



SUMMONS ITEM **6**

LONDON BOROUGH OF BRENT

COUNCIL MEETING 26th JANUARY 2009

MEMBERS' QUESTION TIME

1. QUESTION IN THE NAME OF CLLR ARNOLD:

How is the Council contributing towards increasing opportunities for apprenticeships for young people in respect of its commitment to improve outcomes for young people, to support the radical reform, widening curriculum and skills for 14-19s and to encourage job creation and employability in this current downturn?

Response from the Lead Member for Children & Families:

As part of Brent's Strategic Plan for 14-19 Education and Training, alongside complementary priorities within Regeneration and Human Resources, development work has been undertaken to establish an Apprenticeship scheme within the Council, aimed at offering apprenticeships to 16-19 year olds across the range of Council service areas. Development work has been undertaken to explore the rationale for such a scheme and how it could be set up and delivered, with consideration of clear progression routes for an apprentice once a placement ends.

Initial discussions with potential training providers to deliver the qualification element of the apprenticeships have taken place with the College of North West London and BACES. Several fact finding missions to Councils with established apprenticeship schemes has provided good learning.

A paper to CMT outlining the case is due to be presented in early February which sets out in detail the scale and financial implications of the scheme. Once in operation, the Council will disseminate best practice through the Employer Partnership to encourage local businesses to develop their own Apprenticeship schemes.

The Council is also planning to introduce a scheme itself, which will see a pilot programme this year with a target of 10 Apprentices employed within Council departments, who will study for NVQ's in business administration, customer services or possibly IT. The programme will be for one year with the aim of supporting the young people to obtain employment within the Council at the end of the programme, if they wish. It is hoped to expand the programme in later years.

The Council's Brent in2 Work employment programme continues to deliver its services to unemployed residents in the borough particularly to target specific hard to reach groups including young people. The borough's flagship programme has excellent experience working within specific neighbourhoods and population groups, and has worked with schools and local youth education projects to offer advice and support to move young people out of the NEET category. Brent in2 Work can respond quickly to the changing needs of the borough's community and will explore its delivery for young people accordingly. However, with current Central Government proposals to reduce the amount of Working Neighbourhoods Fund Brent is set to receive by £3,841,081, the scale of Brent in2 Work's ability to respond will be very significantly impacted.

2. QUESTION IN THE NAME OF CLLR CRANE:

How many times has Brent Council used bailiffs to enforce council tax payments during the past twelve months and is the Council proposing to review its procedures in the light of the current economic downturn?

Response from the Lead Member for Resources:

The Council has issued 9,994 bailiff notices since 1 April 2008 in respect of both in year and previous years' Council Tax arrears. By way of background, Council Tax debts are only referred to bailiffs when a customer fails to repay outstanding debt or to make an appropriate repayment arrangement with the Council. Customers are given several opportunities to enter into discussion with the council about their debt before such action is taken. Typically they will receive the initial bill, reminder notices, final notices, a Summons and pre-bailiff notices. On average there will be a 3 month period between the dispatch of the bill and any resulting debt being passed to a bailiff. All of the documents sent encourage customers to contact the Council if they are struggling to pay.

The Revenue and Benefits service has had an anti-poverty policy in place for the past 2 years and this is currently being reviewed to identify any areas that may need to be changed. This policy includes the Council Tax Recovery policy and sets out a number of measures to assist vulnerable customers and those experiencing debt problems. These measures include :

- Proactive identification of potentially vulnerable customers. Once identified, these accounts will be proactively checked before summons action is instigated, to evaluate whether this should proceed. If a customer is identified as vulnerable after recovery action has been taken then action is taken to review the appropriateness of this. The Council's main bailiffs , Equita, have returned a number of potentially vulnerable cases to the Council for review as a result of this policy.
- Customers who have multi- year Council tax debt have the facility to agree one affordable arrangement to cover all years, providing that they are able to provide the Council with full and accurate details of their income and

outgoings. Extended periods of time are agreed for repayments where necessary.

