what is proposed for the Romford Leisure Development with an ice rink above a swimming pool.

Lambeth Council is working with Tesco and others to provide the facility in Streatham and it is expected to cost the Council in the region of £19million. Thanks to the land-swap deal that we struck with Morrisons, we're able to protect Havering taxpayers from that sort of burden.

The Streatham rink and leisure centre is due to open towards the end of the year.

In response to a supplementary question, the Cabinet Member reported that he understood the pool in Streatham was on target to open towards the end of 2013. Engineering techniques used in the Streatham facility would also be incorporated within the Romford project.

4 Commissioned Bailiffs

To the Cabinet Member for Value (Councillor Roger Ramsey)

By Councillor John Wood

Question:

Would the Cabinet Member respond to the following queries in respect of council commissioned bailiffs:-

- a) On how many occasions in 2012/13 were bailiffs deployed to recover monies owed.
- b) How much was recovered in that period and what was the fee payable to the bailiffs.
- c) How many complaints have been received over the last three years relating to bailiffs.

- d) Does this Council set down guidelines for bailiffs to follow and how is that monitored.

Answer:

The Council commissioned Bailiffs on 8,640 occasions to collect money owed to the Authority.

The Council doesn't pay fees directly to Bailiffs. It is their responsibility to recover the debt and any additional charges that may have been incurred. In 2012/13, bailiffs recovered a total of £1,950,000 of money owed to Havering Council.

It is currently not possible to determine the exact number of complaints received about bailiffs specifically - as these will have been recorded together with a variety of other complaints relating to the relevant area (for example, council tax arrears). This supports the view of officers that we do not receive a large number of such complaints. Consideration is being given to breaking down recording of complaints so that any bailiff complaints are specifically identifiable.

All Bailiff Companies are expected to follow the national standard for Bailiffs. These are set by the Office of Government Commerce. In addition we have our own standards that are part of our debt management policy.

We hold regular meetings with the Bailiff companies and would take immediate action if a complaint about bailiff's behaviour was raised.

5 Building New Council Houses

To the Cabinet Member for Housing, with responsibility for Public Protection (Councillor Lesley Kelly)

By Councillor Keith Darvill

Question:

Will the Administration review its decision not to build new Council Houses?

Answer:

We have, and we've submitted a planning application to build nine new bungalows within the grounds of Garrick House.

This is the first time the Council has planned to build houses in more than 20 years. That's because we recognise there's a specific need for them. We have lot of older people living in homes that are too big for them, while so many families are living in overcrowded homes. We've consulted with residents and designed the bungalows to meet the needs of elderly residents so that they will want to live in them and let other families have the space that they need.

But we're also working with housing associations to provide more affordable social housing across the borough. Each year, more and more affordable homes have been built. In total, 1225 have been delivered in the last four years. That's more than a thousand families who have been able to live in an affordable home thanks to our partnerships with housing associations.

In response to a supplementary question, the Cabinet Member agreed to try and seek out a LGA publication – 'Let's Get Building' which supported increasing the number of affordable Council houses.

6 Universal Credit

To the Cabinet Member for Housing, with responsibility for Public Protection (Councillor Lesley Kelly)

By Councillor Ray Morgon

Question:

Would the Cabinet Member advise what steps the council will be taking to stop a potential increase in rent arrears when Universal Credit introduces benefit payments direct to tenants.

Answer:

The introduction of Universal Credit and the provision of direct payments are only two of a number of changes to benefits that have either recently been introduced, or are due to be happen in the near future. The three main changes that staff have been working on are: the introduction of the under occupation levy, the benefit cap and payments of benefits directly to claimants.

The council has undertaken a lot of work to make sure that people are aware of these changes, and established a multi-agency welfare reform group to co-ordinate efforts. We have contacted every household affected by the change in benefit arrangements and have brought in dedicated debt advisors to complement current advice and support structures. The full list of activities is quite exhaustive and I would be happy to send further details to Councillor Morgon.

The first changes occurred in April 2013 (in particular, the introduction of the under occupation levy) and I am pleased to say that the collection rate of Council rents has not as yet, seen any significant reduction.

7 New Football Pitches at the Manor Gooshays Ward

To the Cabinet Member for Culture, Towns & Communities (Cllr Andrew Curtin)

By Councillor Pat Murray

Question:

Will the Lead Member assure me that no adverse impact on wild life and fauna will arise following the creation of new football pitches on the Manor and will he confirm that any impact on the environment will be monitored and the results of that monitoring will be disclosed to members of the Council.

Answer:

Prior to any works being agreed on Dagnam Park, the Council commissioned two ecological survey reports and an impact assessment report on the proposals to the historic landscape. We are assured that the works will have no long term impact on the local wildlife; minimum impact and disturbance to the local wildlife during the construction; and that the design of future maintenance programmes will consider local wildlife.

We regularly monitor flora and fauna in Havering's parks and adjust maintenance programmes to improve local biodiversity. Dagnam Park is one of the parks that will be monitored in the future and any issues that arise will be addressed as and when required.

In response to a supplementary question the Cabinet Member agreed to send to Councillor Murray the impact assessments carried out in relation to the project as well as of any consultation with other bodies that could be released.

8 Savings 2012/13

To the Cabinet Member for Value (Cllr Roger Ramsey)

By Councillor Clarence Barrett

Question:

Would the Cabinet Member set out in detail what approved savings were NOT fully achieved in 2012/13.

