



SUMMONS ITEM **6**

LONDON BOROUGH OF BRENT

COUNCIL MEETING 27th OCTOBER 2008

MEMBERS' QUESTION TIME

1. QUESTION IN THE NAME OF CLLR ARNOLD:

What action is the Council taking to increase the provision of advice services such as the Brent Private Tenants' Rights Group to assist residents facing debt management problems as a result of the world wide credit crunch?

Response received from the Lead Member for Housing and Customer Services:

The Brent Private Tenants Rights Group (BPTRG) is funded by the Council to provide tenant engagement services not advice services. However, the Legal Services Commission (LSC) fund BPTRG for specialist housing advice. This allows BPTRG the opportunity to tackle some debt issues where they are relevant to the housing issue, however, BPTRG do not provide debt advice on a general basis.

The Council funds the CAB to provide generalist advice services, the funding allows the CAB to access a number of other funding streams, in particular the Legal Services Commission (LSC). Most simple debt issues can be resolved via the generalist advice service with all complex matters resolved via the LSC funded debt advisor. The Council's SLA is flexible, as demand changes the SLA allows flexibility to respond accordingly. Council Officers are also able to book appointments for customers with the CAB via the referrals protocol. The CAB is also funded by the Councils Children & Families Service to provide advice to parents and carers of children aged under 5 at all twelve Children and Families Centres. Other partners in the borough include, Brent Housing Partnership and Fortunegate who also fund the CAB for specific work on rent arrears and associated debt advice.

The Council's internal Housing Advice Service also provide advice and support on debt issues on specific housing related matters, a range of services including negotiations with landlords for rent arrears and income maximisation. All Housing Advice staff have recently received debt advice training, to enable them to give general advice on this issue, to help prevent homelessness. We are also working with the CLG to work up a mortgage rescue scheme, for households who are threatened with repossession. This scheme is likely to be facilitated by the Tenancy Protection Team through Willesden County Court.

In line with the SLA for such services, Officers are required to conduct a strategic review of advice services during the next financial year; the review will consult with all parties, taking account of the various funding streams, identify demand and shape future services. In the interim, Officers hold regular quarterly monitoring meetings to discuss the service and any necessary improvements.

2. QUESTION IN THE NAME OF CLLR VAN KALWALA:

What action is the Council taking to monitor its investment portfolio with particular reference to monies in overseas financial institutions, which are not subject to the UK regulatory authorities?

Response from the Lead Member for Resources:

The main step that the Council has taken to reduce the risk to its investment portfolio is to reduce the size and scope of its Treasury Lending List to other institutions. At present the Council will only deposit with very high quality UK banks, money market funds, building societies, local and government authorities and supranational institutions that have government guarantees. The Council is not currently depositing with overseas banks until the market turmoil has reduced. This will have implications for returns and lending opportunities, but is felt to be appropriate at present.

The Council retains some overseas exposure, however, outside of the Icelandic banks, until the existing certificates of deposit/cash deposits mature. The exposures are as follows:-

a] Certificates of deposit (CDs) with Union Bank of Switzerland (UBS) (£2.45m maturing on 31st December 2008) and Unicredito Italiano SpA (£2m maturing on 24th December 2008), managed by the Council's external manager, Aberdeen Asset Management. The manager believes that the CDs are of good quality and will be repaid when due. Both Switzerland and Italy are supporting their banks through the current market difficulties.

b] A deposit for £5m with the Dutch institution, Rabobank, due to expire on 23rd February 2009. Rabobank is very highly rated by the credit rating agencies, and it is expected that the Dutch authorities would offer support if market difficulties continued.

3. QUESTION IN THE NAME OF CLLR BUTT:

How does the credit crunch affect the Council's plans for a new civic centre?

Response from the Leader of the Council:

It is too early to be certain about the full impact of the Credit Crunch and Gordon Brown's mismanagement of the British economy.

As the Liberal Democrat Leader of Brent Council I am determined that the Council provides our residents with the most efficient and best value services possible.

The Civic Centre project involves the replacement of numerous rented offices with a purpose-built facility capable of supporting our efficiency agenda. The administration's aim is to provide the new and efficient Civic facility and workspace at no greater cost than the current scattered, outdated and environmentally inefficient office space.