- A general debt information sheet is issued with all pre-bailiff notices and is available at all One Stop Shops. This provides information on discounts, benefits, and national debt advice lines as well information about the options available for repaying debt, including deductions from benefits, earnings or extended arrangements to repay.
- Efforts are made to ensure that customers entitled to help through the Council Tax Benefit scheme successfully apply for this. Take-up campaigns targeted at pensioners have resulted in over £500K Council Tax Benefit being awarded over the last 2 years.
- Efforts are made to avoid sending debt to bailiffs where other recovery methods could be used. If details of employment are known, an attachment of earnings will be set up and where benefits are in payment we will seek to recover via weekly deductions from these.

The anti-poverty policy was developed in recognition of the differing circumstances of Council Tax customers and, in particular, problems experienced by vulnerable customers and those struggling with debt. This allows much greater flexibility for those who are struggling to pay but who are not wilfully avoiding their responsibility to pay Council Tax. We are however dependent on customers making contact with us to discuss their individual circumstances, since in most cases we hold very little information about the customer. Where a customer fails to make contact, we need to secure a liability order from the Courts, to ensure that the Council is able to enforce recovery of the debt and will in many cases have no other option but to pass to the bailiff to try to seek recovery.

Our overall recovery strategy seeks to support customers to keep up to date with instalments for their in year liability, so that new arrears debt and associated costs do not arise. We are continuing to make efforts to separate customers who can't pay from those who are wilful non payers, allowing a more flexible approach to repayment for the former and a robust approach to the latter.

In year Council tax collection has increased year on year since 2003/04 and we are set to achieve highest ever levels of collection in 2008/09. We need to continue to work to improve collection to support the Council's broader financial strategy and avoid the need for increased bad debt provision.

3. QUESTION IN THE NAME OF CLLR JONES:

Given Sarah Teather's condemnation of local authorities with large numbers of families with children in temporary accommodation, what action is Lib Dem controlled Brent doing to reduce the number, which according to official government figures is the third highest in London?

Response from the Lead Member for Housing & Customer Services:

As at the end of December 2008, Brent was accommodating a total of 3,721 homeless households in temporary accommodation. The majority of these households (approximately 80%) contain dependent children or a pregnant woman.

However less than 4% of these households were living in hotel or hostel accommodation - the vast majority were accommodated in self-contained properties (flats and houses) leased from private landlords by Housing Associations or the Council.

Families are placed in hotel accommodation as an emergency solution and we aim to move families out of hotels within six weeks where ever possible. All temporary accommodation provided by the Council has to be of a good standard, and where issues arise around the condition of a property we ensure that these are resolved, or, if necessary, arrange to move the household to more suitable accommodation.

Since the government published its five year strategy, "Sustainable Communities: Homes for All", in January 2005, (which included a commitment to reduce the overall numbers in temporary accommodation by 50% by 2010), Brent has steadily reduced the numbers being placed in temporary accommodation. Since December 2004, when a total of 4,466 Brent households were in temporary accommodation, there has been an overall reduction of nearly 17% - a drop of 745 households.

Broadly, this decrease has been achieved in two ways - by offering a wider range of homeless prevention measures and by increasing access to settled homes. Work is continuing in a number of areas to further reduce the overall numbers of households in temporary accommodation. This work includes -

- A continued focus on homeless prevention, including negotiation to enable a potentially homeless household to remain in their property wherever possible, as well as other prevention schemes such as the successful lay advocacy project;
- Further development and promotion of other housing options, including access to the private rented sector, home ownership opportunities, and out of borough schemes;
- The development of temporary to permanent schemes, at both a local and sub-regional level.

In addition this Administration has an ambitious development programme for new build social housing – we expect to deliver approximately 290 new affordable homes in 2009/10 and just under 350 in 2010/11. We will continue to build on our success and further reduce the number of people in temporary accommodation.

4. QUESTION IN THE NAME OF CLLR R MOHER:

When an urgent referral for assessment of a vulnerable elderly person is received, within what time scale is it expected that such an assessment will take place?

Are statistics gathered about the time scales within which assessments are completed? If so, what percentage of assessments is completed within the timescale?

Response from the Lead Member for Adults, Health & Social Care:

When a referral is received it will be screened to determine the person meets the 'Fair Access to Care' criteria and has critical or substantial needs. There is a target to respond to an initial contact within 48 hours. If the referral is deemed "urgent", subject to screening/assessment, this means that the person is at imminent risk (there is no other way of supporting the person) then the request will be dealt with immediately or within 24 hrs.

