



Questions from the Opposition and Other Non-Cabinet Members

Full Council – 23 November 2020

1. Question from Councillor Trupti Sangani to Councillor Tom Stephens, Lead Member for Schools, Employment & Skills:

There are over 1.4 million children in England who benefit from a free school meal while in educational settings – over the summer, the Government yielded to pressure from Marcus Rashford, the Labour Party and other campaigners and committed to provide meals over the August break.

Since August, the Government has announced no new actions to eliminate holiday hunger and while the material circumstances haven't changed since summer, the Prime Minister has opted not to support free school meals over the October half-term, nor any forthcoming holiday.

Will the Cabinet Member for Children's Safeguarding, Early Help and Social Care outline the extraordinary actions taken by Brent Council to help ensure that no child went hungry over the October half-term, and, to additionally write to the Secretary of State for Education to call upon the Government to take action in advance of avoidable holiday hunger over the Christmas period?

Response:

Officers from across the Council worked in a very short time frame to distribute supermarket vouchers to Brent families whose children are eligible for free school meals, to ensure that Brent children had a meal every day throughout the half term. Brent Council acted to put this support in place because schools are not funded to continue to provide meals for eligible children over the half term holiday and this left vulnerable children without a guaranteed meal each day.

Voucher collection was arranged from two sites in Brent: Brent Civic Centre and the Library at Willesden Green. I am grateful to Brent schools for sharing this scheme with eligible parents and I would particularly like to thank officers from Brent Customer Services and Brent School Admissions teams who worked for three days to distribute the vouchers and also 500 lunch packs a day, provided by the Football Association.

Over three days in half term Brent Council distributed 2,531 vouchers and 1500 lunch packs to families.

Following the national campaign by Marcus Rashford, I note the announcements from HM Government last week regarding a new £170m Covid Winter Grant Scheme.

The Winter Grant Scheme is intended to enable LAs to provide support for food and bills to vulnerable households and families with children particularly affected by the pandemic. Brent Council is reviewing the announcements to determine the local arrangements. The scheme will cover the period to the end of March 2021, with Local Authorities receiving the funding in December 2020.

2. Question from Councillor Faduma Hassan to Councillor Eleanor Southwood, Lead Member for Housing & Welfare Reform:

Since the loss of 72 lives in Grenfell Tower, 176 private blocks with dangerous ACM cladding have been discovered, but only 10 have seen the necessary safety work completed. Through no fault of their own many leaseholders are facing bills of up to £70,000 to pay for the necessary remediation work – and years of disruption.

The scale of this crisis demands a national response, but more than three years on since the fire at Grenfell Tower, thousands of Londoners, including residents in Brent; continue to live in unsafe accommodation.

Will the Cabinet Member for Housing Welfare and Reform lend their support to the 'End Our Cladding Scandal' 10-step plan below and highlight the work undertaken by Brent Council to enhance fire safety protections within council homes?

10 steps to End Our Cladding Scandal;

1. The government must lead an urgent national effort to remove all dangerous cladding from buildings by June 2022.
2. The Building Safety Fund must cover all buildings, regardless of height, and a range of internal and external fire safety defects, not just cladding.
3. The government should provide the money up front and then seek to recover it from any responsible parties or via a temporary levy on development.
4. Social housing providers must have full and equal access to the fund.
5. The government must compel building owners or managers to be honest with residents about fire safety defects.
6. The government should cover the cost of interim safety measures.
7. The government should act as an insurer of last resort and underwrite insurance where premiums have soared.
8. A fairer, faster process is needed to replace the EWS form and funding is necessary to ensure all buildings requiring a form are surveyed within 12 months.
9. Mental health support must be offered to affected residents.
10. Protecting residents from historic and future costs must be a key commitment of new building safety legislation.

Response:

Leaseholders across Brent are being put in an unacceptable position: being expected to foot the bill for hugely expensive fire-related safety works and/or not being clear on how safe their building is and if/when something will be done about it.

