



## **Questions from the Opposition and Other Non-Cabinet Members Full Council – 10 July 2017**

### **1. Question from Cllr Crane to Cllr McLennan, Deputy Leader of the Council:**

As local government moves into Q2 of an eighth consecutive year of austerity, would the Deputy Leader summarise what this borough has had to cope with and how we have fared?

#### **Response:**

In response to Cllr Crane's question on the impact of eight years of austerity in Brent, that as we know, received some of the highest levels of grant funding. The Council has already made significant savings of £150m between 2010/11 and 2017/18, with a further £14m already identified in 2018/19.

Further savings of £20 million will need to be made in 2019/20. Local Government funding fundamentally changed in 2013/14 where the formula grant was replaced by Revenue Support Grant (RSG) and Business Rates (retained and top up).

However, RSG has reduced from £116m in 2013/14 to £43m in 2017/18 and will be zero in 2020, where the Authority's income reliance will be based on the collection of Council Tax, Business Rates and the Fees and Charges to residents.

In essence, the Council will need to ensure it earns the necessary income to support the most vulnerable services in the first instance.

**2. Question from Cllr Colacicco to Cllr Southwood, Lead Member for Environment:**

Can the Lead Member for Environment please assure residents that Brent council will fight all attempts to drill for shale gas in the borough, and put the health of residents and the environment before revenue?

**Response:**

I know that Cllr Colacicco is an ardent champion of the environment and has taken a lead in voicing local opposition on these matters. I welcome this important question and do appreciate the opportunity that it provides to reassure residents and remind would-be-frackers that this council has, as of 2013, made itself abundantly clear in its opposition to fracking. Before they can explore for shale gas, drilling companies need to have been issued with a PEDL licence (Petroleum Exploration and Development Licence) issued by the Oil and Gas authority.

At the moment, there is no authority granted for any company to do exploratory testing. For the avoidance of doubt, as well as ensuring that any speculative approaches are immediately and publicly rebuffed, in the strongest possible terms, this council will seek further assurance from regional and national government that all relevant policies and plans are sufficient to the task of guaranteeing that this borough's future remains frack-free.

### **3. Question from Cllr Conneely to Cllr M Patel, Lead Member for Children and Young People:**

Could the Lead Member for Children and Young People remind Council how the previous Conservative government's proposals for reducing education funding in this borough would have affected Brent's schools and can she confirm that she is seeking assurances from this government that those plans have now been abandoned?

#### **Response:**

The Department for Education's consultation on the Conservative Government's previous proposals identified that Brent schools would have lost £3.8M of funding from the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). Brent primary schools all stood to lose funding under the proposals and even under the funding protection that was proposed, the average loss for Brent primary schools would have been £30k per primary school. This is a significant sum and whilst individual schools had not set out plans for managing this decrease, this amounts to a half time teaching post for example. Proposals to change funding for children with Special Educational Needs through a particular element of the DSG, the High Needs Block, were also a concern for Brent.

In addition to reducing funding, the proposals neglected to address the specific cost pressures that schools are experiencing, including the national living wage, higher employee contributions to national insurance and the teachers' pension scheme, and the apprenticeship levy. This made the impact of the proposals even more severe.

The Government's current position on schools funding is not clear. The Queen's speech at the opening of parliament made clear the government's intention to pursue what is described as a fairer funding formula, and also included a commitment to increasing the overall school budget as well as continuing the Pupil Premium. It remains to be seen whether this will be sufficient to protect schools from the spending power reductions referenced above. It is particularly important to hear the detail of any revised proposal regarding funding of education for children with Special Educational Needs through the High Needs Block of the DSG. We will continue to lobby through the Department for Education for a fairer funding scheme which supports Brent schools to continue to provide the education our children deserve.

#### **4. Question from Cllr McLeish to Cllr Farah, Lead Member for Housing:**

In lieu of effective national support or leadership, will the Lead Member for Housing set out how Brent has risen to the challenge of tackling what is a multi-layered housing crisis?

#### **Response:**

Political uncertainty following the General Election and the focus on Brexit negotiations, has contributed to delay in publishing much-needed detail for implementing change. For example, there is still a lack of clarity over the extension of the Right to Buy to housing association tenants and the proposal that local authorities should sell high value stock to fund the policy and continuing uncertainty about the timing and content of further welfare reforms affecting Housing Benefit.

More positively, the Mayor has secured the largest ever affordable housing budget for London to deliver new homes across all tenures, including homes at genuinely affordable rents.

