

SOUTHWARK COUNCIL

COUNCIL ASSEMBLY

(ORDINARY MEETING)

WEDNESDAY 22 NOVEMBER 2023

PUBLIC QUESTIONS WITH RESPONSES

1. QUESTION TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL FROM COUNCILLOR IAN WINGFIELD

Can the Leader let us know how many new council homes have been completed in the last 12 months?

RESPONSE

Southwark Council is the largest builder of council housing in the country and our borough now has the most significant programme of council home construction since the 1970s. Our current pipeline consists of over 3,000 homes that are either complete or on site – of which 443 were completed in the last 12 months.

2. QUESTION TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL FROM COUNCILLOR DAVID WATSON

Despite the council's failure to build the council homes it promised, private development across Southwark is booming. Residents living between construction sites are rightly asking when they will see the community benefit of all this private development. Section 106 and community infrastructure levy (CIL) contributions for community investment have reached millions of pounds but are currently just burning a hole in the council's pocket. This despite the immense financial pressures felt elsewhere and growing despondence among residents neighbouring, particularly, big developments.

Councillors were initially promised a review into CIL allocations in autumn this year. But there has been no communication about this. Why has the review been delayed?

Will the council consider increasing its use of S.106 powers to help plug the housing revenue account (HRA) funding gaps, both in cash terms and social housing provision?

When will residents who have endured years of noise and disruption see the benefits of community investments through S.106 and CIL funding?

RESPONSE

With nearly £6.7m of local CIL projects funded since December 2020, we are reviewing the best and most effective way to distribute CIL going forward and

will bring forward these proposals in the spring next year. We already use S106 to provide resources for new social housing. £140m of S106 has been invested in council homes through the Southwark Construction programme in the last five years. In the same period, residents have benefitted from almost £19m of S106 funding into a range of projects including parks, energy programmes, accessible housing projects, community spaces, business support, health initiatives and transport measures.

3. QUESTION TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL FROM COUNCILLOR RICHARD LIVINGSTONE

Could the Leader provide an update of Old Kent Road regeneration?

RESPONSE

The Old Kent Road plan is progressing well, despite the national economic challenges of the last two years, with a huge range of projects coming online, nearing completion or beginning to put spades in the ground. 708 homes have been completed so far across seven sites, and we have a further 20 sites under construction comprising 1,825 homes. 58% of these homes will be genuinely affordable. Additional projects include the Healthy High Street project, which will deliver a new cycle route and crossing at the Ilderton Road/Old Kent Road junction with £9.6m of investment; the opening of the Livesey Exchange which provides affordable workspace on previously underutilised land; and £600k into the community redesign of Bramcote Park. Southwark Young Advisors are also due to move into the youth hub at 231 Old Kent Road, we are retrofitting existing homes in Canal Grove Cottages and Manor Grove to improve their energy performance.

4. QUESTION TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL FROM COUNCILLOR RACHEL BENTLEY

The pressure on the council's finances including the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) is reaching critical levels, with alarm bells being rung by many other councils facing similar problems. Whilst proper funding for vital public services must be restored by central government, it's vital that the Council's own funding streams are well-managed. Residents will have noticed commercial properties sitting vacant and are keen to know that businesses in Southwark are paying their fair share of rent and business rates. Please can you advise the following in relation to the Council's commercial property portfolio:

- What was the total amount of commercial rent arrears in 2022/2023 and in the current year to date?
- What is the overall value of arrears versus the commercial rent budget?
- Is there a strategy to support businesses such as pubs and other hospitality venues that incurred arrears during mandatory closures in the Covid pandemic?

RESPONSE

It is standard industry practice in relation to commercial property that rent is paid in arrears on a quarterly rolling basis. This means that a majority of accounts are in technical arrears at any point in time even where payment is not late. Commercial rent arrears as at 31 March 2023 was £8.7M and is currently £9.8M as at 31 October 2023 on a rolling basis. Currently arrears stand at approximately 40% of rent roll and this is not debt – the vast majority will be paid as expected and has been in the past. During the pandemic, government suspended our ability to pursue the majority of longer term arrears through enforcement which has had knock on effect on the overall level of arrears.

