

Council Questions to Cabinet Members
13 July 2010
Questions and Responses

Question 1**Councillor Susette Palmer**

I am delighted to hear from a recent Conservative leaflet, under the main heading "Action in Childs Hill", that a Childs Hill park has apparently been awarded £25,000 for youth equipment. Could the Cabinet Member please tell me which is the fortunate park?

Answer by Councillor Brian Coleman

Clitterhouse Playing Fields and Lichfield Road Youth Centre.

Question 2**Councillor Brian Gordon**

How do we anticipate that the change of Government will impact on the allocation of rate support grant for Barnet and other similarly efficient local authorities?

Answer by Councillor Daniel Thomas

The Chancellor, in his Emergency Budget, said there would be a requirement of a 25% real reduction of departmental budgets over the next four years.

Barnet received £94.6m in Formula Grant for 2010/11. Ignoring inflation, a 25% reduction would represent £24m. This is clearly very early days and we need to wait for the Comprehensive Spending Review in October and the provisional Local Government settlement due in December to find out the exact details.

Question 3**Councillor Barry Rawlings**

Why did the Cabinet Member for Health say at the April Council meeting that she would not interfere with Hospital Trusts setting their parking charges and then did so a few weeks later?

Answer by Councillor Helena Hart

Perhaps I should remind Councillor Rawlings of the question actually posed by Councillor Agnes Slocombe namely:

"I was wondering if the Cabinet Member for Health would mind commenting on whether she supports the scrapping of parking charges at hospitals in Barnet – something that Labour has pledged to do."

As I recall, having first drawn attention to the perilous financial position into which our local NHS Trusts had been put by that same Labour Government to which Cllr Slocombe referred – I stated quite clearly that it was up to each individual Trust whether or not they levied parking charges in order to alleviate that position. Trusts must be able to manage their own finances responsibly and how on earth did the former Government intend to finance their free hospital parking scheme – presumably by even greater public borrowing!

My view on this has not changed. Nor has my view on the former Labour Government whose reckless and ill targeted spending has resulted in this Nation's worst financial deficit ever.

The fact is that the flat charge of £4 for a full day's parking at Barnet Hospital is considerably less than at some other local NHS Trusts. Where it does seem to be unfair, however, is for those people intending to stay for far shorter periods – particularly those intending to stay for an hour or less.

I therefore asked the Chief Executive of the Trust to urgently consider reducing the minimum payment for stays of less than an hour and perhaps to also look at some sort of phasing for slightly longer periods.

Question 4**Councillor Jack Cohen**

How do you intend to reduce the number of casualties on the Borough roads?

Answer by Councillor Brian Coleman

By continuing our successful policies.

Question 5**Councillor Brian Gordon**

What representations could be made (or are being made) by the Council to Transport for London/Highways Agency concerning the appalling flooding that has occurred on some major roads in Barnet caused by defective sewers?

Answer by Councillor Brian Coleman

Councillor Gordon will no doubt have seen the question I posed as the Assembly Member for the Borough to the Mayor of London at Mayor's Question Time and the resulting answer which I reproduce below. I shall continue to keep up the pressure on the Mayor, in his role as Chairman of Transport for London and Barnet Officers are continuing to keep up the pressure at an officer level.

Question by Brian Coleman (AM):

Sections of the A1 and A41 consistently flood following heavy rainfall, especially in the Hendon area, leading to road closures and inconvenience for my constituents. Will the Mayor instruct TfL to investigate why this is the case and how drainage can be improved?

Answer by Boris Johnson (Mayor of London):

The answer is, yes, of course TfL is aware of the problem that you mention. It is doing extensive investigations. It is to do with a flaw in a Thames Water sewer. It is not big enough to deal with the water that accumulates. I am raising the matter with Thames Water on 28 May 2010.

Brian Coleman (AM):

I am grateful for that, Mr Mayor. I am sure my constituents are. There have been several occasions in the last six months on the A41, at different points along the A41, but particularly focused at Brent Cross, of flooding. Whilst I recognise you are omnipotent I know you cannot control the weather, but this problem is not new and TfL

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London):

We can control the weather. What are we doing with our Mayor's Air Quality Strategy and our climate change? That is exactly what we are trying to do; is to control the weather. I just point that out.

Brian Coleman (AM):

Until the improvements from your strategies come along to the benefit of my constituents, can we just kick TfL where it needs to be kicked to make sure this does not continually happen month in month out?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London):

OK. I certainly will kick TfL wherever they need to be kicked on this, though the issue seems to be that £15 million of Thames Water needs to spend on this sewer.

Question 6**Councillor Julie Johnson**

Has the West Hendon regeneration project been awarded HCA Kick Start funding, and if not, can the Cabinet Member tell me how and when the estate will be brought up to Decent Homes standard?

Answer by Councillor Richard Cornelius

The West Hendon Project has not yet been awarded Kick Start Funding. We are still working so that the scheme may proceed as quickly as possible.

Question 7

Councillor Jack Cohen

Why was the current issue of Barnet First not delivered to the railway cottages, Cricklewood NW2?

Answer by Councillor Lynne Hillan, Leader of the Council

I understand confusion arose regarding which entrances to push the magazine through. As soon as we were aware of this, we took it up with our distributor who took steps to rectify it.

I apologise to those residents of the Terraces who initially missed out on the most recent issue of Barnet First, one that contained a major feature on life in the Railway Terraces.

Question 8

Councillor Brian Gordon

How will the idea mooted by the new Education Secretary for schools to obtain non-Council academy status affect our education programme within Barnet?

