

SOUTHWARK COUNCIL

COUNCIL ASSEMBLY

(ORDINARY MEETING)

WEDNESDAY 27 MARCH 2013

URGENT QUESTION

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

After a number of stories in local press in the past week highlighting the absolute chaos in the housing department, what is the leader doing to get a grip on the situation?

RESPONSE

I do not recognise Councillor Al Samerai's description of our housing department. In 2010 we inherited a housing service which was in chaos, repairs going undone, false recording of customer satisfaction and a gaping black hole in the housing budget. Since that time we have been turning around Southwark's housing. For the first time in a decade we recreated a dedicated housing department and are properly investing in the homes of people in this borough.

In the last year alone we have taken back 310 properties from illegal occupancy, our best ever and one of the best in the country. We are bringing the call centre in-house from the beginning of June so that we can ensure that we have control over the customer service that our tenants receive. Our warm, dry and safe programme is moving forward and government have brought forward future years' allocations of backlog funding in recognition of our ability to deliver. We are judging our repairs based solely on what residents say to us, and this is showing our best customer satisfaction rates since 2010.

With the volume of housing we have in the borough there will be times when we get it wrong or when people don't get the level of service that they deserve. However, with this administration we hold our hands up when we get it wrong and then put it right. This is in stark contrast to the previous administration who would brush problems under the carpet and tell us that everything was fine. Rather than scrabbling around for bad news about the borough and talking down our borough, its residents and the hard working staff of the council, the Liberal Democrats should be welcoming the fact that there is a Labour administration with the competence to sort out the mess that they created in the first place.

SUPPLEMENTAL QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR ANOOD AL-SAMERAI TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Yes I do, I am slightly concerned that the leader of the council is in denial. If I can just remind him about the letter in the press last week where his housing chief had to apologise to a terminally ill man who was given an eviction notice? Then ninety people received letters saying they were not going to get housing benefit for their extra

bedroom when they only lived in one bedroom. And then finally his housing chief can't send a letter because his secretary was out of the office on the day it was due to be posted? Doesn't that sound like chaos to him?

RESPONSE

No it isn't, I thank you very much Councillor Al-Samerai for your supplemental question but it doesn't sound like chaos. And I think it says something actually that this is an urgent question and clearly there was no chaos in the housing department which she could put down in a timely manner in order to ask the question but she had to wait until last week's paper in order to see any stories that she could jump on at the basis of this question.

Look, this is a housing department which is in transition; don't forget in May 2010 there wasn't a housing department in Southwark. In that three years we have got to a stage where satisfaction levels with repairs completed right first time is improving quarter on quarter. Complaint escalations are at an all-time low, as are the number of overdue orders. Our lifts are now at an all-time high lift availability of over 90%. The historic high of gas servicing compliance of 100% has been maintained throughout the year. Red Bus Contract Management has meant that more than £1 million has been reclaimed from poor performing contractors over the past twelve months. We ended the Morrison contract in October last year. The warm dry and safe major works programme is on target, [we have] spent £58 million pounds in this year. We have terminated poor performing contractors Waites and Breyer. We have just been awarded the highest rating of 4 stars for our website by the Society of IT Managers; we are now rated amongst the top twenty in the country, and that's important in terms of keeping tenants informed of how we are performing for housing matters. We have set up our new customer experience or are setting that up later this year which will be employing 40 local apprentices who are residents of Southwark. 310 properties have been recovered from illegal occupancy in the year to date, exceeding our target, and that is the best result ever. A combined annual gas servicing tenancy check programme is now in place. Key fob reconfiguration has been introduced where door entry systems and access codes have been changed and new fobs can only be collected by the legal tenant.

I could go on and on. This is not though, I don't think, evidence of a housing management department in chaos. It is a housing management department doing its work day in, day out, improving day in, day out a service for the residents of this borough.

SECOND SUPPLEMENTAL QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR ANOOD AL-SAMERAI TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Thank you Madam Mayor, as I said, it's denial. Perhaps you could tell this chamber what you said to me privately last week about the quality of the repairs department and its cabinet member?

RESPONSE

I am not sure what I did say, but it is always nice you can rely on a Liberal Democrat to have a Chatham House rules conversation and to be questioned about it later, I will tell you what – I know that our housing management has got to get better. It has to improve and we are working on it, but you know, I think constantly talking down what we are doing as a council; constantly talking down what our department are doing and what our staff are doing, does not improve service performance.

Given the level of savings we have had to find, given the level of added work that they are having to take on, day in, day out, this is a council that I am proud of and staff in this council I am proud of, and I am proud of every level of the staff and the work that they are doing, particularly in the housing department. That's the story we need to be talking about in this borough because that is the service people are experiencing.