Where businesses have been adversely impacted by other pandemic restrictions we have supported them in a range of ways, including with repayment plans or monthly rent instalments to ease cash flow where tenants were otherwise required to make quarterly payments. In other cases we agreed the deferral of rents month by month up to a maximum of 12 months subject to review. The council has put robust action in place to support businesses to return their accounts to balance and to, where necessary, take action when tenants are not taking reasonable steps to pay their arrears.

5. QUESTION TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL FROM COUNCILLOR KIMBERLY MCINTOSH

As part of Southwark Stands Together, the council has committed to tackling racial disparities in its workforce. What progress is being made towards closing the council's ethnicity pay gap?

RESPONSE

The council is committed to closing the ethnicity pay gap and ensuring parity of pay for people of all backgrounds across the organisation. I am very glad to report that since 2018/19, the council's ethnicity pay gap has reduced from 12.6% to 9.3%. One of the most important reasons for this change is an increase in the number of senior roles that are filled by ethnically diverse employees, which has grown from 31.8% to 37.0% over the same period.

6. QUESTION TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL FROM COUNCILLOR EMILY TESTER

Southwark is lucky to be home to many railway viaducts and arches, dating back to the Victorian era of railway speculation – the Spa Road junction is even Grade II listed. Whilst some of the arches have been put to good use, some of the tunnels remain dingy, unlit, and unsafe.

- What will the council do to make these spaces a safe and welcoming part of the street-scape?
- How will the council ensure that the heritage assets are preserved for future generations to appreciate?

RESPONSE

We have the largest number of railway arches of any London borough and we have worked with the owners in Network Rail and ArchCo to bring many of them into safe and viable commercial and community use. We have set out ambitious plans for many of our arches, illustrated most clearly through our commitment to the low line and schemes such as Findlater's Corner scheme at London Bridge. We have an exceptionally strong heritage policy embedded within our local plan and at our next Cabinet we will bring forward proposals for our own local list which will support and defend local heritage into the future.

7. QUESTION TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL FROM COUNCILLOR KATH WHITTAM

Can the Leader update on the figures for genuinely affordable housing delivery in Southwark?

RESPONSE

The council is continuing to drive the delivery of genuinely affordable homes in the borough. The last financial year 2022-23 saw a significant amount of new homes being delivered, with an additional 472 homes for social rent. In the same financial year, construction began on 1,125 units set for social rent on top of what has already been delivered, with affordable housing making up around half of all units started across the borough that year.

8. QUESTION TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL FROM COUNCILLOR IRINA VON WIESE

In 2020, Southwark Councillors unanimously passed a motion calling for Southwark to become a 'Borough of Sanctuary' as part of the City of Sanctuary movement.

In that time, Southwark has failed to become an official borough of sanctuary and the campaign calling for this has become inactive.

Does the council plan to uphold the commitment made in 2020 for Southwark to become a borough of sanctuary? Is there a strategy across the council for how to achieve this? Has Southwark Council as an organisation been in contact with City of Sanctuary to seek guidance as to how to become a borough of sanctuary?

RESPONSE

The council has substantially scaled up our work to welcome to refugees to this borough, working with the voluntary and community sector (VCS) to provide the support they need to flourish in our communities. Meanwhile we are absolutely committed to achieving formal recognition as a borough of sanctuary. We have joined the City of Sanctuary local authority network and are in close contact with them and VCS partners to advance this work. We will update members in Spring 2024 as to our progress.

9. QUESTION TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL FROM COUNCILLOR MARGY NEWENS

Could the leader outline how the council accounts for heritage and conservation issues within planning policy?

RESPONSE

We are proud of the fact that our local plan includes some of the strongest policies for protecting local heritage and conservation areas in the country. These protections are vital to maintaining the character and history of our borough. The Southwark Plan sets out how we do this around key areas such as listed buildings and structures, conservation areas, conservation of the historic environment and natural heritage, archaeology and more. I am delighted that we are bringing forward new plans for our own Local List to our next Cabinet meeting in order to further extend these protections into the future.

10. QUESTION TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL FROM COUNCILLOR VICTOR CHAMBERLAIN

Residents of Styles House are rightly furious at the recent cancellation of a redevelopment they were all looking forward to. Eight council homes have now been cancelled in what is yet another blow to the council's unfunded housebuilding promise.

When was the council aware that the building design was no longer compliant with new fire safety laws?

When did the council first engage with residents and the tenants and residents association (TRA) about problems with the development?