To date, the credit crunch has if anything improved the value for money case for the Civic Centre. The Council has obtained a prime site in the Wembley regeneration area at a very favourable price. It is also likely that construction and material costs will be less than anticipated given the current economic downturn.

No capital financing of the Civic Centre has yet been undertaken, although future interest rates are expected to fall, which will again benefit the project.

4. QUESTION IN THE NAME OF CLLR POWNEY:

Can the Lead Member give a monthly breakdown of reported fly tips by ward between the introduction of the new cleaning contract in April 2007 and September 2008?

Response from the Lead Member for Highways and Transportation:

At borough level, the average number of fly-tips per month since the start of the new Waste Services Contract is 728 per month, compared with 1,543 in the previous three month period before the new contract started.

Much of this significant improvement is down to the improved cleansing specification and additional resources in the service generally.

The monthly breakdown by ward has been produced and is available as a separate document (attached).

This Administration is committed to combating the anti-social, illegal behaviour of fly-tipping and determined to take action against those who do.

5. QUESTION IN THE NAME OF CLLR LONG:

As buildings are currently being constructed in the area, will the administration support the naming of a building on the old Grunwick site in Chapter Road after the leader of the Grunwick workers, Mrs Jayaben Desai?

Response from the Lead Member for Environment, Planning and Culture:

This development site is not owned by the Council. The developer, Henry Developments, is responsible for the naming of the premises which the Council has to subsequently approve under the London Building Acts (Amendment Act) 1939.

A ward councillor has previously suggested the name Grunwick or Ms Desai and this suggestion was forwarded to the developer. The developer has asked that the

access road/walkway be named Grunwick Close and the Council has approved this name.

One of the adjoining blocks has yet to be named and Cllr Long's suggestion, along with any others, will be forwarded to the relevant developer.

6. QUESTION IN THE NAME OF CLLR GREEN:

Does the Lead Member for Highways and Transportation support Queen's Park councillors and local residents in their call for the Kensal Triangle to be included in the Residents' Discount Zone should the Western Extension to the Congestion Charging Zone proceed?

Response from the Lead Member for Highways and Transportation:

Yes - If the extension to the Congestion Charging Zone were to proceed, I would certainly want to see residents in the Kensal Triangle area protected by a Residents Discount Zone in just the same way as is proposed for those in an area of Kensington and Chelsea with very similar geographic linkages .

I have asked officers to make appropriate representations on these lines, and we will continue as a Borough to press the case that I know Queens Park councillors have made in response to TfL's consultation on the issue.

The active involvement of the Queens Park Councillors in this issue shows just what a difference electing Liberal Democrats can make, and I fully back both the Queens Park Liberal Democrat team and local residents on this issue.

7. QUESTION IN THE NAME OF CLLR CORCORAN:

Can the Lead Member for Crime Prevention and Public Safety please update the Council on the rollout of Council funded PCSOs as a result of the Executive's initiative, and on other actions that have been and are being taken to make Brent a safer borough? What results are being achieved?

Response from the Lead Member for Crime Prevention and Public Safety:

The 16 additional PCSOs that are part funded by the Council have been attached to Safer Neighbourhood Teams in Wembley Central, Kilburn, Willesden Green, Dudden Hill, Kensal Green and Harlesden since summer 2007. The MPS in Brent submit monthly returns to the Council reporting on specific activities which these PCSOs have been undertaking with their colleagues. An analysis of these in August showed that since December 2007 they had reported 683 envirocrime issues to the Council's Street care number, been involved in dispersing groups on 296 occasions, removing alcohol on 804 occasions and had been involved in 266 community meetings.