In the meantime, many people are unable to sell or remortgage their homes. Earlier this year, the Government extended the use of External Wall Survey Review (EWS1) to buildings of any height, rather than only high-rise blocks. The

forms are required by most mortgage lenders. To make matters worse, there is a shortage of fire engineers to do the surveys and complete the forms, leading to delays and increased uncertainty for leaseholders.

The stress and anxiety that Government failure to take proper action on this cannot be underestimated. I support the 10 steps identified in the 'End Our Cladding Scandal' campaign.

As a landlord, the council takes its responsibility to be open with residents about safety issues seriously and we are continuing to implement works and improvement as quickly and effectively as possible.

We have carried out external wall insulation surveys of 40 Council high-rise blocks that are over 18m high. Issues needing remediation have either been programmed for works or are being investigated further. We have identified potential problems with the external fabric of four First Wave Housing blocks and will carry out intrusive investigations. However our initial findings indicate that remedial action may be necessary and a waking-watch arrangement has been put in place.

With regards to low-rise properties, we are nearing completion of comprehensively upgrading the fire safety of the communal areas of 1100 blocks including the provision of fire doors to resident flat front entrances. The programme will be complete by March 2021.

We have also carried out external wall insulation surveys of 86 privately owned blocks. From the findings it is clear some privately owned blocks are likely to require remediation work and their building owners have been notified of the problems we found. We have also reported our findings to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

3. Question from Councillor Janice Long to Councillor Shama Tatler, Lead Member for Regeneration, Property and Planning:

In May 2020 the Government published statutory guidance in response to the Covid-19 pandemic stressing the urgent need to reallocate road space to facilitate safe social distancing and embolden residents to walk and cycle during and after the pandemic.

Similar schemes across London have decreased levels of air pollution and increased the life expectancy of their residents; taking inspiration from these, Brent Council is delivering on its plans to create more Healthy Neighbourhood schemes, to reduce traffic on residential streets and encourage sustainable modes of transport to address our climate change commitments.

In light of a new national lockdown, will the Lead Member for Regeneration, Property and Planning provide an update on the roll-out of the Healthy Neighbourhood's scheme and apprise full Council of the work undertaken to facilitate feedback from residents; bolster communications; and engage local people on the future benefit of these schemes in their areas?

Response:

As members will be aware, we have implemented (5) Healthy Neighbourhoods schemes using Experimental Traffic Orders with notification letters sent to residents explaining the aims of the schemes and encouraging the community to provide their comments during the trial period as well as informing that the schemes would be evaluated after six months of implementation. This was necessary to meet TfL and DfT requirements to deliver these schemes quickly and a similar approach has been taken by many other London boroughs.

This is a significant variation of the usual process used by the Council for highway improvement schemes, and unfortunately, while it has always been our intention to engage with the local community, this resulted in some misconceptions that schemes would be made permanent without taking fully into consideration their views. Due to the number of objections that we were receiving, and as we were awaiting guidance from TfL on access for the emergency services, schemes were paused in September.

Further to the Extraordinary meeting of the Full Council on 16th October to discuss Healthy Neighbourhood schemes, we have focussed on improving communications and engagement with our communities and a collaborative approach.

A community engagement plan has been drafted which sets out our approach to providing information and regular updates to residents and stakeholders, and listening to their feedback.

The plan includes;

Web pages – We have reviewed and will bolster information on the Brent Council website; www.brent.gov.uk/activetravel which will be used as a hub for providing up to date information to residents and stakeholder groups. This will be regularly refreshed with new meeting dates, monitoring data and materials.

Resident updates - In addition to the formal consultations, hosted on Brent's consultation hub, residents in affected areas will also receive information letters / questionnaires 2, 4, and 6 months after the new measures go in, as well as on their introduction. A Cabinet Member covering letter will also be provided explaining the reasons for the introduction of these schemes, how they support the strategic objectives to respond to climate change, improve air quality and public health. This will allow us to track whether and how resident's views change as the trial progresses, as these schemes often take time to become fully effective (as travel habits adapt).