How many other council construction projects currently in the pipeline will be affected by the issue that cancelled Styles House?

RESPONSE

New guidance on the previous approved scheme for the new tower at Styles House was received on 8 September 2023. Upon receiving this guidance, the council contacted the tenant management organisations (TMOs) and arranged to meet with them on 18 September 2023. There are no other sites affected with the specific combination of issues as Styles House.

11. QUESTION TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL FROM COUNCILLOR CHLOE TOMLINSON

Can the leader outline the cost of living support available to residents in Rye Lane and across the borough over the winter?

RESPONSE

I am proud that in July we approved an £11m Cost of Living Fund to help those suffering in this crisis. This has included automatic targeted support without the need for applications for vulnerable households, as well as working with local VCS partners to refer low income households to us. So far this year the council has helped more than 70,000 households and distributed £5m of cash support, including our ongoing delivery of Holiday Free School Meals to over 15,000 children. This autumn and winter Southwark residents throughout the whole borough will have access to a further £6m of support as we continue to help our residents through this crisis. It can be accessed at: www.southwark.gov.uk/here-to-help

12. QUESTION TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL FROM COUNCILLOR HAMISH MCCALLUM

At the beginning of the summer the deputy cabinet member for housing allocations committed to refreshing the allocations scheme in order to be 'chain maximising', with a pilot to be conducted in the short term.

- Please will the Leader update us on the progress of that pilot.
- How will the extra administrative burden of this new system be handled given the pressure the allocations team are under with record high waiting lists and hundreds of monthly approaches?
- Though the logic of prioritising allocations on the basis of maximising chains is sound in theory, how will the council ensure that those with the greatest need are not waiting even longer than they already are?

RESPONSE

The chain lettings pilot exercise is under development. This is an innovative project which has potential to be transformative in ensuring more residents have access to a council home. We will ensure that the scheme is equitable and fair for all residents in the borough and on our waiting lists and ultimately lead to more residents having homes that are right for them.

13. QUESTION TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL FROM COUNCILLOR SANDRA RHULE

How are we encouraging more businesses to become Living Wage employers?

RESPONSE

We currently have 312 Living Wage Employers in Southwark with nearly 5,000 people having received a pay rise due to their employer becoming accredited. We are delighted that an additional 28 employers based in Southwark have been accredited with the Living Wage Foundation since March. To continue to drive this forward, we have established a new Living Wage Unit to support this

work. Employers interested in becoming accredited can find more information at: <https://www.southwark.gov.uk/business/london-living-wage>

14. QUESTION TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL FROM COUNCILLOR GRAHAM NEALE

The Cleaner Greener Safer (CGS) fund in theory represents a funding stream for projects that enhance communities – but many residents feel that in practice, it is not being followed through.

- How CGS funded projects have been followed through to completion, against the total number of projects granted initial funding, to date?
- How many CGS projects have been rejected, and on what grounds?
- The flora at Nursery Row Park now taken down in the name of ‘safety’ was a CGS project – how many other CGS projects have been cancelled or removed by the council?

RESPONSE

The total number of completed CGS projects since the programme started runs into the hundreds. Last year 319 eligible applications were received of which 127 were successfully chosen by local ward councillors to proceed. We have many more applications each year than we can fund and therefore a proportion will be always be unsuccessful. Some schemes will need to be amended in order to be delivered and there are a wide range of reasons why a small number of proposed projects may not be able to proceed.

15. QUESTION TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL FROM COUNCILLOR ADAM HOOD

Residents of Rotherhithe and Surrey Docks have been enduring significant traffic problems on Lower Road for months as the cycle lane works are being completed. Whilst the completion of the cycle lane is welcome, residents will be concerned about both the timeline of the project and the impact of the traffic flow adjustments.

- What modelling has been done to ensure that the end result will have lower traffic levels than before?
- The reversal of the flow of Cope Street is a welcome part of the plans - but has the council considered implementing this now (i.e blocking access from Rotherhithe Old Road) to alleviate some of the traffic pressure onto Lower Road whilst works are in progress?
- What is the timeline for completion of this project and the start of the next phase of highways work in the area?