The type of service will depend on the person's situation and other support that might be available. If the person requires a full assessment which may be multi disciplinary involving health service input, then the target time to undertake this is within 28 days. The care plan, to put services in place, then has a target time of 4 weeks. We report annually to the Department of Health on Performance (D55) for 2007 – 08 the overall score for assessment was 81.87% consisting of Part 1 response to initial contact within 48 hours = 98.87% part 2 assessments completed in 4 weeks = 64.88. The overall score for D55 is the average of these two scores = 81.87%. Due to high demand, assessments have to be prioritised accordingly and we aim to ensure those with high risk are responded to appropriately.

5. QUESTION IN THE NAME OF CLLR POWNEY:

What are the ENCAMS street cleaning figures for the previous three inspections? How have they been publicised for each inspection and do the latest figures show an improvement or decline on the previous inspection?

Response from the Lead Member for Highways and Transportation:

The ENCAMS street cleansing scores for the last three confirmed inspections are:

Tranche 3, 2007-08 - 17% (i.e. 83% of streets at a high or acceptable standard)

Tranche 1, 2008-09 - 13% (i.e. 87% of streets at a high or acceptable standard)

Tranche 2, 2008-09 - 22% (i.e. 78% of streets at a high or acceptable standard)

The latest monitoring figures show that to date, 2008-09 is 17% (i.e. 83% of streets at a high or acceptable standard).

The underlying trend is one of significant improvement in cleansing standards since the Waste Services Contract started in April 2007 with its improved street cleansing specification.

The Council has an LAA target of 19% in the current year and we are quietly confident that we are on course to achieve this.

The scores are not routinely publicised by Brent externally. There is occasional external publicity produced by ENCAMS / Capital Standards when all Boroughs' scores are confirmed.

Internally, the scores appear in Service Plans, reports to the Performance & Finance Select Committee, High Level Meetings, and Brent Veolia Partnership Board Meetings.

For reference, the previous years' figures were:

2003-04 -	45% (i.e. 55% of streets at a high or acceptable standard)
2004-05 -	34% (i.e. 66% of streets at a high or acceptable standard)
2005-06 -	30% (i.e. 70% of streets at a high or acceptable standard)
2006-07 -	32% (i.e. 68% of streets at a high or acceptable standard)
2007-08 -	21% (i.e. 79% of streets at a high or acceptable standard)

As you can see, Brent's streets are cleaner under this Liberal Democrat-led Administration than the last Labour-run one.

6. QUESTION IN THE NAME OF CLLR CLUES:

Will the Lead Member for Housing please explain why rents look set to rise well over and above the rate of inflation this year? Does he not think that in these difficult times, it is appalling that the Government should expect Brent tenants to face large increases in an essential weekly payment?

Response from the Lead Member for Housing & Customer Services:

Rents for Council tenants in Brent are set each year in line with the Labour Government's Rent Restructuring Policy. Under this policy, all Social Housing Rents (Council and Registered Social Landlords) will converge in the future (currently 2023-24 although this is likely to be brought forward).

The Government uses the Housing Finance Regime, and in particular the Housing Subsidy system (the method through which the Government provides financial support to Council Housing), to influence Council Rent Setting.

For 2009/10 the Government has assumed that nationally, notional rents will increase by 6.2%. and they have reduced our Housing Subsidy 2009-10 to reflect this. Brent's Housing Subsidy will therefore be cut by £2.3m in 2009-10 in this respect.

The Government is forcing up Brent's rents by twice the rate of inflation to meet this subsidy cut.

The Rent Restructuring Policy requires that actual Council rents for 2009-10 are increased by the Retail Price Index at September 2008 (which was 5%) PLUS a 0.5% real increase PLUS 1/15th towards target rent. At individual dwelling levels, rent increases will be limited to an increase of no greater than 5.5% plus £2.

The result of this is that if the Executive is to balance the HRA Budget under the Labour Government's finance regime, we will be forced to increase average actual rents in Brent by 6.01% in 2009-10.

Sadly, the entire rent rise will simply pay for the Labour Government's subsidy cut, and not for extra services.

