

COUNCIL ASSEMBLY

(ORDINARY)

WEDNESDAY 12 OCTOBER 2011

PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

1. QUESTION FROM PATRICK YORKE TO THE CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE, RESOURCES AND COMMUNITY SAFETY

What is the net gain received from our disposable assets i.e. buildings, stocks up to date? And what are the proposed secured funds being used for?

RESPONSE

The net capital receipts received over the past five years amounts to £192.3 million. These funds have been used to contribute to funding the council's capital programme, which over the past five years has amounted to £850.4 million.

Future net receipts will be used to contribute to the funding of the 10-year capital programme, which was agreed at council assembly on 6 July 2011 and which amounts to expenditure of £351 million over the next 10 years.

Last 5 years net receipts and actual capital expenditure:

Year	Net Capital Receipts £000's	Capital Expenditure £000's
2006/07	28,194	147,456
2007/08	35,400	140,227
2008/09	30,093	185,935
2009/10	53,127	202,419
2010/11	45,479	174,381
Total	192,293	850,418

Current agreed 10 year capital programme:

Year	Capital Programme £000's
2011/12	226,470
2012/13	209,191
2013/14	119,422
2014/15	98,061
2015/16	110,791
2016/17	10,325
2017/18	6,930
2018/19	7,195
2019/20	7,195
2020/21	7,245
Total	802,824

SUPPLEMENTAL QUESTION FROM PATRICK YORKE TO THE CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE, RESOURCES AND COMMUNITY SAFETY

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to ask a supplemental question and I thank you for bringing this meeting to Peckham and championing the cause of Peckham. Looking at the answer given we have a deficit of £650 million coming from the expenditure - will Southwark still maintain assets and for how long will Southwark maintain assets ringfenced for prosperity for the next generation so that they can look forward to using those assets?

RESPONSE

I would like to thank Mr Yorke for his supplemental question, I can certainly reassure him that the value of the assets that we dispose of as a council are then ploughed back into the council's capital programme to ensure that future generations get best use of that and clearly the whole purpose of the capital programme that we agreed last council assembly meeting is to ensure that money is being invested to give as bright a future as possible to future residents of the borough so I can certainly give him that reassurance.

2. QUESTION FROM DORCAS FAYEMI TO THE CABINET MEMBER FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES

In these times of financial restraint how does Southwark Council justify paying up to £63 daily for carers to supervise disabled children at home after school when there are organisation that can provide the desired level of care and more for a number of these children at £10 per day?

RESPONSE

The council buys and directly provides a range of services to meet the needs of disabled children and support their parents and carers. This includes a variety of types of short break (formerly known as "respite care").

The cost of short breaks provision varies because of a number of variables, including the child's needs, the facility used, and the skills and experience of the carer. The average hourly cost of a carer in the family home is around £15.50. The hourly cost of an after school or holiday provision for a group of children with mild or moderate disabilities can be as low as £10 per hour. Some children have high cost daily packages because they have high assessed needs. By supporting these children with more complex needs in the community, we can prevent them entering care which is more expensive than supporting them at home with their families.

We seek to deliver best value for money, and must always balance cost with quality. We pay no more than market prices for the required type and quality of provision that children with complex needs require.

3 QUESTION FROM MICK BARNARD TO THE CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE, RESOURCES AND COMMUNITY SAFETY

Can you provide the response times for responding to emails, letters and phone calls from the public and explain what action can be taken in the case of either a councillor or officer should they fail to comply with that requirement?

RESPONSE

Southwark's response times are 3 days for acknowledging correspondence and 10 days to answer emails and letters, and generally within 24 hours for returning phone calls. Depending on the issues raised a response may take longer, however an update should be provided to customers if this is likely to be the case.

If an officer fails to respond to correspondence or phone calls it may be an oversight on their part and we would encourage customers to contact the person again. The complaint process would be the appropriate process to use if an officer still fails to respond. If it is identified that a specific officer is failing to respond to correspondence or telephone calls then advice and guidance would be offered, combined with training if appropriate. Disciplinary action may be considered if the circumstances warrant this.

Councillors are not covered by the council's correspondence standards, and the national councillor code of conduct places no obligation on councillors to answer correspondence. Councillors' accountability is through the ballot box.

SUPPLEMENTAL QUESTION FROM MICK BARNARD TO THE CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE, RESOURCES AND COMMUNITY SAFETY.

How do you justify my emails being ignored prior to 15 September when an investigation by an independent auditor is now taking place into the content of those emails and how does your original answer relate to the constitution's code of conduct for members? Thank you.