In this context, long-term planning is more difficult and local approaches may be subject to change as national policy and legislation is clarified. However, the council has taken or is proposing a number of steps and, following completion of consultation, these will be set out in a revised Housing Strategy. These include:

- Bringing Brent Housing Partnership back in-house to deliver improved services to tenants and leaseholders.
- Introducing the Single Pathway for non-priority homeless households in anticipation of new duties on councils under the Homelessness Reduction Act.
- Implementing the Temporary Accommodation Reform Plan to reduce reliance on and improve the quality of housing for homeless households.
- A development programme for new council housing.
- The New Accommodation for Independent Living programme to deliver new homes for older and vulnerable households.
- A special purpose vehicle, Invest for Brent, to purchase homes in the private sector.
- New engagement structures and partnerships with Registered Providers to ensure Brent maximises investment in new homes through the Mayor's programme and other funding sources.
- Proposals to extend Selective Licensing in the private rented sector to tackle poor conditions and improve management standards (approved by Cabinet but subject to a final decision from the Secretary of State).

**5. Question from Cllr Choudhary to Cllr Hirani, Lead Member for Community Wellbeing:**

Can the Lead Member for Community Wellbeing confirm that this borough has at last received the extra funding for social care services as promised by government?

**Response:**

First let me dispel one myth. This is not extra money. The announcement in March's Budget was for £2billion 'extra' funding over the next three years. In Brent, the Tories and Lib Dems have taken over £150 million from Brent Council, significantly reducing the money that we have available locally to pay for social care.

The Government has completely ignored the fact that Conservatives and the Lib Dems have taken £5.5 billion out of social care in the last few years. In simple balance terms, the £2 billion puts social care in a net position of MINUS £2.5billion.

In addition, the Government has only committed this money for a three year period so as far as we can account for, in 2020, we will be back in the position of -£5.5 billion as the 'extra' £2 billion will no longer be there.

On the additional money, we are expecting the funding to be rolled in to the Improved Better Care Fund process but we have not had the final planning guidance for 2017/2018 nor do we have a publication date yet for this. Therefore, not a single penny of this money has reached a Brent resident to this date and we are well into this current budget year.

The Government is totally failing residents on social care by first cutting our funding, announcing imminent money back into the system and then not providing it. And more recently announcing its ill thought out Dementia tax proposals and we all know how well that went with the public.

**6. Question from Cllr Krupa Sheth to Cllr Miller, Lead Member for Stronger Communities:**

In recent weeks this city has suffered a series of tragic incidents. Understandably, many residents are feeling as anxious and vulnerable as they are angry and frustrated. Will the Lead Member for Stronger Communities set out how Brent has responded?

**Response:**

The council is united with its residents in its shock and condemnation of the recent incidents at London Bridge and in Finsbury Park. As the Leader said in his statement following the Finsbury Park attack, we can be proud of the fact that this has overwhelmingly resulted in displays of unity and compassion amongst the people of London.

Brent's current Stronger Communities Strategy has been in place since 2015. This rightly sought to draw upon our borough's natural strengths of diversity, engagement and mutual respect to build cohesive communities. This is our most effective defence against forces which seek to divide us, including violent extremists and those targeting individual groups with hate crime. From this strategy we launched our Time to Talk events, which have brought people together to share their concerns on a range of issues and focus on developing solutions. Violent extremism and hate crime have each been the topic of such events.

However, the world has moved quickly since the strategy was developed, and I have decided that the time is right to review and update it. We will be focusing on developing grassroots, community-led approaches to tackling these problems, and will engage and work more closely with faith groups, community champions, our local safeguarding boards, councillors and, through digital platforms, with the wider public. This revised strategy, and an action plan to implement it, will be launched in the autumn. Like the previous strategy, it will build on Brent's cohesion and strong sense of mutual pride and tolerance, but will also respond to a rise in hate crime, including that which followed Brexit, and outline a local approach to the Prevent strategy to demonstrate to our communities that they can have faith in us.

Overall, it is important to emphasise that our experiences with Prevent indicate that Brent does not have a visible problem with far-right activity, and there has been nothing major since the South East Alliance march in 2014, where many members attended the counter-demonstration. However, we will remain vigilant when it comes to rooting out and tackling far-right activity and radicalisation, and I will be working closely with Brent Multi-Faith Forum over the years ahead to build a multi-faith approach to tackling the evils of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism.

In the wake of the specific incidents themselves, the council has naturally increased its vigilance for incidents through CCTV, and monitored community and relevant cross-borough tensions, with few reported issues. Officers and I have consulted Brent Multi-faith Forum, as well as key community members and organisations, for any indication of concerns or experiences, and to offer any useful support. Everyone has been encouraged to report incidents to the police, but also to use third-party reporting sites if appropriate, as some members of the community are not comfortable reporting directly to the police. There have been two confirmed charges of hate crime linked to the attacks.

