

Members' Question Time

Council meeting, Monday 20th October 2003

Question from Bob Blackman – ALLOCATED QUESTION

The DfES has written to all local education authorities requiring details of the Education Budget before the end of December. What action is the Lead Member proposing, given that this will be before Brent Council has final details of the grant settlement?

Response from Executive Member for Education, Councillor Lyon:

The Council is expected to receive the Government's announcements on Education FSS and key school funding requirements towards the middle of November. We will make our provisional decision on the schools budget, to be communicated to DfES by the end of December, at the Executive Meeting on 8th December. It is too soon to hypothesise precisely what these budgets will be, but most likely we will decide that we are minded to meet or exceed full passporting, in line with government requirements.

Question from Councillor Carishma Gillani – ALLOCATED QUESTION

In Brondesbury Park Ward there is still a problem with excessive bus traffic in Staverton Road. What action are you proposing to overcome this problem and resolve this burden together with London Buses and the Council?

Response from Executive Member for Environment and Planning, Councillor Jones:

We do appreciate the concerns of Staverton Road residents and for some time have been raising the issues with London Buses through our regular liaison meetings with transport providers. We have also raised the need for improved services to new developments such as the Capital City Academy and Willesden Community Hospital, suggesting that a diversion of at least one route would be a contribution to both.

London Buses have failed to agree to a number of requests from the Council to re-route buses away from Staverton Road, including several detailed proposals for alternative routes which would divert excess bus capacity to under-served areas of the borough. The Council has therefore taken the unprecedented step of bringing this matter to the attention of the Mayor of London, the Transport Commissioner for London, and the GLA member for Brent and Harrow.

A copy of the reply from the Mayor of London is available for Cllr Gillani. Other responses are awaited, and though there is nothing further we can do directly at this stage, officers are continuing to provide evidence to London Buses of the need to take urgent action to resolve this problem. The Council has also placed on record with TfL our opposition to London Buses proposal to add even more buses to Staverton Road by increasing the frequency of route 6, which they are seeking to implement early in 2004.

We await the review proposed by the Mayor and will continue to press for alternatives to be considered.

Question from Councillor Paul Lorber – ALLOCATED QUESTION

With Government forcing up Brent's Council Tax, including 22% last year, will the Labour Executive, having just wasted £10,000 on another awayday, confirm next year's rise will be within inflation and if necessary 'local discretion' will be used to help elderly and disabled residents by keeping any rise under inflation?

Response from Executive Member for Corporate Resources, Councillor Coughlin:

Cllr. Lorber surely has enough common sense to realise that no authority could commit to a spending figure before details of 80% of its yearly funding is known? If it is Cllr. Lorber's intention to set a budget within the parameters he indicates and to offer the discounts he indicates then maybe he would like to tell us and the public which frontline services (many of them serving the poor and disabled) he would be prepared to cut to obtain the many millions of pounds worth of savings he would need to honour those pledges? I doubt though whether opportunist populists would ever have the courage to go public with such a statement.

Regarding the subject of local discretion, this has only recently been given approval by Government and I have asked officers to look at the implications and the costs as the Council Tax data does not include whether a person is 65 or over or whether they are disabled. Therefore, it will be extremely difficult to calculate a cost in the first year or even to estimate what provision should be made within the budget to cover any discount. Certain disabled residents do already get a discount, where there have been significant adaptations to a property it moves down a band, and those in Band A also get a discount. I look forward to Cllr. Lorber making a public statement on whether he wishes to propose this in his budget this year.

On behalf of the administration though I will publicly pledge that Brent's Council Tax will be below that of the Lib-Dem run Borough of Kingston, which currently has a Council Tax of £1222. I trust that Cllr. Lorber has written to them in similar terms?

Question from Councillor Helga Gladbaum - BALLOT

I would like to know whether the Environmental Services are responsible for the maintenance, inspection and repairs of rainwater gullies or if they are sub-contracted. What SLAs or performance indicators exist regarding the inspection, maintenance and repairs to rainwater gullies?

Response from Executive Member for Environment and Planning, Councillor Jones:

The Council (Environmental Services) is responsible for the highway drainage, unless it is a trunk road, like the North Circular, in which case it is Transport for London - TFL. This responsibility only extends as far as the connection to the surface water sewer. We have 2 water companies in Brent, Thames and Three Valleys. Thames are responsible for ALL surface water sewer issues in the Borough.

The operations regime can be broken down into 3 aspects:

- Inspection
- Maintenance (Cleaning)
- Repairs

Inspection is covered by multiple input: Highways Inspectors, Streetcare Inspectors, Community and Estate Wardens, members of the public, elected Members and Highways & Emergency Operations operatives all can, and do, report on the condition of the gullies. Such calls are received and urgent problems where possible actioned within 48 hours.

