

FULL COUNCIL – 30th June 2008

MEMBERS' QUESTION TIME

1. IN THE NAME OF COUNCILLOR CRANE:

I am in favour of the Green agenda in Brent but when will we have some action to tackle the growth of weeds on pavements and gulleys in Fryent ward?

Response received from Councillor D Brown, Lead Member for Highways and Transportation:

I am glad to hear that we have your support for the many Green Agenda initiatives which have been introduced by this Administration in Brent since taking power from Labour in 2006 including the introduction of solar panels at the Town Hall.

As you may know weed removal forms part of the Waste Services Contract that started in April 2007. The decision to remove weeds manually using equipment such as garden hoes was taken when the contract was awarded, and recommended by Veolia as a tried, tested and successful approach in both Camden and Westminster.

The Contract has proved successful in the first year, with reduced complaints, increased satisfaction and our best ever independently assessed cleansing scores since records began.

In the first year of contract, we continued to treat weeds with chemicals which linked with arrangements in the last months of the old contract and manual weeding started this year.

Problems have, however, occurred this summer due to a failure, on Veolia's part, to organise themselves and respond in time to tackle weed growth before it became a cause for complaint. I am pleased to say that Veolia have now doubled the number of people dealing with weeds in areas affected following discussions between the Contractor and the Council.

2. IN THE NAME OF COUNCILLOR FARRELL:

How long is the Council's waiting list for replacement wheelie bins?

Response received from the Councillor Van Colle, Lead Member for Environment, Planning and Culture:

There are currently 250 replacement wheelie bins awaited because the contractor has recently had difficulty obtaining bins. These should be delivered to our contractor by the end of July and a concerted effort will be made to supply outstanding orders to residents as soon as delivery has taken place'.

3. IN THE NAME OF COUNCILLOR JOHN:

Some years ago, the Liberal Democrat Group was committed to re-naming the borough as 'the London Borough of Wembley & Willesden' and the Chief Executive is now proposing to rename the borough 'Wembley'. How much would it cost to rename the borough?

Response received from Councillor Lorber, Leader of the Council:

I assume the Leader of the opposition is referring to the issue raised by the Chief Executive in his recent newsletter. While, under the previous Labour Administration, of which you were Leader, this may not have been allowed, he is of course entitled as Head of Paid Service to express his views on this matter, there is no current proposal from the Administration to re-name the borough so the issue

of costs does not arise. If such a proposal came forward, it would of course be subject to widespread public consultation, careful evaluation and costing by Council officers and full council debate.

The Liberal Democrats did, many, many years ago suggest changing the name of the borough to "The London Borough of Wembley and Willesden", this however was because at the time the antics of the Labour party had managed to earn the council the nicknames 'Barmy Brent' and the 'London Borough of Bent'.

4. IN THE NAME OF COUNCILLOR POWNEY:

What is the Lib Dem/Tory administration's policy regarding concessionary rents to socially beneficial businesses such as the Roundwood Park Café?

Response received from Councillor Blackman, Lead Member for Resources:

In general terms all successful businesses provide some social benefit either directly or indirectly to the community within which they operate. This does not and in my view should not require a local authority to provide financial support via a policy of concessionary rents. Given the constraints on the Council's resources, support is better directed toward voluntary organisations and charities through our grant regime which is targeted towards meeting our objectives with outputs that can be measured. It also allows each organisation's case to be evaluated on its merits.

Officers are currently reviewing our existing policy and relationship with the third sector in respect of Council owned property which will culminate in a report to the Executive.

With specific regard to the Roundwood Park Café this tenant has a commercial lease from the Council which includes a review to move to market rent. This is the process currently being followed by officers.

5. IN THE NAME OF COUNCILLOR THOMAS:

On 28 February 2005, Cllr Lorber proposed "More money for voluntary groups and advice services in Brent, the latter of which often have to pick up the pieces resulting from failings in Council departments or BHP". Why has he cut funding to groups like the Brent Private Tenants Rights Group?

Response received from Councillor Allie, Lead Member for Housing and Customer Services:

The Council funds the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) and the Brent Community Law Centre to provide advice services in Brent. Since 2005/6 the advice budget has increased by around £18,000.

The Brent Private Tenants Rights Group (BPTRG) receive funding from the Council to maintain, organise and support representative tenants organisations. Due to the government's under-funding and miscalculation of population figures, this Administration has made some very difficult and challenging decisions to balance the Council's budget for 2008/9 which have included actions to deliver the Labour Government's demanding Gershon savings across internal and external services. In real terms this Council's Grant is being cut every year. The impact on the BPTRG budget resulted in a reduction of approximately £1,500 in their funding, though they still receive more funding now than in 2005.

The significant reduction in BPTRG's funding arises from the introduction by this Labour government of the Legal Services Commission (LSC) reforms in October 2007 which has reduced funding to this organisation by approximately £40,000 in 2008/9. The Council has no direct control over these issues however we continue to liaise with the LSC to keep abreast of developments.

With regard to wider voluntary sector issues, during the last year a scrutiny task group review of Main Programme Grant funding from the council to voluntary organisations has been undertaken. This included widespread consultation with voluntary organisations. As a result of that review, changes have been made to the Main Programme Grant processes which have resulted in over £120,000 being freed up to fund new organisations and projects this year. This Administration is making more

efficient use of the resources available to us and are ensuring a greater focus on delivering our key priorities. In the next financial year we will be introducing a rolling, themed funding approach which will offer stability to voluntary organisations by agreeing funding for three years. We are committed to working in partnership with voluntary sector agencies and will, later this year, be holding the first annual voluntary sector conference jointly planned and hosted by the council and local voluntary agencies, as well as working closely together to develop a voluntary sector resource centre in the Borough.