Officers have also liaised with supplementary schools to address their concerns, providing advice from the National Counter Terrorism Security Office both directly and through the supplementary schools newsletter. No concerns have been registered by mainstream schools when consulted.

Looking beyond the council's own response, the Metropolitan Police have enhanced levels of policing on the street by extending working hours, and providing high-visibility patrols around prominent mosques and Islamic locations – these sites are visited by a dedicated police vehicle at least once per shift. Brent Policing Safer Neighbourhood Teams visited all mosques in the run up to Eid, and our own Partnership Tasking Team of police officers have prioritised hotspot locations to help increase the resource in the borough.

## 7. Question from Cllr Colwill to Cllr Farah, Lead Member for Housing:

Following the tragic incident at the Grenfell Tower, the Conservative Group would like to know exactly how many buildings have been found to be a fire risk in Brent and the number of families that could be affected. How many of the Grenfell Tower residents have been re-housed in Brent?

Brent officers have stated that all of Quintain's buildings are up to the required safety standards. Are there other developers building on the Wembley site and have their buildings been checked for fire safety?

We would like a report from the Labour leadership of the location of any buildings which are at risk, what is being done to ensure that they are made safe for our residents and are sprinkler systems going to be installed into high rise flats in the Borough?

### **Response:**

A comprehensive report including information on what is being done to manage the risk across the borough will be submitted to 10 July Full Council meeting. At the point of writing this response (30 June 2017):

- 3 developments have been identified through the government tests as being clad or partially clad with ACM cladding material. All 3 developments have been inspected by the fire brigade, who have stated they have a low risk of fire because they were purpose built, and have a range of fire safety measures in place. Therefore at this stage there is no indication that there will be any need for people to be asked to leave. However, both Housing Associations plan to remove and replace the cladding in the future
- Brent Council has not re-housed any K&C residents, but 2 housing officers were working in K&C and an offer of 10 properties and support to access to Private Sector properties in Brent was made to K&C, but was ultimately not needed.

Brent officers have reported that Quintain has assured them that all of their buildings are up to the required safety standards. Building control have written to all developers to seek similar reassurance, and are awaiting replies. A further update will be given across all of the issues raised in this question in the report to Full Council

## **8. Question from Cllr Ms Shaw to Cllr Butt, Leader of the Council:**

I would like to ask the Leader of the Council - in the light of the terrible fire at Grenfell Towers and all the lives lost, quite naturally there are council residents in Brondesbury Park who are asking specific questions about their specific block. Questions have been sent to the Director of Housing for a response but as he is so inundated, no response has yet been forthcoming. This should not be the responsibility of local councillors but that of BHP and Brent Council until the transition takes place. Officers need to answer questions from residents so that their minds are set at ease.

For example a resident of 'Rosedene' requests that: *"It is important that there is transparency on information sharing, and would like Brent to confirm to residents that the cladding recently used on the roof is safe and meets the approved standard – they would also like a sample of this cladding"*.

Also, a different resident from another block is asking: *"In each high-rise block in the borough, have sprinklers been installed; is there an alarm system; have any flammable materials been used in the building construction; is there more than one exit from each floor; are the gas supply and wiring regularly monitored; are regular fire drills conducted in the blocks; have any adverse comments as to fire risks been made by the insurers"*.

Also, I would like a housing officer in charge of my area to be at hand to visit/or answer details needed from any of my blocks.

### **Response:**

Officers in the Council and Brent Housing Partnership have been and continue to respond to all individual enquiries wherever they come from, including these. Initial responses were sent regarding the correspondence highlighted in this question, confirming what was known at the time and these have since been followed up with more information providing further reassurance.

BHP has carried out estate visits to all 37 of their high rise blocks in Brent. An estate inspector was also on-site on Rosedene on Tuesday the 27th June. The Council, BHP and other Housing Associations are also seeking to provide other opportunities to discuss individual concerns, for example: Local meetings in Alperton (19 June), Watling Gardens (20 June), and South Kilburn (4 July), and Member Briefings – 19 June and 3 July.

Individual enquiries at these events, and on email, are also informing the broader communication response, with Brent Council compiling key information and seeking to signpost to information being posted by other housing associations in the borough. This information can be found at:

<https://www.brent.gov.uk/services-for-residents/housing/grenfell-tower/>

A comprehensive report including information on what is being done to manage the risk across the borough will be submitted to 10 July Full Council meeting.