Environmental Services publishes quarterly performance information which shows the quarterly target of gullies to be cleared against those actually cleared. The target for gully cleaning in 2003-04 is 8666. Between April and June 2003, 8569 gullies were cleaned.

Highways & Emergency Operations inspect and clean the gullies twice a year as routine. This is an in house operation won in open competition, and maintained since the advent of Best Value.

There are approximately 25,000 gullies in the borough and the number increases every year due to new developments. At present there are 70 to 80 gullies reaching the end of their useful life. The replacement with a new gully costs around £1,400 complete.

Major repairs to gullies rely on capital main programme funding with the worst sites receiving the highest prioritisation.

Question from Councillor George Crane - BALLOT

Could the lead member for education inform the members what the Council and its partners are doing to promote "healthy living" in schools. How many Brent schools are currently taking part in the Government's "fruit scheme for schools"?

Response from Executive Member for Education, Councillor Lyon:

Fruit Scheme - 55 out of 56 Infant Schools in Brent but are participating in the National Fruit Scheme.

Background

The scheme provides one piece of fruit per day each morning for all children from reception to year 2. Fruit is required to be supplied to high quality standards, i.e. to be deliciously ripe. From the initial pilot in 18 Brent Schools the scheme is now rolled out across Brent (and beyond) and is run centrally from the Dept of Health.

Schools and parents are delighted with the scheme. Anecdotally, schools report young children eating whole apples, rather than cut pieces, asking for fruit snacks and providing a social focus to sharing of fruit and food. Teachers note that children are concentrating longer during the morning because they are not so hungry.

The scheme has also provided the impetus for schools to take a wider look at healthy eating and drinking. For example, many primary schools have replaced fizzy drinks and sweet snacks with drinking water and fruit snacks for the whole school. Even staff report eating more fruit. With the help of the Children's Fund Schools Dietician a number of schools have also been developing a School Food policy aimed at improving the quality of food provided and consumed in the school.

Wider context

The Fruit Scheme is part of the wider Government drive to reduce child and adult obesity and aimed at reducing Coronary Heart Disease and Diabetes. Brent PCT has recently received NOF funding to support the '5 – a – day' (eating 5 portions of fruit and veg per day) strategy. Part of [this bid] will be providing cookery classes in some schools.

Healthy Living

Brent and Harrow Healthy Schools Programme, affiliated to the National Healthy Schools Scheme, provide a framework for schools to raise awareness and contribute to improvements in the health and wellbeing of all children, young people and staff as well as contributing to raising achievement. The health and education themes covered in the programme are:

Personal and Social Health Education (PSHE),

Citizenship,

emotional health and wellbeing (including education on bullying, safety and drugs issues),

sex and relationships education,

healthy eating, and
physical activity

There are currently 43 Brent schools involved and will now have to work towards a more standardised approach. From September 2003 schools wishing to be validated as healthy schools must provide evidence to demonstrate that stringent criteria demonstrating the effectiveness of their programmes, professional development, involvement and outreach to all categories of pupils and young students are being met.

The Government has set challenging targets: as well as providing support to all schools intending to be validated as Healthy Schools, it requires all schools with 20% or more Free School Meals to be in the programme by 2006.

Question from Councillor Neil Nerva - BALLOT

What action is being taken by Brent Council and the Brent Local Strategic Partnership to ensure that Crossrail comes to Brent?

Response from the Leader of the Council, Councillor John:

I have written to Alistair Darling expressing extreme disappointment that his written statement to the House of Commons on 14 July made no mention of Crossrail branches to the north west of London. Rather in the west of London, Crossrail would extend south of the river to Norbiton. Since Mr. Darling's announcement, Council officers have been in contact with representatives of London Regional Metro (LRM), a consortium of construction, transport, legal and financial interests which is proposing a privately financed alternative to Crossrail. This differs from an earlier proposal from Cross London Rail Links (the TfL/SRA joint venture whose route proposal was accepted by the Minister) in that it retains a link to Willesden Junction. This would enable trains from the Watford-Euston line to be diverted through the Paddington-Liverpool Street tunnel section, which is common to both schemes.

The minister has given an undertaking that if viable alternative schemes are put forward, they will be considered as alternatives to the Cross London Rail Links proposal. If an evaluation of the London Regional Metro plan shows a realistic prospect of reviving Brent's link to the proposed new cross London line, consideration will be given to supporting this scheme as an alternative to Crossrail.

The Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) has discussed the Crossrail developments and has concluded that the 'Brent Link' is critical to the future regeneration of the Borough. The LSP therefore resolved at its meeting on 15th October that the Chair (myself) be empowered to write to Alistair Darling and the Mayor of London setting out how important the LSP sees this development and requesting support for the revival of the Brent Link. The letter will go out in the names of all the constituent members of the LSP.

