

COUNCIL ASSEMBLY

(ORDINARY)

WEDNESDAY 26 JANUARY 2011

URGENT QUESTIONS

1. URGENT QUESTION TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL FROM COUNCILLOR ANOOD AL-SAMERAI

Please could the leader give an update about the fire at Brawne House and the current position.

RESPONSE

The causes of the fire are still under investigation and we are co-operating fully with the fire brigade.

Of the damaged flats, 59 residents chose to remain in their homes, 1 is staying with relatives and 8 were in temporary accommodation. As at 25 January, of the 9 displaced households, 2 had returned home. We are working toward completing all outstanding repairs by the end of the week, and will be redecorating those flats where there has been damage caused by smoke or water.

Emergency payments have been made to those who lost belongings in the fire - £200 over the weekend, and provision is being made for another £300 to be paid this week.

Surgeries have been held daily for residents, and daily contact is being made with all residents displaced by the fire.

Counselling services have been offered to all residents and those wanting to take up this opportunity have been given a freephone telephone number to call.

A public meeting has been arranged for the evening of 27 January, where officers and the deputy leader and cabinet member for housing management will be available to brief residents.

SUPPLEMENTAL QUESTION TO THE LEADER FROM COUNCILLOR ANOOD AL-SAMERAI

Thank you very much to the leader for his answer. I joined Councillor Bowman at her surgery on Brandon Estate on Thursday and we went and met the director of housing on Friday and I am very pleased to hear that emergency assistant payments have been made and that counselling has been offered - it was particularly difficult dealing with some of the younger children who had been above the fire coming down through the smoke - so I am really pleased about that. There was an issue raised about smoke alarms, whether they were working, whether communal alarms on the landings were needed, so I would be grateful if the leader could assure us that that would also be looked into?

RESPONSE

Well I am grateful for that follow up question, it is important that we do keep on top of issues like this. I was just being reassured by Councillor Wingfield, who is going to be meeting residents tomorrow together with housing management, that the fire brigade has inspected Brawne House and they have confirmed that all fire safety regulations were complied with and that everything was in working order so residents can be assured that every thing is in order this time.

SUPPLEMENTAL QUESTION TO THE LEADER FROM COUNCILLOR ANOOD AL-SAMERAI

Thank you, the extra question does ring a bell from the democracy commission and Councillor Mohamed is not here to thank him, so please pass on my thanks to Councillor Mohamed. There was a specific issue about fire alarms in people's flats. I appreciate it may tick the fire assessment boxes; but that was something people were very anxious about, so I am sure Councillor Wingfield could follow that up tomorrow and that would be appreciated.

RESPONSE

I absolutely give that reassurance. My understanding is that the fire brigade will provide local alarms for free for any resident in any event – they won't? Well, there we are. I am taken in by the advertising that they put on the TV and cinema. But Councillor Wingfield can address this with residents tomorrow and hopefully give some reassurance there.

2. URGENT QUESTION TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL FROM COUNCILLOR LEWIS ROBINSON

Would the leader comment on whether an amnesty is to be offered to unauthorised occupants of council dwellings, and set out any proposed changes to responsibilities or processes for checking that council tenanted dwellings are occupied by the authorised tenants?

RESPONSE

Because there is such a shortage of council housing in Southwark, housing officers are currently drawing up new proposals to crack down on illegal occupancy to ensure that our homes go to those genuinely in need. We are also currently waiting to see what the government's proposals in this area will be.

SUPPLEMENTAL QUESTION TO THE LEADER FROM COUNCILLOR LEWIS ROBINSON

Thank you Mr Mayor, I certainly do, because the leader has not answered my original question. I think that many members of the council here tonight, many people on the waiting lists in this borough, many homeless people and many people in temporary accommodation will be extremely concerned to hear that at the audit and governance committee meeting last night it was revealed that the council is considering an amnesty for illegal sub letting in this borough. This answer does not deny that, which it should do, and this is what the council should do now – it should deny that that process is underway, it should also clarify the changes that it is planning to fraud investigations within housing and

reassure us that they have the full confidence of the senior fraud investigation team.

RESPONSE

I can give a more direct reply to Councillor Robinson like he seeks. No, there is no question of an amnesty for illegal occupancy of any Southwark property. We are in the midst of drawing up new proposals to crack down on this problem – that will be through work in the press as well as actually carrying out door to door checks of who is in occupation of the properties. It is a very important issue given the shortage of property in Southwark, that people are not making a quick buck on the back of Southwark's property portfolio. It is not something we will tolerate as a council ever at any stage; the message from this administration goes out loud and clear to that affect. I am sorry that audit and governance committee seems to have been misled about some idea, that's all I can call it, last night but I can give the categorical reassurance he seeks this evening.