Council Tenants who are on full Housing Benefit will have the increase met in full by Housing Benefit (around 45% of tenants in Brent), while tenants on partial Housing Benefit (over 20% of tenants in Brent) will have a proportion of the increase met through Housing Benefit. I agree with you however that the rises we are being forced to pass on will hit many tenants hard, not least in these difficult times.

Sadly, the Labour Government's rent rise policy means that our tenants are also likely to have to face a similar unfair increase next year.

7. QUESTION IN THE NAME OF CLLR BESSONG:

Could the Lead Member give a progress report on the Brent Youth Parliament. Does she think it is succeeding in its aims, how much awareness is there of the organisation, and what feedback has been received from the young people and schools who have been involved?

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

The annual report of BYP for 2007-08 was presented to the Executive on 15 April 2008. This outlined progress against the Terms of Reference as well as the impact made by the young people involved. I have attached the report.

The next progress report on the work of current youth parliament for the year 2008-09 is scheduled for Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 29 April 2009.

BYP 2007-08

- Last year's BYP produced a manifesto document outlining their achievements against their chosen priorities. Increasing police security on bus routes, producing a radio advert warning young people about internet safety, undertaking a survey on Sex and Relationships Education as well sitting on the Healthy Relationships task group are amongst some of the high profile issues that the youth parliament has addressed.

BYP 2008-09

- The BYP elections for the year 08-09 were aligned with Local Democracy Week and facilitated in partnership with electoral services. This proved to be a huge success; where for the first time 5 of the borough's secondary schools used online methods to cast their votes. Furthermore, for the primary schools elections, 1,841 primary pupils casted their votes (an increase of almost a 1000 votes from last year).
- 58 out of the 63 BYP members for the year 08-09 were successfully elected in October and inducted in November. Work is underway to fill the five remaining vacant seats.
- Since the induction BYP have held two parliament sessions on 13 December 08 and 10 January 09 respectively.
- Three older members of the parliament from last year have been retained as advisors to the new parliament, thereby empowering the young people to take on leadership roles.

Has BYP succeeded in its aim?

The BYP was developed with the aim of creating a mechanism for facilitating young people's participation that was representative of Brent's children and young people and would impact service planning and delivery. Empowering young people to come up with the issues that matter to them, and being part of the change, is a vital element of BYP.

The success of last year's BYP is outlined in the annual report. This year's work is also focused around their terms of reference. Outlined below are the current BYP's terms of reference and statement on progress with achieving its aims:

Terms of Reference	How this aim is achieved
To be the voice of young people in Brent and to debate and discuss issues that are important to young people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The parliament meets every month to discuss issues that are important to young people with a view to finding solutions / change where needed. The sessions are planned and chaired by young members. • The members also have a duty to find out from their constituents what the issues are affecting the wider youth population in the borough. • Lowering the age of voting to 16, contributing to the development of the Children and Young People's Plan, addressing the issues around cyber bullying and working on their campaign are amongst some of the topics discussed by the current parliament at its monthly sessions.
To have a say in decisions that are usually made by adults and to influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BYP acts as the boroughs youth

policy	<p>consultative forum in order to give young people a say in high level policy and planning such as the Children and Young People's Plan.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The chair and vice chair of BYP are members of the Children's Partnership Board. • BYP present an annual report to the Council's Executive (attached above), a six monthly report to the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny and regular updates to the Children's Partnership Board with a view to communicate issues raised by young people with decision making adults.
To promote the work of BYP and celebrate achievement of young people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members of BYP attend the monthly BYM2 forum which is open to all young people in Brent. • BYP has been featured in the local press to promote its work. • BYP is involved in the distribution of the Youth Opportunities Fund. • BYP campaign this year's is focusing on celebrating the positive perceptions of young people which includes planning 2 celebration events in February.
To link with the work of UK Youth Parliament and influence national policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 members from BYP represent Brent on UKYP. • Members attend national meetings and contribute to consultations and discussions that result in a positive change for young people e.g. SRE in schools, debates around lowering the age of voting to 16, concession for transport cost for young people etc.

Awareness of BYP

- In its first year (07-08) the BYP was featured in local and national press over 40 times including in nine issues of the Brent Magazine.
- Information on BYP can be found on the BRAIN website as well as by undertaking a Google search on Brent Youth Parliament.
- Members of BYP have set up a Facebook account in order to communicate with each other and other young people across the borough.
- Posters on BYP were sent to all schools and youth clubs in the borough.
- Regular email alerts are sent to all the school and the young people involved with BYP.