If Councillor Thomas is honestly concerned about funding of advice agencies he should have the strength of character and condemn the cuts being imposed by his own Labour Government and join us in campaigning against those cuts.

6. IN THE NAME OF COUNCILLOR V BROWN:

Can the lead member for Highways and Transportation confirm what progress there has been to stop Southern Railways terminating the service at Clapham Junction?

Response received from Councillor D Brown, Lead Member for Highways and Transportation:

I am aware of your campaign for this service to continue on behalf of local residents which I on behalf of this Administration and the Council am happy to support.

Since being notified of the proposed service changes, I and officers have made representations to Southern Railway expressing the Council's opposition to the termination of the West London line at Clapham Junction. Together with a number Local Authorities I wrote to the Secretary of State for Transport in November 2007 clearly outlining the reasons for our dismay and disappointment.

More recently a representative of Southern Railway attended the Public Transport Liaison Meeting of 5th June 2008 where she described the service changes coming into effect December 2008,

At the meeting it seemed that some success has been achieved as Southern Railway advised that the service was to continue to East Corydon which allows easier interchange for people travelling to or from Gatwick from Wembley

However sadly the peak trains only go to Clapham Junction and as Wembley Central is a peak hours only service at present Brent may not benefit from this. I will continue to make representations on this issue.

7. IN THE NAME OF COUNCILLOR CASTLE:

Will the Leader please update the Council on his meeting with the Heritage Lottery Fund in respect of Dollis Hill House?

Response received from Councillor Lorber, Leader of the Council:

I was pleased to be able to meet with Wesley Kerr, Chairman of the Heritage Lottery Fund in London, to ask about the possibility of assisting with funding for the renovation of Dollis Hill House and to express the Council's support for the project following similar lobbying from Brent East constituency MP, Sarah Teather.

As Leader of the Council, I was pleased to speak about the hard work and determination over many years of individuals involved in the Dollis Hill House Trust, who have long campaigned for the damaged and derelict building to be restored.

In contrast to the previous Labour Executive, who were quite happy to consign this site to history and send in the bulldozers, we have allowed every possible avenue to be explored that might bring a positive community use for the site.

After laying down some strict criteria outlining the types of development we would find acceptable, we received expressions of interest from several organisations. After considering officers' advice, we felt the proposal from Training for Life represented the best option for redevelopment of the House and the Stables area whilst still maintaining the character of the park.

I was delighted when earlier this month, the Heritage Lottery Fund, whose support was vital if this project was to have a realistic chance of proceeding, announced that they would contribute £1.2 million to the renovation. They agreed with us about the value of the job creation and social enterprise that Training for Life wish to bring, as well as the value of restoring the House and bringing this venue back to life.

Two more factors are needed to bring success. The first is a viable business plan from Training for Life showing how they will sustain their operation. The second is financial support from the Mayor of London to honour the commitment given by the previous Mayor, to fund up to half the redevelopment costs if the other half were obtained.

8. IN THE NAME OF COUNCILLOR MS SHAW:

Can the Executive please say what they have done to try to deal with problems being faced by residents in Staverton Road of dozens of buses passing through their road every hour?

Response received from Councillor D Brown, Lead Member for Highways and Transportation:

This Administration and Brent Council have recognised the issues arising from the number of bus movements on Staverton Road and has consistently promoted measures to mitigate the impact on local residents. The No. 6 route was successfully diverted from Staverton Road to serve the Willesden Sports Centre and City Academy.

The council has lobbied for the diversion of the No 52 route to Willesden Green underground station, but to date, London Buses have not accepted this proposal. I have written to the new Mayor expressing our concerns and will continue to press the new Administration at City Hall to try and find a solution for the residents of Staverton Road.

9. IN THE NAME OF CLLR H B PATEL:

Could the Lead Member please report on the level of Council Tax Collection in the current year and how this compares with previous years?

Response received from Councillor Blackman, Lead Member for Resources:

We achieved the highest ever levels of Council Tax collection in 2007/08 - with 95.37% achieved (inclusive of recovered costs) - or 94.59% exclusive of costs.

The following table shows how this performance compares to previous years.

Council Tax Liability year	Collection (inclusive costs)	Collection (excluding costs)
2003/04	90.97%	90.6%
2004/05	93.41%	92.7%
2005/06	93.56%	92.7%
2006/07	94.17%	93.2%
2007/08	95.37%	94.59%

As can be seen collection has improved year on year since 2003 and Brent has been highlighted as one of the most improved authorities in the country by the Department of Communities and Local Government.

Collection performance in 2008/09 is already 0.8% higher than at the same time in 2007/08 so we look forward to continuing the upward trend

The Administration is committed to pursue those that can pay but won't pay by all means open to the Council while being flexible with those residents in genuine financial difficulties.

10. IN THE NAME OF CLLR H M PATEL:

Please can the Lead Member give an update on the future position of the Strathcona Centre and what proposals the Executive has to enhance the facilities for this much needed centre?

Response received from Councillor Colwill, Lead Member for Adults, Health and Social Care:

The community care service has been consulting on the provision of day services for people with learning disabilities, in order to provide more modern person-centred care and outreach support. This consultation included relatives of users who attend the Strathcona Day Centre, along with the 2 other Council run Centres.

A letter was sent to relatives on 4th June informing them that 'a summary of consultation views and questionnaires showed no one wants a day centre to close and the support is valued. It also showed many people would like improvements in the day opportunities for their relatives. We are therefore looking at how we can improve the service overall and maintain a sufficient number of day centres within existing resources'.

We will be revising options in light of this and consulting on reformed options within 3 months. Any developments, including those for Strathcona, would be considered as part of the overall strategy for modernising day services.