RESPONSE

Comprehensive traffic modelling is always carried out to ensure changes to proposed road layouts are adequate for the predicted traffic flows once a scheme has been implemented. At the Plough Way junction the model shows that during the week at peak hours the junction is busy but is coping with the flows. This should continue when the cycleway is opened with an additional stage introduced in the traffic signal phasing. The reversal of the flow of Cope Street is not part of the current Cycleway 4 project. This would need careful consideration of the impact of the change, a further traffic re-modelling exercise and a statutory public consultation. The temporary cycleway is currently programmed to be opened to the public by mid-February 2024. We will then decide in spring next year whether to take forward further consultation for the next steps of the scheme.

16. QUESTION TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL FROM COUNCILLOR MARIA LINFORTH-HALL

Residents of Perronet House in St George's Ward have been living with severe on-going leaks in the building since 2018. The delays are reportedly due to the presence of asbestos obstructing attempts by council officers to fix the leaks.

- Why has the council not been able to arrange the removal of asbestos in the past 5 years in order to allow proper repairs?
- Are any other repairs being delayed due to the presence of asbestos and how long have they been delayed for?
- Does the council have a named contractor used for the removal of asbestos and other harmful materials or is that service handled internally?

RESPONSE

In accordance with industry standards the council only removes asbestos when necessary; such as when it has been disturbed. This is in order to keep residents safe and limit disruption in their homes. At Perronet House there have been a total of 25 occasions where repairs have necessitated the removal of asbestos. This is a common cause of delay since we then have to formally notify the Health & Safety Executive before work can take place. In some cases, asbestos removal can also be very disruptive and require tenants to be temporarily re-housed. We use accredited services for the removal of asbestos and currently contract DCUK Ltd and Franklyn Shaw Associates.

17. QUESTION TO THE CABINET MEMBER FOR NEIGHBOURHOODS, LEISURE AND PARKS FROM COUNCILLOR RICHARD LEEMING

How has insourcing improved our leisure services?

RESPONSE

Following the very successful transfer of the service into the council, the team have been focused on improving the customer experience including:

- Establishing a new booking and payment system
- Improving access to centres
- Additional training and development of staff
- Investment programme to improve the quality of facilities
- Investing over £800,000 in our leisure assets since transfer.
- Introducing a new Customer Relationship Management system
- Removing barriers and increasing participations by removing the advance payment on memberships when joining.
- Staff engagement meetings and surveys to support and motivate the leisure staff across the service.

We are developing a new leisure strategy for 2024. This will seek to maximise the opportunities for more residents to access leisure services; additional programmes to support health and well-being; and working collaboratively across the council and with local partners.

18. QUESTION TO THE CABINET MEMBER FOR NEIGHBOURHOODS, LEISURE AND PARKS FROM COUNCILLOR SAM FOSTER

Can you provide an update on when we can expect the Una Marson Library to open on the Aylesbury?

RESPONSE

I am delighted to say the brand new Una Marson library on the Aylesbury estate will open on 29 November 2023. The library will start by offering over 21,500 books, 25 study spaces, 16 public PCs, a reading area with large comfortable seats, multiple window seats, wireless printing, a children's section, two meeting rooms, public wifi, a health kiosk and defibrillator.

19. QUESTION TO THE CABINET MEMBER FOR NEIGHBOURHOODS, LEISURE AND PARKS FROM COUNCILLOR ANDY SIMMONS

Can you provide an update on the newly re-open Kingswood Library?

RESPONSE

Kingswood library re-opened in its new permanent home on the Kingswood estate in July 2023. The new community facility provides a contemporary library offer of new books for adults and children, PCs for internet use, free wifi throughout the space, children's library area, flexible shelving, seating & study space and a garden area. Since re-opening the new library has had over 1,500 visits, issued over 1,500 book loans and had over 340 attendances to the various events. In addition to the new library space, the Libraries team are

working in partnership with Kingswood Arts, who manage Kingswood House, to deliver library and heritage related activities and events at the house.

20. QUESTION TO THE CABINET MEMBER FOR NEIGHBOURHOODS, LEISURE AND PARKS FROM COUNCILLOR JANE SALMON

In 2011, the Friends of Nursery Row Park used £10,000 of council funding to create a flower walkway in the park.

In September 2023, council officers, at the request of the police and with no dialogue with the local community, tore down this flower walkway. The council and police claim this was in order to deter anti-social behaviour (ASB) by clearing CCTV sight lines. However, Residents report this action has done nothing to reduce ASB in the park.