Other activities being taken to make Brent a Safer Borough include:-

- The establishment of Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACS) to plan for the safety of domestic violence victims – 275 were held in 2007/08.
- The establishment of the Specialist DV Court – 230 cases were reviewed with a 50% improvement in outcomes at the court

- The Not Another Drop programme to reduce gun and knife crime. Currently there is a 57% reduction in gun crime and a 15% reduction in knife crime
- The development of a more preventative approach to graffiti which focuses on the perpetrators. 40 tags and 20 individuals have been investigated. One offender has been given an ASBO and 4 have signed Acceptable Behaviour Contracts.
- The creation of BARK (Brent Actions for Responsible K9's) has increased collaboration between partners in tackling dog related incidents. 44 search warrants have been executed, 98 dogs have been seized, 5 stolen dogs have been recovered and various court cases have taken place, including one where a resident was given a 10 year ban from owning a dog.
- Memocams have been installed in the homes of residents who have been victims of distraction burglary and are vulnerable to repeats. 13 offenders were arrested and charged as a result of these devices.
- The Keep Your Stuff Safe project is delivered in schools by police Safer Schools Officers. They give young people awareness on how they can avoid being victims of robbery. Brent's robbery figures are currently down by 13% compared with this time last year.

Between 2003/04 and 2007/08 Brent saw a reduction in crime of 21% - which means 4,518 fewer offences. (All this information, and more, is available in the CDRP's annual report, which is available on the Safety pages of the BRAIN website) In this financial year the downward trend has continued. Unofficial figures at the moment show a 21% reduction in acquisitive crime, a 12% reduction in burglary, a 28% reduction in theft from motor vehicles and a 21% reduction in serious youth violence – all compared to the same time last year.

8. QUESTION IN THE NAME OF CLLR CUMMINS:

Will the Executive please outline their progress on recycling, following the recent introduction of Compulsory Recycling and the Labour opposition's doubts and mud-throwing about this policy? What take-up has there been from residents, and how much is now being recycled? Has the strong lead on this environmental issue worked?

Response from the Lead Member for Environment, Planning and Culture:

The introduction of compulsory recycling has seen a dramatic increase in recycled and composted waste tonnages and almost 20,000 requests from residents for green boxes.

During the first two months of compulsion, the monthly recycling rate has averaged 29% compared with 24% in the same period last year. Further improvement is expected as our door-knocking work continues and we get to speak directly with more residents who have not yet recycled.

Alongside this, the amount of waste collected for landfill has shown a reduction of 3,500 tonnes since the beginning of April.

We are being supported by Waste Watch for a 24 week implementation period, and they have reported that participation rates are up to 85% in some parts of the Borough and that around 90% of residents spoken with rate the service as good or satisfactory.

Complaint levels are minimal and the introduction of compulsory recycling can be seen to have been a major success.

9. QUESTION IN THE NAME OF CLLR JOSEPH:

Neighbourhood Working is a brilliant concept but currently only officers and councillors are able to participate in deciding the allocation of money. Is it not better to include residents in the decision making process of how the money is spent and are there any plans to introduce this in Brent?

Response from the Lead Member for Human Resources & Diversity, Local Democracy & Consultation:

While it is the case that ward councillors make the actual decisions on the allocation of Neighbourhood Working money in their ward, the views of residents are very much at the heart of the Neighbourhood Working process.

The aim of Neighbourhood Working is to support Members' consultation with residents in their ward and to develop action plans, which take forward community issues raised by residents with colleagues across the council and external partners such as the police.

Members take the lead on consulting with residents in the ward and prioritise which issues to tackle using the ward budget. All three ward Members play an equal role in this process, which is non party political.

Neighbourhood Working combines the existing and ongoing knowledge and expertise of members with additional active research. This involves going out to where people are already gathered for some other purpose, such as a library or outside a school, or taking to the streets on a walkabout. This helps to reach people whose views would otherwise not be heard.

Public meetings organised specifically to generate or discuss neighbourhood working issues are not usually part of the process, as they tend to attract those people in a ward who already attend other meetings and have other opportunities to express their views. Instead, Members are encouraged to use their Neighbourhood profiles as a means of identifying hard to reach groups for targeted outreach. Some other models used elsewhere do include public meetings as part of the process, but we would argue that our model allows more people to participate in the process and a wider range of views to be heard.

The Neighbourhood Working team also attend meetings organised by other parts of the council or by partners to gather residents' views about their area and report back on what Neighbourhood Working has achieved locally. This includes regular attendance at, for example:

- Area Consultative Forums
- Area Housing Board meetings
- Police Safer Neighbourhood Team Ward Panel meetings
- Residents' Association meetings

Members will already have an important awareness of neighbourhood issues as a result of their own communications with local residents and community leaders. Where such issues have an impact on the wider community (i.e. not relating specifically to an individual or specialist service area) they can be passed to Neighbourhood Working and included in the action planning process.