Answer:

In 2010 the council set out a four year plan to reduce its budget by £40 million. In the last financial year we needed to make £10 million of savings -

the details of which were set out in individual service plans that were reviewed by overview and scrutiny committee and Cabinet.

We have delivered the savings that were necessary for last year although the accounts have still to be audited.

In any transformation programme with the scale of savings that Havering has had to make there will be some areas where the programme has to be adjusted, so that where identified savings could not be made within a given year, they are achieved in other ways.

Any savings that cannot be delivered permanently have been covered by substitute savings, and set out in the budget report.

These were:

For the customer services programme, £421k

For the shared services programme, £352k.

We have sensibly set aside a special budget provision to cover shortfalls while our plans are refined. What matters to local people is that we are able to deliver the totality of savings with as little impact as possible on frontline services and taxpayers. I'm pleased to say we are on track to do just that.

In response to a supplementary question, the Cabinet Member explained that, whilst the final figures and audit had not been completed, there would be an underspend that would be applied to one-off items such as new technology or redundancy costs. Havering Council Tax payers were happy with the way resources had been managed.

9 Harold Hill Ambitions Implementation Plan

To the Deputy Leader of the Council (Councillor Steven Kelly)

By Councillor Paul McGeary

Question:

When will the implementation plan for Harold Hill Ambitions be disclosed to Ward Councillors?

Answer:

In 2007, which is when we started doing Harold Hill Ambitions, we went out to consultation – to 1,300 people. In 2008 we published two Cabinet reports which detailed at great length every item to be covered. That was then followed in 2009 by another Cabinet report and was then followed in 2010 by a further progress report.

The Harold Hill Ambitions Board that was set up constitutes the Leader and myself, and various other people, overseeing and delegating activity. Unlike

most people we run on about eight or nine different fronts at the same time. We have a brochure which first set out the plan clearly and there have actually been 16 quarterly updates since then provided to all the local residents through the Harold Hill Ambitions newsletter.

To update members here, just in case they've missed what we have managed to achieve: the Academy is open and delivering excellent education results - one of the things we are very proud of; myplace is open and providing facilities for young people; work is set to begin building a new library; we are building nearly 1,000 homes in Harold Hill which will help us deliver Havering homes for Havering people and in fact in Briar Road the Briar Road tenants will get priority; Central Park will be revamped this summer, as we promised; we will be turning Broxhill into a state-of-the-art sports park; Dagnam Park is being improved as well.

In response to a supplementary question, the Cabinet Member confirmed that details of Harold Hill projects would be given as the projects were delivered. The Cabinet Member felt that the question had only been asked as an election was now imminent.

10 **Beam Reach**

To The Leader of the Council (Michael White)

By Councillor David Durant

Question:

Please provide an up-date on plans for a super-size prison at Beam Reach and the Administration's views on this matter.

Answer:

There has been no further information from the Ministry of Justice about any proposals for a new prison in Beam Reach in Rainham.

The Council believes that such a development would have serious implications for plans to regenerate the wider area which could provide much needed jobs, family homes and improved travel connections.

Residents believe that a new "super" prison would have a detrimental effect on their community and the Council strongly supports this view.

In response to a supplementary question, the Leader of the Council stated that it was not relevant how it was financed, a prison such as this was not in the Administration's plans for Rainham.

11 New Homes Bonus expenditure

To the Cabinet Member for Value (Cllr Roger Ramsey)

By Councillor June Alexander

Question:

Would the Cabinet Member advise how much of the £1.797 million New Homes Bonus is scheduled to be spent on homes related expenditure this year?

Answer:

The New Homes Bonus is an unringfenced grant, and as such, forms part of the overall funding allocated to the Council by the Government. It cannot be viewed as a separate funding source.

Neither should it be seen as 'extra' money. The funds for the New Homes Bonus form part of our revenue support grant, which has been cut in overall terms. In other words, we have less money to spend, not more.

The Council has consulted fully on its budget proposals and these were considered at length by the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Council's planned spending for the year is entirely in accordance with that consultation, and the subsequent decisions taken at Budget Council.

So any decision to spend money on new priorities beyond those agreed when we set the budget would either result in a rise in Council Tax or require new savings to compensate.

12 Voids of Council Homes**To the Cabinet Member for Housing, with responsibility for Public Protection (Councillor Lesley Kelly)**

By Councillor Denis Breading

Question:

Will the Lead member make a statement about the current average number of voids and the average length of such voids of Council Homes compared with 2011 and 2012?

Answer:

During the first three months of 2013/14, the average number of properties that were void – in other words empty between tenancies - was 62 per month.

This is a little higher than the monthly average of 49 properties for the last three years because we are proactively helping under-occupiers who are affected by the housing benefit changes to downsize to a smaller property. As a result, there are more moves taking place within the Council's housing stock and hence more voids, particularly among high demand family-sized accommodation.

So far in 2013/14, the average length of time that a council property stands empty between tenancies is 23 calendar days. The comparable figure for 2010/11 was 22 days, for 2011/12 24 days, and in 2012/13 it was 19 days.

In response to a supplementary question, the Cabinet Member explained the number of voids had gone up because there had been more moves between properties. The percentage figure for voids was similar to that in previous years and she would forward this figure to Councillor Breading.