- Having failed to tackle ASB in Nursery Row Park by removing the flower walkway, how does the council intend to resolve this ongoing issue?
- Will the council apologise to locals and the Friends of Nursery Row Park for destroying a flower walkway that took 10 years of care and maintenance to grow?
- Does the council have a plan to improve the park for locals or will they wait another 10 years for the flower walkway to regrow?

RESPONSE

Parks Liaison Officers, the Police and local residents continue to work together to find a resolution to the issue of anti-social behaviour in Nursery Row Park. Officers have offered that the Friends be part of any solution in terms of re-planting or fresh design and will discuss with the group soon. I hope all members can show our appreciation and support for our hard working local police, our park staff and volunteers in the park and immediate local areas as we work to resolve these issues in partnership.

21. QUESTION TO THE CABINET MEMBER FOR NEIGHBOURHOODS, LEISURE AND PARKS FROM COUNCILLOR NICK JOHNSON

Having brought leisure services in-house in June, there are already reports of gyms being neglected and in disrepair. Users of one gym in Peckham have reported up to 15 broken machines at a time and mould on the premises.

- How does the council plan to improve the Peckham Pulse Gym for users?
- Does the council have a ring fenced budget for improving existing leisure facilities in budget and, if so, how much is in that budget?

RESPONSE

We are implementing extensive improvements in our leisure centres such as Peckham Pulse, including replacing old equipment. There are further plans to improve the gyms in the borough, including Peckham, with a full refurbishment and redecoration plan. We have invested £804k across the facilities in the borough since June 2023, including group exercise studio improvements, new kit, replacement of pool plant, air handling, and improvements to building fabric.

22. QUESTION TO THE CABINET MEMBER FOR NEIGHBOURHOODS, LEISURE AND PARKS FROM COUNCILLOR LEO POLLAK

What is being undertaken to ensure the council maintains the 30 Green Flags in our parks?

RESPONSE

In the past three years we have spent nearly £19m on maintaining our parks, ensuring they continue to be some of the best in London. This involves regular inspections, contactor meetings and a partnership approach to service development and improvements. An officer working group is also active in advance of Green Flag assessments to ensure that any issues arising are addressed and our parks continue to be maintained to their Green Flag status and standards. In addition to this, we regularly liaise with Friends of groups and other stakeholders to review parks maintenance and explore opportunities for service improvements.

23. QUESTION TO THE CABINET MEMBER FOR COMMUNITY SAFETY FROM COUNCILLOR SUNIL CHOPRA

Following the “A New Met for London” Plan, what is the council doing to ensure local residents get the policing they deserve?

RESPONSE

The council is working closely with the police, enhancing engagement with residents through local events and the establishment of a local policing oversight board to increase trust, confidence and accountability locally. Southwark hosted the first borough based engagement event in London for the MPS where local residents met the Police Commissioner and Police Senior Leadership Team to discuss local priorities. Following this the council hosted three community conversations events across Southwark where local residents had the opportunity to set out what is important to them locally. New and improved approaches to communication are already evident through the deployment of specialist teams in the borough and collaboration on a local Stop and Search Charter. Through further engagement and the setting up of the oversight board, the Council is and will continue to ensure that residents get the policing response they deserve.

24. QUESTION TO THE CABINET MEMBER FOR COMMUNITY SAFETY FROM COUNCILLOR KETZIA HARPER

The Baroness Casey Review found that the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) is institutionally racist, misogynistic and homophobic. What is the council doing directly with the local police command unit and the MPS more widely to ensure the review's recommendations are delivered locally?

RESPONSE

The Leader and Cabinet Member for Community Safety have met directly with the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) Commissioner and the local Police Commander to emphasise the importance of delivering the Casey Review recommendations and to offer the council's support to the MPS in order to restore trust and confidence. A local Policing Oversight Board is now being established to ensure all of the recommendations are delivered and local residents are kept informed of progress.

Through its own commitments and priorities, the council will also continue to support the MPS in delivering the Review's recommendations with particular focus on:

- Establishing a ground-breaking Women Safety Centre
- Developing the reach of the 'Through Their Eyes' anti-misogyny campaign
- Rolling out training offers for local police and central teams delivered by young people in areas such as stop and search.

The council will continue to use its statutory role to ensure police deliver and are held accountable on the key cross cutting themes present in the Casey Review.