

COUNCIL

WEDNESDAY 29 FEBRUARY 2012

PUBLIC QUESTIONS

I. **Questions from Toni Hale, Sunfields Place, Blackheath to Councillor Chris Roberts, Leader of the Council.**

On the 10th February 2012 at a royal celebration at the Wine Church in Woolwich Cllr Roberts reported that the reason he was late for the event was because he 'had surgery.....the last person that' he 'saw at the surgery was a homeless person and that concerned' him.

1. Did the Leader of the Council inform the homeless person that they intend to spend £4m on the new equestrian/veterinary centre at 341 Shooters Hill?
2. If the Leader of the Council is so concerned with the homeless problem here in Greenwich what does he intend to do about it?

Reply -

I thank Toni Hale for written notice of her question.

Homelessness is a growing concern. The problem has been exacerbated by the coalition cuts agenda and will be made worse by its welfare reforms. I advised the person who attended my surgery of the agencies he / she should contact for help based on his specific circumstances.

- I. The Council is not developing an equestrian/veterinary centre. It is developing a Horticultural and Equestrian Skills Centre. The Council has rightly prioritised investment in skills through the creation of a number of employer skills centres. These include a new digital skills centre at Ravensbourne and a new Hospitality and Catering Skills Centre with De Vere at Charlton Athletic. The Horticulture and Equestrian Skills Centre will be our third skills Centre and will open on two sites in the next twelve months. The Horticulture and Equestrian Skills Centre run in partnership with Hadlow College, will deliver high quality vocational training to address gaps in skills, help residents get jobs, and use sport and the interest generated through the staging of the Olympic equestrian events to engage residents, especially young people including NEETs. Through the centre, residents will be supported into employment, apprenticeships and related training.

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2. The Royal Borough of Greenwich has been very successful in significantly reducing homelessness over the last 5 years. In this period, there has been a reduction of over 80% in the number of households accepted as homeless and those placed in temporary accommodation. The success that has been achieved in tackling homelessness is based upon the provision of dedicated advice, support and casework services. These services have been recognised as excellent and the Royal Borough was awarded Trailblazer status by the Government, in recognition of its work in this area .

In addition, the Council has a significant programme of providing new homes. In the four year period to 2010/11 3,732 new homes were built of which 45% were affordable homes. The Council has given permission to build 30,893 new homes since 2000, of these 11,513 are already built.

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2. Question from Paul Webbewood, Courtlands Avenue, SE12 to Councillor Ray Walker, Chair of Planning.

The minutes of the Planning Board held on 13th October 2011 record that councillors voted 5-2 to allow an application to establish an equestrian centre at 341 Shooters Hill. However the otherwise full and excellent minutes do not record how individual councillors spoke and voted.

I understand that Councillors Fletcher (H), Jawaid, Offord, Roberts and Walker (all Labour) voted in favour while Councillors Brighty and Poston (both Conservative) voted against.

It is clearly desirable that residents are easily able to ascertain how their elected representatives have voted on important issues and it is strange that the minutes do not record this. Will Councillor Walker as chair of planning ensure that future Planning Board minutes revert to the previous practice of listing the votes of individual members (see for example the vote on 23d March 2010 regarding the use of Greenwich Park for the Olympics)?

Reply -

I thank Mr Webbewood for his question and any councillor may ask at the meeting for how they voted on a particular matter to be recorded in the minutes.

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3. Question from Paul Webbewood, Courtlands Avenue, SE12 to Councillor Chris Roberts, Leader of the Council.

I am advised that the Council paid £304,200 to secure the services of the Interim Director of Neighbourhood Services for a nineteen month period between October 2009 and April 2011.

Why was an Interim Director needed for so long and why was he paid so much?

Reply -

I thank Mr. Webbewood for his question.

I can confirm that Chris Wood worked for the Council from 28 September 2009 to 30 April 2011.

Mr Wood was initially employed as Interim Director of Neighbourhood Services in September 2009 following the resignation of the previous post holder. Part of his role was to review the structure and make recommendations to improve the way the service is delivered. As part of the reconfigured service a post of Director of Housing was advertised but no suitable applicants were identified. Mr Wood agreed to stay on while the Council undertook a new recruitment process and until a suitable applicant was identified. In April 2011 the Council successfully appointed John Clark to this role.