RESPONSE

Thank you for your supplementary question, Alderman Barnard. I have to say the final paragraph does make clear that councillors are not bound by that standard in terms of responding. I obviously have not had the detail of the complaints that you have raised. I am not aware what the issues are and it seems fairly clear to me from what the monitoring officer was saying it would be unwise of me to try comment or to try to speculate on those questions you have asked. I know it is not a very satisfactory answer but I am happy to have a conversation afterwards if that would be helpful.

4. QUESTION FROM JEFF KELLAND TO THE CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE, RESOURCES AND COMMUNITY SAFETY

The council on 1 August 2011 ended the lease on the first floor of Nutmeg House, Gainsford Street community space. What consultation took place with Tooley Street tenants and residents, how have the assets been disposed of and what compensation will be available for the loss of this community asset?

RESPONSE

The premises on the first floor of Nutmeg House, 60 Gainsford Street, SE1 was leased by the council from Dorrington Properties PLC for the use of Tooley Street TRA. The lease was set to expire in December 2014.

On 1 August 2011, the council terminated the lease. The tenants and residents

association (TRA) had become defunct in 2009, and there had been no use of the property since then. Under the terms of the lease, it could only be used to hold meetings, and not for other activities, so without a TRA its purpose had ended.

The council had continued to pay for the upkeep of the hall since the demise of the association, but it was considered poor value for money to continue to pay for a property that was no longer being used. The council received a settlement of £11,200 for the early surrender of the lease and is now making a saving of £14,375 per year in running costs that would have been payable had the lease not been surrendered.

In 2009, the council worked for several months to try to either bring the residents' association back together or to help it dissolve. It was not possible to do either. Before ending this lease, we spoke about our intentions with Fair Community Housing, the tenant management organisation which manages the properties where the TRA had operated. They had no interest in using the property. The contents of the property were given to Fair Community Housing.

Nutmeg House also contains a nursery facility on the ground floor. This will continue to operate with the support of the council.

SUPPLEMENTAL QUESTION FROM JEFF KELLAND TO THE CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE, RESOURCES AND COMMUNITY SAFETY

I am sure that the councillor will join with me in regret at the demise of the Tooley Street tenants and residents association, which has had a proud history of almost 40 years. What concerns me in the answer is the disposal – the summary disposal of assets by council officers, which I do not think is appropriate as there are still tenants and residents at Tooley Street, and will he use these good offices to ensure that a public meeting is held where appropriate disposal of the substantial assets of the TRA, including the sum of £4,207, is a matter for that meeting in accordance with clause 25 of the Tooley Street TRA?

RESPONSE

Thank you Madam Mayor, I would like to thank Mr Kelland for his supplementary question.

In the circumstances I certainly agree with you that the demise of the Tooley Street TRA, I think, was a very sad loss to the area and I know that considerable effort has been put in to try and reinvigorate that and unfortunately that has not been successful and that is obviously why the council is no longer leasing what was quite an expensive facility for a group that was not able to meet any longer and that was the sole reason for that lease.

I am happy to go away and talk to officers about the issues around disposal of assets. As I understand it the money that you mentioned I think was returned to the tenants' fund, but I may need to check that through. I am certainly happy to have those conversations with officers to see whether what happened to the assets was the best place, and what we can look at and what might be to ensure that has been for the best benefit for the local community, so I am happy to take that further with officers.

5. QUESTION FROM SUE WHITEHEAD TO THE CABINET MEMBER FOR TRANSPORT, ENVIRONMENT AND RECYCLING

Was an assessment made of the impact on the visual environment – particularly in streets of terraced houses – prior to introducing bright blue recycling bins rather than bins of a less obtrusive dark blue as used in other areas, and was the Southwark Streetscape team consulted?

RESPONSE

We did not carry out a specific assessment, however we have been using blue containers, currently boxes and bags, for our recycling collections for several years and we believe it is important to keep the colour theme consistent. Many of our residents know that green is for rubbish, brown is for garden (and now food waste) and blue is for recyclable materials.

To maximise recycling it is vital that contamination, where the wrong materials end up in the containers, is minimised. We believe that changing the colour scheme that has been in use in Southwark since 2001 would lead to confusion and an increase in contamination levels.

During the food waste pilot that we carried out last year, a number of residents and ward councillors specifically requested that the blue boxes were replaced with blue bins as they wanted additional storage capacity. The provision of these bins is in direct response to resident feedback.

