

MEMBERS' QUESTION TIME
COUNCIL MEETING
MONDAY 31ST JANUARY 2005

1. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR BOB BLACKMAN

With the introduction of the Freedom of Information Act the council ordered the shredding of a huge number of documents. Can the Lead Member inform me how many files were removed in her department and how sure is she that no deliberate destruction of any official information took place?

Response from Councillor Kagan:

The statement contained in the first sentence of this question is totally and completely untrue.

As part of the preparation for the Freedom of Information Act, in particular to ensure compliance with Section 46 (Issue of Code of Practice by Lord Chancellor 'in connection with the keeping, management and destruction of their records') and following guidance from the Department of Constitutional Affairs, we have been promoting best practice in records management, and suggesting that service areas review and act on their records retention and disposal schedules. This does not mean that they have been asked to shred anything.

If they are already efficient in records management they will be disposing of old records as set down in the council's policy. Records are only disposed of when they are no longer necessary to council business and always in line with the various legislative and constitutional requirements.

With the huge amount of information held by the council at any time, document management is essential; it saves on space and better utilises officer time. It now has the additional benefit of improving efficiency when answering Fol requests because it prevents the need to search through old and redundant material.

As set out in Section 46 of the Code of Practice issued by the Government:

"9 Disposal Arrangement

9.1 It is particularly important under Fol that the disposal of records – which is here defined as the point in their lifecycle when they are either transferred to an archive or destroyed – is undertaken in accordance with clearly established policies which have been formally adopted by authorities and which are enforced by properly authorised staff."

2. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR VAN COLLE

Quintain Plc is obviously interested in part of their land around the Wembley Stadium being used for a site for one of the 8 major casinos to be built. What is the Executive's current attitude towards this proposal?

Response from Councillor Jones:

The Council has identified Wembley as a major leisure destination for national, regional and local facilities through its Vision and adopted planning policies and related guidance. Wembley is already an established international leisure brand, and the Council has been seeking to attract significant new leisure related development to the area surrounding the stadium to complement to attractions of the new National Stadium and the soon to be refurbished Arena, providing the basis of sustainable employment and other benefits for local people. This objective is also reflected in the London Plan.

Casinos, both large and small, are currently classified as leisure uses within Planning Use Class D2. There is therefore no planning policy presumption against the principle of a major casino in Wembley. It would already be possible for a major casino to be located with the approved Quintain Stage 1 site where 13,700 Square metres of leisure floorspace has been agreed.

The Government have indicated that it is their intention to set up a Commission to examine and recommend locations for 8 regional, medium and small casinos across the country. The Commission is not expected to report until 2006. The precise process around licensing and planning in the future is still unclear.

Whilst no objection is seen to the principle of a larger casino, a casino scheme, like any other submitted to the Council, would need to demonstrate acceptable impacts and in particular bring benefits to local people.

Whilst Quintain have indicated their intentions of promoting a major casino in Wembley, there is currently no scheme before the Council so the Executive has not been required to formally define an "attitude" apart from the commitment to the sustainable regeneration of Wembley as a whole which is shared by the majority of Members.

3. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR LORBER

Why are the Executive trying to sell off Public Land near Copland School potentially worth tens of millions of pounds, and build a 28-storey tower block and two further Housing blocks on Open Space, when residents are totally opposed to both? When will the Executive demand proper Government funding for School redevelopment?

Response from Councillor Jones:

The Council does not own public land near Copland School worth tens of millions of pounds. The freehold interest in the main school site is owned by the governors of the school as is the freehold to the playing fields apart from two parcels of land which are owned by the Council and leased to the school. The Council is proposing to release a covenant on one of these parcels of land in order to help facilitate the complete rebuilding of the school at no cost to the Council. In addition, the Council will seek to protect and enhance benefits for local schools and the wider community by securing wider access to the proposed state-of-the-art facilities.

The planning application submitted by Copland School does not involve residential development on either existing open space south of the pedestrian pathway through the site (it is on the fenced off part of the existing school site) or land currently owned by the Council.

The school application relates to the whole school site, including the main open space, and to two community buildings accessed from London Road. The Council has a freehold interest in these buildings together with part of the existing open space. The application makes provision for the groups who use these buildings to use facilities in the proposed new school, allowing both sites to be incorporated in the open space that will remain.

The Council has made a submission for funding under the Government's Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme which will renew all secondary schools in England to modern 21st century standards.

Brent has not been included in the first two waves of BSF. This decision reflects the Government's criteria of free school meals and poor exam performance; exam performance in Brent schools is above the national average.

As a Council not in an early BSF wave, Brent has been compensated with additional government schools capital resources of £26 million over 2004/5 to 2006/7. This will enable a substantially increased programme of expansion and improvement of Brent schools.

4. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR HARROD

Does the Executive agree with me that hospital patients should be able to contact their friends and family at an affordable cost and that the charges made by *Patientline* for telephone services to hospital patients are exorbitant and represent profiteering at the expense of hospital patients and loved ones?

Response from Councillor Fox:

I am delighted that you have now left hospital and that you are on the road to recovery after your serious accident.

I certainly welcome the comfort and benefits that a direct line to hospital patients can give and I believe that telephone calls both to and from patients in hospital should be at reasonable cost.

5. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR J LONG

Pigeons are still a nuisance. Regular feeding areas are covered in droppings and can be frightening areas for pedestrians. Much of pigeons' food becomes a source of food for rats without wings to enjoy. Again, I ask, what is the Council doing to reduce the feeding of pigeons?

Response from Councillor Jones:

Councillor J. Long's interest in this problem is appreciated and it is recognised that a number of areas in Willesden are particularly affected by pigeon mess as a result of feeding. The worst areas have been targeted for pavement hosing this week and four sites are having signs erected in the next two weeks, asking people not to feed the pigeons (the signs will be in English, Gujarati and Urdu as Hindus are caring of wild birds).

In extreme cases, the Council can use legal powers to prevent accumulations of rotting bird food as it will attract rats. In the majority of cases, however, there is no legal precedent for taking legal action against people feeding birds on the basis that they are littering. This course of action would involve expensive surveillance to catch and identify offenders, a high risk of a prosecution being unsuccessful and a risk of the Council being seen as heavy-handed towards bird-lovers.

Alternatively, measures could be taken to manage the pigeon population in particular areas. This has been tried by some other Councils but has proven to be very expensive. It is hoped that the planned signing and cleaning measures contribute to improving the situation.

6. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR JOSEPH

What has the Council done to help the victims of the tsunami/earthquake?

Response from Councillor Ann John, Leader:

On 31 December, the Council issued a press statement advising residents of ways in which they could donate via the Disaster Emergency Committee, comprising major British charities.

The Council worked with the Sri Lankan community to facilitate a fund raising walk and a candlelit vigil in Roe Green Park. Leading Members attended other fund raising events by other faith groups including a very successful event at the Swaminarayan Hindu Temple in my ward.

On 22 January, the Council held an inter community service to commemorate the victims of the tsunami and to offer our collective sympathy and support to the survivors. A collection was held at that service.

7. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR O'SULLIVAN

Many local authorities are claiming that the Government's 24 hour licensing system will cost them millions of pounds and unlike magistrates, councils will rely on fees. Can the Lead Member inform me what figure will be budgeted for Brent's Licensing system?

Response from Councillor Jones:

The new Licensing Act 2003, starts to come into effect from 7th February 2005. The Act allows applicants to apply for whatever opening hours they wish although it does not advocate, or give automatic rights to, 24 hour opening and it is anticipated that very few applications for 24 hour opening will be received, if any. It replaces a number of older pieces of legislation dealing with the regulation of public entertainments, night cafes/restaurants and alcohol sales, and brings them together under a single scheme to be administered by local authorities.

The estimated net cost to the Council for the first year of operation 2005/2006 is £300,000 which is included in the draft budgets for 2005/06. This is after allowing for estimated income for premises and personal licenses and the loss of income from the former entertainments licensing regime.

The estimated costs cover the full range of expenditure for the service including administration, enforcement and the legal and democratic process.

In common with other London boroughs, Brent officers will be monitoring the implementation of the Act and the costs involved, and representations made to central government through the ALG as required.

8. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR VALERIE BROWN

I am sure the Lead Member knows that Wembley residents would prefer more public toilets to unnecessary Council propaganda. How many additional self-cleaning toilets in the Wembley area could Brent Council rent if it scrapped the £6,000-an-issue, unnecessary, misleading WembleyWay leaflet?

Response from Councillor Jones:

Given the scale and pace of regeneration/development that Wembley is now experiencing the council is obliged to keep residents informed and provide opportunities for people to express their views on the changes planned and proposed. It is suspected that Liberal Democrat Members, so supportive of consultation and information sharing, would be loud in protest if residents were not regularly informed about developments.

Wembley Way is distributed to over 35,000 homes, businesses and schools in the vicinity of the regeneration area and provides a useful additional information source to cover such news items in a more in-depth manner and give contact details for further information. The council has received very positive feedback on Wembley Way and considers the cost per issue to be value for money.

With regard to the issue of toilet provision the Executive is shortly to receive a report on a public convenience strategy for the Borough to ensure the council is meeting the needs of residents and visitors within the resources it has available. In Wembley there is also work underway to identify a site for additional event day toilets in relation to the new Wembley Stadium. These toilets would be funded through monies allocated as part of the S106 agreement with WNSL (Wembley National Stadium Ltd).

9. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR SHAH

Will the Lead Member confirm the sum being written off in uncollected council tax this year, and in the previous 3 years? Is he proud of this record of failure, and will he publicly apologise to responsible Brent residents who pay their council tax but are forced to subsidise non-payers?

Response from Councillor Coughlin:

Councillor Shah is obviously unaware of Council policy, doesn't read financial reports or attend meetings, or all of the above.

I can state therefore, for Councillor Shah's information, that the Council has not written off one single penny in council tax in the past three years. It is the Council's policy to pursue all outstanding monies.

10. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR KANSAGRA

I have followed with interest the proposals for the new Wembley Development. Can the Lead Member inform me if there are proposals for a City Academy and if so what is the location and the time frame?

Response from Councillor Lyon:

Brent continues to increase in popularity as a destination. Brent Schools continue to improve in exam results - GCSE results are now above the national average. The combined effect of increasing parental choice of Brent Schools and the trend in demographics mean that Brent needs to increase the supply of quality school places.

Brent Council is negotiating with a potential sponsor, who will work in productive partnership with the Community for a second City Academy in Brent to be sited in the Wembley area. Any proposal for a new academy and its location and timeframe will be subject to formal consultation.