Feedback from young people and schools

- An annual satisfaction survey is undertaken with the members of BYP (last year's survey was undertaken in March 08). Next survey will be undertaken in September 09. Listed below are the results from a sample of questions from the last year's BYP annual survey.
 - I have been provided with skills , knowledge and training to contribute to BYP in a way that makes a difference
 - 56% strongly agreed
 - 32% agreed
 - 6% neither agreed nor disagreed
 - 6% disagreed
 - 0% strongly disagreed
 - BYP views are heard and considered in decision making within the council
 - 54% strongly agreed
 - 34% agreed
 - 12% neither agreed nor disagreed
 - 0% disagreed
 - 0% strongly disagreed
 - BYP is an organisation that is fair and makes decision that reflect the majority
 - 74% strongly agreed
 - 20% agreed
 - 6% neither agreed nor disagreed
 - 0% disagreed
 - 0% strongly disagreed
 - BYP is able to make its own decisions
 - 46% strongly agreed
 - 46% agreed
 - 5% neither agreed nor disagreed
 - 3% disagreed
 - 0% strongly disagreed
 - BYP feels that the decisions it takes are respected and made a priority by Brent Council
 - 38% strongly agreed
 - 34% agreed
 - 11% neither agreed nor disagreed
 - 14% disagreed
 - 3% strongly disagreed

- I would recommend becoming a BYP member to my friends

71% strongly agreed
23% agreed
3% neither agreed nor disagreed
0% disagreed
3% strongly disagreed

Evaluation forms are completed by the young members at their monthly sessions to seek regular feedback from the young people. Comments on the forms are read immediately after each session in order to improve future sessions. The monthly evaluations have been very positive to date indicating a positive experience from the young members.

8. QUESTION IN THE NAME OF CLLR GUPTA:

Can the Council Leader please update me on his lobbying of Government regarding their proposed removal of £4 million of Working Neighbourhood Fund money? How much funding for Brent's important job creation work is still under threat?

Response from the Leader of the Council:

The Government formally launched the consultation into its proposed changes to the allocation of Working Neighbourhoods Fund (WNF) in November 2008. If implemented over the next two financial years this would result in a £3.8million reduction in the Council's funding to tackle concentrations of worklessness in Brent.

The Council submitted a full response to the consultation by the closing date on 9th January. We believe we have set out a strong case for the full original allocation of WNF to be awarded to Brent. Our case centres on the following:

- The data used to calculate the "new" third criterion masks the real concentrations of worklessness within Brent and as a consequence, hides the level of resource needed;
- Brent has a strong track record of successful delivery on the worklessness agenda. We have developed a locally focused programme of employment support tailored to the specific needs of our local disadvantaged communities. We lead a partnership of over 50 local employment providers including the private and third sectors to fill the gaps left by mainstream provision;
- Reducing the levels of WNF to Brent will only serve to widen the gaps between those neighbourhoods and communities that experience persistently high levels of worklessness and the rest of London. It will result in a significant loss of expertise and provision in the borough that will be extremely difficult to recover;
- This means our challenging LAA target to reduce the numbers of working age residents claiming out of work benefits will be impossible to achieve;

- The timing of the consultation significantly disadvantages the borough, we are now less than three months before the start of the 2009/10 financial year. We strongly disagree that there is no objective distinction between our situation and that of Camden and Westminster and believe you have set a precedent by awarding these boroughs their full original allocation of WNF for 2008/09.
- With the reassurance of the Government's policy of "three year settlements", we have already planned and committed our programme budget for 2009/10, including all of our original WNF allocation. WNF is the Council's only dedicated source of funding to support residents and businesses through the current recession.

The Council is currently awaiting a response from Ministers in the Department for Communities and Local Government but we have been given no indication as to when this will be.

Furthermore, I have met with Ian Clements, Deputy Mayor to Boris Johnson to lobby for support from the GLA and the London Development Agency. Meetings have also been held with the borough's local MPs, who have taken our case forward with the relevant ministers.