With respect to consultation with the Streetscape team, this team is represented in all senior decision making around this project, but also as bins are generally contained within the property boundary consideration of their design is not what we have envisaged to be the purpose of the streetscene design manual. The design manual is intended to relate to the design of fixed physical assets on the highway such as lamp columns, benches, guard rails etc.

We do of course understand that the new blue bins won't be suitable for everybody, which is why we are still offering the old blue boxes as an alternative. This can be requested via the council's customer contact centre on 020 7525 2000.

SUPPLEMENTAL QUESTION FROM SUE WHITEHEAD TO THE CABINET MEMBER FOR TRANSPORT, ENVIRONMENT AND RECYCLING

My question is about the new bright blue recycling bins in Southwark, particularly my area of Southwark which is East Dulwich. The blue recycling containers which were recently used in Southwark were a very unobtrusive dark blue whereas the blue wheelie bins that have now come in are a really bright blue. If you have already seen them there is a comparison of the two pictures here you can see the bins very dark blue, the new bins extremely bright blue. It has an effect on the visual street environment, in particularly in streets of terraced houses where there is no room to put the bins except immediately outside the houses where they are on full view of passers by does not seem to be taken into account in making this colour change from dark blue to bright blue. What I would like to know is whether the less obtrusive dark blue bins will be used in future for any new bins that may be required now this has been brought to your attention?

RESPONSE

I thank Ms Whitehead very much for her question. What we are doing at the moment is undergoing a major change in how we deliver our waste collection services and I believe this change is very much to the better – but what we want to do is to make sure that everybody who can is supportive and gets the most out of recycling.

I take every single complaint very seriously including the issue around the shade of blue bins, although at the moment of course we have a programme rolling out to 45,000 properties and we really do need to actually get that right, particularly in terms of how people handle their waste. It is not something I am completely ignoring about the shade of the bin and the effect it has on the street scene. If you could bear with us at this moment and understand, our priorities at the moment are managing to get people to be able to recycle to the maximum, it certainly is something I could look at further down the line.

6. QUESTION FROM CHRIS COOPER TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Re: Agenda item 6.4 – The government's pension proposals for the LGPS include pay more, work longer get less. This will have detrimental impact upon the workforce, older members and younger members of our community. Could this item not be changed to state that the council fully support the TUC day of action?

RESPONSE

I have considerable sympathy for the way workers from across the public sector, including all of our staff, face the prospect of larger pension contributions for a smaller return. This government has treated public sector staff and the trade unions who represent them with contempt. This is particularly the case for members of the local government pension scheme, which the government itself has recognised as fully-funded, and yet it still refuses to rule out making punitive changes to it.

I would like to assure all our staff and trade unionists that if the ballot supports a day of action, I will not cross a picket line.

SUPPLEMENTAL QUESTION FROM CHRIS COOPER TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

I would like to thank the leader for his very helpful response. The question relates to the council assembly on 30 November in relation to the action being taken, in particular in this case in relation to the local government pension scheme, which is in fact not in crisis but is self financing. I think I have stated the obvious concerns of the impacts on both older and younger people in the borough. My fear is that by imposing what equates to an additional income tax of 3% on contributors to the local government pension scheme many, especially the lower paid, will be compelled to withdraw and that in fact could create a pensions crisis. I therefore think the council should support the action being taken and rather than move the assembly, simply because there may be difficulties, that the assembly should be moved because the council fully supports the action being taken in defence of the council's pension scheme?

RESPONSE

Thank you very much Madam Mayor, and thank you Chris for that supplemental question.

I know how much this issue concerns employees of our council and public service workers right across the piece actually, and what an impact it is having on them and it is not through the usual activists who are concerned about this; it is people at every level. I think people who feel that they were part of a pension scheme; who have been loyal public servants for many years; who could have earned more actually out in the private sector but chose to stay in the public sector because of the way the pension was arranged – they entered into that contract when they entered into employment and feel extremely let down by the government's current proposals and in particular I feel they feel let down in the intransigent way in which the government is going about this – we are willing to negotiate as long as it is on our terms and you come to the conclusion we have already come to – it feels very much like that.

Obviously I have a duty to balance my sympathy for those who may participate in a day of action on 30 November with my duties as leader of the council to ensure all those who may be impacted by that day of action continue to receive the vital services they need to on 30 November and obviously that position will not change. I also have to be mindful of those employees of the council who may not be union members and who may choose to work on that day and I don't think I could rightly say that the council as a corporate entity, I don't think it would be right for me to say that the council fully supports any proposed action on 30 November – but what I can say is that I will not cross any picket line, I will support the campaign of yourself and other union members and I am sure that many and if not all my colleagues on this side will also support you.