Payment was not made direct to Mr Wood and we do not hold the information on how much he was paid. The Council made a payment of £304,200 to the company which supplied him.

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4. **Question from Darryl Chamberlain, Charlton, SE7 to Councillor Chris Roberts, Leader of the Council.**

Could the leader of the council please confirm how much has been spent on buying certificates for every Councillor to celebrate royal borough status?

Reply -

I thank Mr Chamberlain for his question.

The Royal Borough certificates were designed in-house and so the cost of producing them was simply the colour photo copying charge. This was 4p per certificate. The total cost to the Royal Borough was £2.08.

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5. Question from Darryl Chamberlain, Charlton, SE7 to Councillor Chris Roberts, Leader of the Council.

Could the leader please clarify whether he supports Conservative mayor Boris Johnson's plan to build a road tunnel between Greenwich Peninsula and Silvertown, or whether he supports Labour candidate Ken Livingstone's view that a tunnel would be "mad"? (See <http://snipe.at/scoop/ken-livingstone-i-won-t-bring-back-western-congestion-charge>)

Reply -

I thank Mr Chamberlain for his question.

The Council's priorities have included a package of river crossings for many years, with the DLR and Crossrail being examples of the ongoing success of delivery.

The Council is therefore supportive of the implementation of a package of measures to address the lack of river crossings to the east of Tower Bridge, both for road based traffic and public transport. The Council is in discussion with representatives of the Mayor over the importance of the implementation of the whole package of schemes identified in the London Plan and Mayors Transport Strategy, and for his commitment over their funding and delivery.

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6. Question from Tim Freeman, Greenwich, SE10 to Councillor Chris Roberts, Leader of the Council.

How much money was spent on the Royal transformation of the borough by the council?

What is the breakdown of this spend (i.e. advertising & media, fireworks, new road signs, new stationary etc)?

Reply -

I thank Mr Freeman for his question

The strategy for 'transforming' Royal borough was to create as much impact as possible at minimal cost. This was achieved by doing all design work in-house, delaying some renewal work until the new status was effective and developing new products to have the longest possible usable life.

The borough boundary signs that were erected 12 years ago have been replaced. The previous Boundary signs were dilapidated, some had collapsed and were in need of urgent replacement. The renewal programme was delayed so that the change to Royal Borough could be done as cost effectively as possible. The cost of the new Borough Boundary signs was £21.8K. This is significantly cheaper than the cost of replacing the previous signs as a much simpler design has been used. The lamppost banners that have been installed in town centres cost £41.4K. The cost of new street signs only placed in selected areas was £19K.

Across the Royal Borough there is an agreement that we will avoid producing new stationery. Existing stocks are being used up and the bulk of letters will now be produced on letter templates which have been designed in-house thus avoiding pre-printing costs.

The cost of fireworks displays in the three town centres on three successive nights was £32.5K including music, lighting and displays. This was offset partially by contributions from sponsors to the general celebrations.

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7. **Question from Antony Austin, Greenwich West, SE8 to Councillor Denise Hyland, Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Enterprise and Skills.**

Why has the Council appointed a new main contractor for the refurbishment of the Greenwich and Woolwich foot tunnels?

When will this work, delayed by more than a year, be finally completed?

Reply -

I thank Mr Austin for his question.

Royal Greenwich is working hard to finish the work to enable the tunnels to be fully operational.

The Borough decided to replace the previous contractor following severe delays to the programme.

Royal Greenwich is committed to as early a completion as possible of necessary works to bring the Greenwich and Woolwich foot tunnels fully into operation. Key to resolving the project has been the procurement of specialist contractors from a variety of sources, to maintain best value and ensure as rapid a completion as possible. Works at both tunnels are expected to be complete early in 2012.

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8. Question from Ashleigh Marsh, The Heights, SE7 to Councillor Chris Roberts, Leader of the Council.