Residents' views are, therefore, at the heart of identifying the issues to be tackled through Neighbourhood Working. These are then prioritised by elected members (any expenditure is formally signed off by the Director of Policy and Regeneration in line with the Council's Standing Orders and Financial Regulations).

The model we use does not include residents actually voting on how Neighbourhood Working funds should be spent. Most models of participatory budgeting which include voting require a very strong additional administrative input to make them work effectively. In some instances officers have worked behind the scenes for up to a year to encourage participation. This is often in a small area with a large fund to distribute. The Neighbourhood Working fund of £20k per ward would not justify the level of input needed to make participatory budgeting of this kind work. As stated already, we believe that our model is effective in engaging members of the public who would not otherwise be involved in the decision-making process.

The White Paper "Communities in Control" talks about bringing together representative and participatory democracy. Here in Brent we have a working model, which does just that and which other people could learn from.

10. QUESTION IN THE NAME OF CLLR KANSAGRA:

What is Brent Council doing about the serious problems caused by overcrowding and multi-occupancy houses which are a rapidly growing problem throughout the borough? How does the Council propose to deal with this menace for frustrated neighbours and council taxpayers alike?

Response from the Lead Member for Environment, Planning and Culture:

Brent has always had a large number of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) with shared basic amenities and many houses have also been converted into self contained flats. Whilst there has been some anecdotal evidence of growing concerns about the use and management of such properties, there is no strong evidence that the problem is growing rapidly.

The Council can only act within the scope of the legal powers given to it. It has limited controls available to influence the use and management of such properties and this is particularly the case where the concern is over the impact on neighbouring properties. The controls we do have are planning controls which regulate the conversion of properties to and use of properties as HMOs, private

housing legislation largely concerned with the protection of tenants, and legislation about nuisances and public health.

Planning law defines an HMO as a dwelling which is occupied by more than one household. Generally speaking this definition does not include self contained flats. The definition would include up to six students living as one household which may not chime with the public view of a household. There has been no significant increase in complaints about unauthorised dwellings in recent years. In 2007, the Planning Service received 42 complaints about HMO's and issued 6 enforcement notices. The remaining cases were either lawful or were situations where sufficient evidence of an HMO use could not be established.

Where a planning enforcement notice is not complied with, the owners can be prosecuted but it can be difficult to find the owner to bring them to court and it may require extensive investigation to gather the evidence to prove beyond reasonable doubt that an HMO use is taking place. Planning enforcement is time consuming and can be slow, and greater priority could only be given to more action on HMOs at the expense of some other area of planning enforcement action.

Private Housing Services' (PHS) role is to safeguard the health, safety and welfare of the tenants, by enforcing repairs and improvements to the HMOs. It is quite common for managers to let HMOs to more tenants than the HMO can safely accommodate, either in terms of the number of basic amenities or amount of space. PHS routinely enforces the installation of additional basic amenities and / or reduction of spatial overcrowding, and both courses of action result in fewer people being accommodated in the HMO. This is normally achieved by not replacing tenants who leave voluntarily rather than by enforced eviction and subsequent homelessness.

In a small minority of cases the managers of HMOs must be licensed. Such licenses are only issued if the manager is a "fit and proper person". Licensing has a restricted role because it only applies to managers of HMOs that are 3 or more storeys tall, and are occupied by 5 or more tenants. Licenses are issued for up to 5 years, and are subject to enforceable conditions.

Where nuisance complaints are received the responsibility lies with Environmental Health Nuisance Control Team and possibly the Anti-Social Behaviour Team. Both these teams must gather and evaluate evidence before formally intervening. Their intervention is not limited by the number of tenants or the status of a property as an HMO or otherwise. Where rubbish is allowed to accumulate outside properties the council may be able to take enforcement action. Although the turnover of tenants can lead to particular problems with mattresses and the like being left outside HMOs the enforcement action that can be taken is by no means limited to HMOs and would apply equally to other classes of property.