



Questions from the Opposition and Other Non-Cabinet Members

Full Council – 22 January 2018

1. Question from Councillor Ezeajughi to Councillor Miller, Lead Member for Stronger Communities:

Could the Leader Member for Stronger Communities update councillors on the progress made in procuring a new generation of CCTV units to safeguard the residents of Brent?

Response:

The contract for the CCTV upgrade was awarded in December 2017, following the Cabinet meeting to sign off authority to award.

Initial contract and project planning meetings have already taken place with the initial order of stage one infrastructure having been made. The first stage of the project will concentrate on the additional goods including updating the control room and CCTV System for easier and increased capability of monitoring, increased number and use of deployable CCTV and increase the number of High Definition cameras for high profile town centre locations to increase monitoring capability even further. This should all be completed by the end of Spring 2018.

Concurrently a review of locations with current CCTV coverage will also provide us with the evidence base for any gaps in CCTV coverage of crime hotspots. The second stage of the project plan will be to install any new cameras into locations where there are gaps evidenced and then lastly the final stage will be converting into a wireless enabled network.

2. Question from Councillor Krupa Sheth to Councillor McLennan, Deputy Leader:

Since 2010 how much extra council tax has this authority generated to protect vital services through additional net-dwellings added to the boroughs housing stock?

Response:

The Growth in properties from 1/4/2010 to 30/11/2017 is 11,191. We cannot provide an exact figure as there are variables to be considered so have calculated on the basis of multiplying 11,191 by the average band charge which is between band C and D, of £1,350 and then making an allowance for discounts, CTS etc. (23.5% based on ratio of net debit to gross debit).

This gives us a figure of £11,557,505 for 2017/18.

3. Question from Councillor Conneely to Councillor Farah, Lead Member for Housing and Welfare Reform:

Could the Lead Member for Welfare Reform update councillors on the preparations Brent Council has made in anticipation of the Conservative government's shambolic universal credit roll-out?

Response:

Brent has been live on Universal Credit (UC) since March 2015 on a limited basis relating to new claims from single jobseekers. About 2,200 Brent residents are currently in receipt of UC. All claimants transferring from Housing Benefit are given key information regarding their responsibilities under UC. The Council's website also carries information, advice and a benefit calculator to assist claimants and these are regularly advertised.

The Welfare Reform Strategy seeks to ensure that all claimants are equipped and informed of their new responsibilities on the transfer to UC. Heads of Service from all relevant services including Benefits, Housing, Employment & Skills, Adults, Troubled Families, Substance Misuse etc meet regularly to ensure a joined up approach is being taken across the Council. There are regular meetings to join up with partner organisations (Registered Social Landlord's and the voluntary sector) to help coordinate preparation activities and understanding.

There is regular liaison both with local Job Centre Plus to address practical issues and nationally with Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) via London Councils and other organisations to lobby for policy changes which are in the best interests of the Council and its residents. In recent months there have been a number of concessions and changes to government policy, due in part to lobbying across the sector as well as political pressure.

DWP have now halted all partially live services (such as in Brent) from 1 January 2018 and as such there will be no further new UC claims accepted in Brent until the full service goes live, currently scheduled for November / December 2018. The Benefits Service and colleagues are currently developing a more detailed action plan to cover specific mitigation activities for the six-month run up to the UC full implementation date.

4. Question from Councillor Denselow to Councillor Hirani, Lead Member for Community Wellbeing:

According to the British Red Cross over 9 million people in the UK suffer from loneliness. Can the Lead Member tell us what efforts he is making to address this issue in Brent and can he invite representatives from the 'Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness' to address this full Council at a future date about their work and recommendations?

Response:

Thank you for raising this incredibly important issue. Evidence that we have found in Brent really brings home the damage that social isolation can have on lives. It can be as harmful as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

We acknowledge the British Red Cross and The Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness' efforts to address social isolation. In Brent, we have been proactively working on this issue and have developed our Social Isolation Brent Initiative – better known as SIBI. The service was launched in 2015 so has been running for two and a half years now.

The service has reached 6,000 Brent residents in that time and signposted people to activities as well as hosted activities for people to attend and engage with. We now have people who were socially isolated even volunteering for SIBI and 17 volunteers have moved on to employment.

In 2018, we will be working to further bring SIBI into the mainstream by improving how it interacts with the NHS and having it as a core referral point for GPs in Brent. We are working to tie it up with other support services such as Care Navigation and Carers support so that we can develop a social prescribing service that works for Brent residents and is easy to refer people to for professionals. Perhaps a more appropriate way forward would be to have SIBI presented to Councillors as we have a comprehensive local established service

5. Question from Councillor Long to Councillor Farah, Lead Member for Housing and Welfare Reform:

With the imminent introduction of Universal Credit, the high level of indebtedness and the need to stop people being entrapped by Loan Sharks, what is Brent doing to provide debt advice and promote the use of Credit Unions?