Question from Councillor James Allie - BALLOT

Can the Lead Member confirm the total number of LOCATA bids made by Brent residents since this scheme began and the total number of Brent properties let over that time? What were the maximum and minimum numbers of Bids for a property in Brent and where did these relate to?

Response from Executive Member for Housing, Councillor Thomas:

Since Locata began Brent applicants have made a total of 134,407 bids. This is the largest number of any of the partner Boroughs indicating their high involvement in the scheme.

So far 528 Brent properties have been let using the Locata scheme.

The property with the most bids was a newly built three bedroom house on the site of the old Chalkhill estate which received 404 bids.

The property that received the fewest number of bids was a 1 bedroom second floor sheltered housing flat in New Croft House, Morland Gardens, Stonebridge which received 4 bids.

Thank you for raising this matter with me.

Question from Councillor Arthur Steel - BALLOT

Over the last two years Brent Council has contributed £4.1 million to reserves. Is it legal for the reserves to be depleted in the year prior to the Council Elections in order to minimise the Council Tax?

Response from Executive Member for Corporate Resouces, Councillor Coughlin:

The Director of Finance has a legal obligation under the Local Government Act 2003 to report to Council on the adequacy of balances within any budget proposals, and the Council must have regard to this report in fixing its budget and Council Tax for the year. Any reserves or balances above that amount are of course available for any purpose within the Council's powers that the Council sees fit – including reducing the level of Council Tax. It is not possible now for the Director of Finance to assess what an adequate level of balances is required for a budget in over two years time, as that will depend on the overall financial circumstances and risks that apply at that time.

It is therefore a matter of regret for the residents of Brent that this requirement was not in operation during the last Tory administration when the alluded to tactic was regularly used by the Tories for their own short-sighted dogma.

Question from Councillor Reg Colwill - BALLOT

The Council agreed to resurface Greystone Gardens and Winchfield Close, Kenton, eighteen months ago but now I am informed that this will not take place. How bad does a road surface have to be before it is resurfaced and does the Council not consider that it should honour its commitment?

Response from Executive Member for Environment and Planning, Councillor Jones:

An inspection of the carriageways in Winchfield Close and Wellacre Road, Kenton was carried out following a letter dated 21.5.02 from Councillor Reg Colwill regarding their condition. In the reply to this correspondence dated 30.5.02 from the Highways Maintenance Team it was confirmed that these roads were included in the 2002/2003 condition survey and that the results of that survey did not prioritise either Winchfield Close or Wellacre Road high enough to be included in the budget allocation for carriageway resurfacing 2002/2003. These roads were included in the 2003/2004 Independent Condition Survey and were again not prioritised high enough for inclusion in the 2003/2004 resurfacing programme.

The top priority sites list contains 59 roads. The highest priority scored 17689. Wellacre Road scored 5602 in the independent condition survey and Winchfield Close scored 3883.

The records in Highways Maintenance do not show any request for the resurfacing of Greystone Gardens, Kenton in the last two years.

Greystone Gardens and Winchfield Close will be included in the annual independent condition survey to be carried out in January 2004. The results of this survey will determine the priorities for 2004/05 carriageway resurfacing dependent on available funding.

£350k capital and £80k revenue funds were allocated by this administration in 2003/04 to improve the programme of carriageway repairs. £1.5m capital was provided for a range of highways major works together with £1.329k for principal road resurfacing from Transport for London.

Question from Councillor Valerie Brown - BALLOT

When was the last comprehensive Borough-wide survey of Road Safety around schools and who carried this out? What steps have been taken to meet the recommendations and to address any urgent safety issues arising from the findings? When can all schools expect to have appropriate safety schemes in place?

Response from Executive Member for Environment and Planning, Councillor Jones:

The most recent survey involving schools was undertaken in the mid 1990s to establish and resolve the situation regarding mandatory school entrance markings and school warning signs on the approaches to schools. The work was subsequently fully completed afterwards.

We take road safety for children seriously. Currently road safety work is contained in two areas:

1. Road safety education is provided in depth based on the highest child involved road traffic accidents in the vicinity of schools. All schools receive road safety materials twice per year and formal road safety training is provided to schools once every two years.
2. Brent is fully committed to the Governments Safer routes to School project whereby the children of selected schools (selected on the basis of accidents & congestion) are involved for a full school term in identifying their routes to school, the dangers associated with them, and then what measures can then be taken to improve their safety. This project is funded by Transport for London and for the last 4 years approximately 8 schools per year were involved.

Additionally in all areas where traffic management and safety measures are taking place, schools within those areas are given consideration and where possible appropriate measures taken. 20 mile per hour zones are perhaps a good example of this.

Another example of a safety initiative was the competition for primary school pupils to design posters warning drivers about speeding. This was supported by Transport for London, the television programme "Art Attack" and our own road safety officers. A pupil at Sudbury Primary School won first prize and I was delighted to present this and prizes won by other pupils at the school.