With the agreement of section 106 money for a much-needed free, accessible skatepark for the multiple users in the Woolwich/ Charlton area in 2012 to replace the site lost to the Woolwich Cross-Rail development, fundraising activities by Greenwich Skatepark Co-op, and with the Olympics coming up, is there support from the council for Greenwich Skatepark Co-op's plan to build a quality skatepark in Barrier Park by Woolwich Road?

Reply -

I thank Ashleigh Marsh for her question.

The Royal Borough recognises the demand for a good quality skate park to help meet the needs of the local skate boarding community. The skate park site in the Royal Arsenal is not in imminent danger of being lost and it is expected to be in place for a number of years. The Council is currently consulting on a supplementary planning framework for Woolwich and Charlton Riverside and the outcomes of consultation will be awaited before determining a way forward.

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9. Question from Chris Smith, Blackheath, SE3 to Councillor Steve Offord, Cabinet Member for Housing

What action is the Council taking to bring empty homes in the local authority area back into use?

Reply -

I thank Chris Smith for the question.

The Royal Borough of Greenwich has a dedicated Empty Homes Officer who works within the Disability and Home Improvement Team based within Housing Services. The Council is currently working on bringing 20 homes back into use and have bid for additional funding to bring a further 24 back into use over the next 3 years.

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10. Question from Chris Smith, Blackheath, SE3 to Councillor Steve Offord, Cabinet Member for Housing

Does the Council monitor voids in social rented accommodation to ensure that these are not left empty for a long time?

Reply -

I thank Chris Smith for the question.

The answer is yes. This has resulted in void re-let times in the Royal Borough being reduced to 14.7 days making us the best performing Borough in London

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11. Question from Paul Fannon, Blackheath, SE3 to Councillor Steve Offord, Cabinet Member for Housing

How many empty Greenwich Council properties are there?

How many of these have been empty for more than 6 months?

Reply -

I thank Mr Fannon for his question

As at the 27 February 2012 there are 138 void Council properties excluding those empty due to rehousing programmes for the Woolwich Estates and decommissioned sheltered schemes. Of these, 22 have been empty for longer than 6 months.

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12. Question from Stewart Christie, Plumstead, SE18 to Councillor Steve Offord, Cabinet Member for Housing

What is the current size per band of the Greenwich Housing Waiting List?

What is the average time spent on this list per band before suitable housing is found

Reply -

I thank Stewart Christie for his question.

As at February 2012 the numbers on the Housing waiting list are:

There are 14,496 households on the housing register.

297 are in Band A

1133 are in Band B.

The remainder are in Band C.

It is not possible to provide average waiting times by band because this varies depending on housing need and the size and location of properties.

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13. Question from Suzanne Miller, Greenwich, SE18 to Councillor Chris Roberts, Leader of the Council

In light of the News Shopper article that asked, “Is Greenwich the most undemocratic Local Authority in the UK?”

(http://www.newshopper.co.uk/news/top_stories/9530528.Million_pound_decisions_made_behind_closed_doors/), what action if any will the Leader of the Council be taking to improve democracy in Greenwich by allowing the Council as a whole, and also residents, to scrutinize and debate important issues and expenditures rather than deciding them by delegation?

Reply -

Thank you for your question.

Greenwich operates no differently than other local authorities. The law requires all local authorities to arrange for full Council to agree the budget, set the council tax and agree key policies such as the local development framework. Other key decisions must be published in advance before they are taken. All decisions delegated to councillors may be called in by other councillors for scrutiny before they can be implemented.

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14. Question from Suzanne Miller, Greenwich, SE18 to Councillor Steve Offord, Cabinet Member for Housing

The 2008 Greenwich Housing Requirements Study stated that 24,646 Greenwich households were unsuitably housed because of one or more serious problems relating to their current home, such as overcrowding, major disrepair, or housing support needs. How many Greenwich Council homes are currently awaiting major repairs or adaptation (with a breakdown according to those two categories)?

Reply -

I thank Suzanne Miller for her question

The figure quoted in the Housing Requirements Study above covers all tenures of housing in the borough not just homes owned by the Royal Borough of Greenwich.

In terms of the Council's properties, there are currently 8 properties awaiting or undergoing major repairs.

There are currently 49 households living in Council homes requiring a major adaptation. Of these 20 are approved and in preparation with the remainder on the waiting list.