We will also hold monthly meetings with ward councillors and residents for each area where a scheme has been implemented, throughout the six-month trial period. This shall include socially distanced walkabouts where needed to discuss the scheme operation and suggested improvements. We are also looking at the option of procuring community engagement specialists to support these sessions and to ensure they are useful for residents.

Information leaflets - We have produced an information leaflet to be included in the documents sent to residents, which provides further information on the aim of these schemes, how they are beneficial and information on traffic congestion and emergency service access to address concerns.

Improved signage - We will improve signage around the closures, including advanced warnings of the closures on approach to the road to reduce the amount of traffic driving up to the barriers and turning, as well as temporary explainer signs to explain the new measures and signposting people to the consultation using a QR code and green 'active travel welcome here' signs on planters.

Officers have recently received feedback from the London Ambulance Service and made amendments to remove lockable bollard closures to two of the schemes:

- (i) PM 26 - Dollis Hill Area; Oxgate Gardens, concerns raised as route used by ambulances travelling to Health Centre – The closures to be implemented without lockable bollards only plastic barriers to be used, CCTV at a later date.
- (ii) PM 32 - South of Princes Avenue Area; Berkley Road and Brampton Road Kingsbury, concerns raised about potential traffic on Kingsbury Road. The closures to be implemented without lockable bollards, when CCTV cameras can be installed.

Officers continue to liaise regularly with the London Ambulance Service, with fortnightly meetings arranged as well as the MPS and Fire Services during the experimental period.

The Healthy Neighbourhoods programme will now resume in two phases:

- (i) For the 5 Healthy Neighbourhoods schemes that have already been implemented, but are not fully operational, we are aiming to send out residents update letters and information leaflets the week commencing the 16th November with additional bollards and signs installed the week commencing the 23rd November.
- (ii) For the remaining Healthy Neighbourhoods schemes, notification letters and information leaflets are planned for the week commencing the 23rd November with implementation the week commencing 4th December.

It is therefore envisaged that all schemes will be fully operational by Mid-December.

4. Question from Councillor Michael Maurice to Councillor Krupa Sheth, Lead Member for Environment:

Residents of Kingsbury & Queensbury have queried if Brent Council is facing the prospect of having to replace the newly laid slabs on Kingsbury Road, which were laid only just over a year ago, given it appears that the Council will be incurring thousands of pounds costs to repair them. Some have said that the footpaths do not look structurally right and consider that the standard of work carried out by Brent Council's contractor is of a very poor standard.

Residents have also said that the footfall in Kingsbury Road has been considerably reduced over the last 9 months as a result of the lockdowns and residents are not venturing out as much as they would normally have done.

Can the Lead Member for Environment please advise:

1. Why the Council allowed slabs to be replaced with a different grey colour by the bus stop near Roe green?
2. Was the ground properly surveyed before the work was carried out and, if not, why not?
3. Why, just over a year after they were laid, there are hairline cracks already in the new pavements evident on all almost the whole of Kingsbury Road and, if this is as a result of substandard work, whether the contractors will be asked to rectify the base and replace the cracked tiles?
4. If any work required to be carried out will be under warranty and at no cost whatsoever to the Council and, if not, why given the cost to Council Tax payers?

Response:

We are aware sections of the paving along Kingsbury High Road have suffered from premature cracking. Initial investigations have indicated the underlying problem to be a number of flawed pallets of paving and the method of construction. The issue only came to light upon substantial completion and we were able to amend the design specification for the last phase of the scheme, which has not suffered defects.

We have engaged specialists to test the material and discussions are ongoing with our contractor and paving manufacturer. We will be pursuing compensation from the paving manufacturer and remedial works to install expansion joints will be required at a number of locations. A trial area has been agreed and work will commence within the next month. The hairline cracks do not at the present time give rise to safety concerns.

With regards to the grey paving slabs by Roe Green, this was gas utility works and a Defect Notice has been issued to replace the standard paving with a material that matches the original.