Response:

Advice & Support

A number of local VCS organisations are commissioned or funded by Brent Council to provide welfare benefits / financial inclusion & resilience advice: Citizens Advice Brent, Age Concern, Ashford Place, Bosnia Herzegovina Community Advice Centre, Advice4Renters, Brent Irish Advisory Service, Salusbury World.

Citizens Advice Brent provides a service 2 days per week at Customer Services, Civic Centre and the Bosnia Herzegovina Community Advice Centre & Advice4Renters offer advice at the Harlesden Hub. Age Concern provide a home visit service for elder residents.

Debt Advice will be a key area of advice for the proposed rollout of the Harlesden Hub model to additional locations.

Brent Council's housing service has a Financial Inclusion Team which offers support and signposts tenants to sources of financial management and debt advice, and promotes membership of a local credit union. Housing Associations and social landlords are an important part of our approach to promote financial inclusion and debt advice. Through partnership working we have discussed financial inclusion with housing associations and acted as a point of co-ordination to allow an exchange of information about activities to promote this.

Brent Customer Services' Welfare Team operates two discretionary schemes (Discretionary Housing Payments and Local Welfare Assistance) which are used, amongst other things, to mitigate the impact of welfare reforms including Universal Credit which to some degree provides a more viable alternative than private loan companies. The Welfare Team also provides advice to claimants and signposting to debt advice provision such as the CAB.

In 2016 the local authority agreed a Fair Debt Recovery Policy which applies to debts from Housing Benefit, rents, leasehold major works and service charges as well as Council Tax and business rates.

We have also helped to raise awareness among residents of illegal money lending through ongoing publicity in the residents' magazine and highlighting high-profile convictions as well as working directly with residents to raise awareness of the activities of loan sharks.

Specific activities to promote the use of Credit Agencies are being discussed with the Lead Member

6. Question from Councillor Nerva to Councillor Southwood, Lead Member for Environment:

Please could the lead member outline the key features of the new Tree Management Policy recently adopted by Brent. Specifically can the lead member advise how, when trees are lost through insurance claims, replacement trees are funded by the insurance company or local resident who asked for the tree to be removed.

Response:

Brent has many parks, green spaces and tree-lined streets. These features offer not only aesthetic value but many environmental, economic and social benefits too. We aim to ensure Brent's trees contribute positively to the quality of the local environment; do not pose a risk to safety or of damage to property and are protected from unnecessary harm.

The new Tree Management Policy aims to improve the understanding of tree issues and sets out how the council will fulfil its commitments, including how we:

- Maintain our tree stock;
- Limit the felling of trees to circumstances where it is essential or advisable;
- Carry out reactive and emergency inspections when they are necessary;
- Provide clarity on the circumstances in which the Council will not intervene; and
- Provide public information in advance of planned tree works;

From time to time, a tree may need to be removed to prevent damage to nearby properties caused by its roots. We seek to take action to prevent any damage taking place, but occasionally an insurance claim is made by a resident seeking compensation for damage. Such insurance claims make no provision for the replacement of the tree should it need to be removed.

Residents are able to sponsor new tree planting, including the replacement of any trees scheduled for removal. The standard charge for sponsorship of a new tree is £250, and details of the scheme can be found on the council's website at: <https://www.brent.gov.uk/services-for-residents/environment/trees-hedges-and-grass-maintenance/>. Where a tree associated with a successful insurance claim is removed, we will invite the resident concerned to sponsor a replacement tree.

7. Question from Councillor Maurice to Councillor Southwood, Lead Member for Environment:

Both residents and businesses in the north of the borough find it inconvenient to go to the recycling centre in Park Royal, and many have been using the London Borough of Harrow facility in Kenton. Harrow Council, however, will now only allow their own residents - upon production of proof of Harrow residency - to use the facility.

Can Brent Council liaise with Harrow Council so as to allow local Brent residents to use this Harrow facility? It would reduce congestion / pollution around Wembley and the North Circular Road for those making the trip to Park Royal, and would be convenient for local residents

Response:

Harrow Council made the decision to restrict the usage of their site to Harrow residents from Monday 13th November 2017 because of substantial queues at the site, caused by a significant increase in visitor numbers. In order to make their site manageable for their residents, they have chosen to restrict free entry to Harrow Residents and to implement a £20 charge for taking recyclable waste from non-residents.

Should Brent residents who are local to that site wish to visit they can still do so, but they can only dispose of recyclable material and will have to pay £20 per visit. Businesses have to pay for the disposal of their waste wherever they choose to legally dispose of it and should not be restricted in any way by Harrows Policy.

Allowing residents who live in the North of Brent to access Harrow's site for free does not fit with Harrow's current policy. However, I will raise the issue through the West London Waste Authority (WLWA). Brent residents can also choose to book a bulky waste collection, should they not wish to drive to Abbey Road.