Support has also been pledged by Cllr Stephen Houghton, Leader of Barnsley Council, who is currently leading a Government task group on worklessness, and who visited Brent as part of his best practice review.

9. QUESTION IN THE NAME OF CLLR H B PATEL:

Residents have been severely inconvenienced by utilities digging up the roads, grass verges and pavements to access the water pipes and gas pipes. What fines have been levied on the utilities over the past 3 months for their failure to adhere to timescales or required standards of work?

Response from the Lead Member for Highways and Transportation:

Under the New Roads and StreetWorks Act 1991 the Highway Authority has a duty to coordinate and monitor the work of utility companies, but utility companies are responsible for the management of their works. Notices must be submitted by utilities to the Council whom will monitor work by carrying out random sample inspections, or inspect work in response to complaints. The introduction of the Traffic management Act 2004 provides local authorities with additional powers to keep traffic moving and minimise disruption to local residents, businesses and the travelling public, and these include restricting major utility works for 3 years following completion of highway major work, levying Fixed Penalty notices against utilities for false or inaccurate notices, and the option to introduce a permit scheme. Brent are one of 15 London Councils whom have opted to introduce a permit scheme, which is currently under consultation with the Department for Transport, for implementation in Autumn 2009.

Many utility companies are under pressure to renew their aging infrastructure due to leakages and therefore in recent years we have had major utility renewal programmes in the borough.

Coordination meetings are held quarterly with utility companies to plan and discuss major works, and these meetings are attended by our Traffic Manager and New Roads and StreetWorks Co-ordinator along with other officers from both the network management and NRSW teams. Additionally, ad-hoc meetings take place to discuss larger schemes and site meetings are arranged with the metropolitan police and bus companies to consider work at particularly difficult locations. At these coordination meetings officers discuss with utilities areas for improvement which often includes providing adequate notifications and periodic updates to residents and businesses affected, and delays in completing work.

Where utility companies fail to complete their works within the notice period a daily charge is levied and an extension is only granted if there are 'reasonably unforeseen engineering difficulties', many applications for time extensions are now refused. In recent years the Council have taken a far tougher stance and the charges levied have been increased by over 60%. The performance of utility companies has generally improved, although there are still some instances where works overrun, although these are now far fewer, and occasions where defect notices are served for poor quality reinstatements.

The charges levied for overstays in the last three months total £44,800, although the annual charges levied for overstay have reduced this year as the utility companies have improved the management of their work. In the past three months we have also served 86 defects notices, total £8,600 for reinstatements carried out by utilities that do not comply with specification. We have also introduced the inspection of reinstatements that are nearing the end of their 2 year guarantee period and periodically carry out core sample testing.

10. QUESTION IN THE NAME OF CLLR MENDOZA:

Now that the Mayor of London has challenged the Council to justify the loss of open space, the transportation problems created and the basis behind the choice of the site for the Wembley Academy, what is the status of the planning application?

Response received from the Lead Member for Children & Families:

In comments on the application, the Greater London Authority has not raised any objections in principle, and is in many respects supportive. The GLA has requested some further information and further consideration of particular issues. For example:

Paragraph 25

“The proposals for education and community facilities are compliant with the London Plan policies in principle, provided justification for the loss of open space and a robust argument of the education need in this location is provided.”

Paragraph 31

“The layout of buildings and play/open spaces and sporting facilities across the site is founded on an analysis of the historical and current site context and is generally successful.”

Paragraph 38

“In summary whilst the design is generally supported, some areas require further consideration and justification to ensure the proposals meet London Plan policy 4B.1 ‘Design principles for a compact city.’”

It has always been the intention of the Council and Ark that the sporting facilities should be available to the community. We are happy with the GLA requirement that this should be formalised in a Section 106 agreement. The open space will therefore not be “lost” but the range of facilities will be expanded.

Analysis of alternative sites was reported to the Scrutiny Committee and to the Executive on several occasions. We have no difficulty in explaining to the GLA why this is the most suitable site and the only one which can be developed in time to meet the educational demand.

All developments have some impacts on local roads and we fully accept the need to minimise these. As part of this, we will be developing the Travel Plan and other information requested by the GLA to maximise the site’s public transport advantages.

The application will be considered by the Planning Committee in March.