Answer by Councillor Andrew Harper

Outstanding schools could potentially convert to academies by September 2010. Governing bodies of academies will be responsible for ensuring quality of educational provision, challenging and monitoring performance, managing finances and property, and employing staff. We anticipate that this will enhance the quality of educational provision in the borough.

We currently have two academies – the Wren Academy and the London Academy. These schools continue to have a positive relationship with Barnet Council and we expect that all schools who chose to convert to academies will continue to work closely with the Council and other schools.

Question 9

Councillor Barry Rawlings

When are the contracts for the rebuild of Finchley Memorial Hospital due to be signed?

Answer by Councillor Helena Hart

At this stage the application is currently being considered by the Department of Health. All questions and queries have been responded to correctly and a decision is expected to allow contracts to be signed by the end of July – on schedule.

Question 10

Councillor Mark Shooter

Will the Leader join me in congratulating the Conservative-led Government in scrapping the CAA?

Answer by Councillor Lynne Hillan, Leader of the Council

Absolutely. Councils such as Barnet should be free to determine their priorities according to what local people need and not the whim of Whitehall bureaucrats.

Question 11

Councillor Anne Hutton

Is the Council committed to providing decent Youth Services, or will they take money away from children and young people once the ring fence for grants like Capital Ambition and the Youth Opportunity Fund are removed?

Answer by Councillor Andrew Harper

The Barnet Children and Young People Plan clearly sets out our commitment to ensure that children and young people engage with positive activities, are actively involved in decision-making, and are supported to access education, employment and training. Youth services in Barnet help to make this possible.

As you will appreciate, we are having to scrutinise all our services, especially those that are grant funded, to ensure they are effective and continue to provide value for money. This is not to say that those services which cease to be ring fenced will be cut. However, resources will have to be reallocated across the Children's Service and indeed across the Council. We are in the process of reaching conclusions about this. No decisions on the levels of funding available to our services have yet been made.

Question 12

Councillor Tom Davey

Will the Cabinet Member for Housing outline how the Council is responding to planned changes in Housing Benefit?

Answer by Councillor Richard Cornelius

The main changes will be:

- Caps on the total amount payable;
- Reduced benefit for families with adult children; and
- Reducing housing benefit to 90% after receipt of 12 months jobseekers allowance.

The Council is planning to help those in need move to less expensive properties. Barnet will work with partners to encourage Adults back in to work and away from benefit dependency.

Question 13

Councillor Alan Schneiderman

Why wasn't a council tax freeze for two years (as opposed to just one) included in the emergency budget on 22 June, and will this mean the Barnet Tories renegeing on their promise of a freeze for two years?

Answer by Councillor Daniel Thomas

It is not for me to explain the rationale behind central Government budgets. Our manifesto stated this Administration would work with a Conservative Government to freeze Council Tax for two years and this was inline with national Conservative Party policy. We do not have an outright Conservative Government to work with however this administration, as always, will endeavour to keep Council Tax as low as possible.

Question 14

Councillor Barry Evangeli

Does the Leader agree with me that while tough, the Emergency Budget was the only way to deal with the problems affecting the UK and our residents?

Answer by Councillor Daniel Thomas

As the Cabinet Member for Resources and Performance it falls upon me to answer budget related questions.

I agree that the Emergency Budget was the only way to deal with the aftermath of the reckless manner in which the previous Labour Government dealt with public finance.

Question 15

Councillor Ross Houston

What impact will the cuts to the HCA have on Barnet's ability to build new affordable homes in the Borough?

Answer by Councillor Richard Cornelius

Clearly the HCA funding reductions will reduce the numbers of affordable homes that will be built nationally. As we do not know precisely how monies will be distributed it is not possible to give a quantitative answer for Barnet. However, we will ensure that Barnet receives its share of the money available.

Question 16

Councillor Andreas Tambourides

Will the Leader join me in congratulating the Former Leader of Barnet Council, Mike Freer, on his election to the DCLG Select Committee?

Answer by Councillor Lynne Hillan, Leader of the Council

Yes. A well-deserved appointment. Mike has done a huge amount to improve and innovate in Local Government as many people in Barnet and beyond will testify.

Question 17

Councillor Barry Rawlings

How will the Administration continue "Supporting People" given the recent announcements on "Supporting People grant" – particular those elderly and vulnerable residents in sheltered housing?

Answer by Councillor Sachin Rajput

The Government's decision to remove the ring-fence from the Supporting People Programme Grant and to subsume it within the Area Based Grant makes no difference to the Council's relentless drive to use resources as efficiently as possible. Government-commissioned research shows that prevention services, such as those provided by this Authority, help to keep people independent and reduce the risk of dependency on more expensive health and social care provision. Local and national analyses of housing and support services for older people also show that there are inefficiencies that need to be resolved. In relation to the aforesaid, later this year Cabinet will be considering options for improvement within the budgetary resources available in Barnet.

Question 18

Councillor Reuben Thompstone

Given we are in the Age of Austerity, will the Cabinet Member for Resources outline steps being taken to keep Council spending and Council Tax down next year and beyond?

Answer by Councillor Daniel Thomas

Real terms reductions over 4 years of between 25% and 33% have been announced for non-priority services. This represents an unprecedented challenge to all local authorities.

In response, the Council has recently enhanced the business planning and performance framework. All services have been asked to identify how they would manage with a reduction in net expenditure of 20% over three years.

The Government has also announced incentives for Councils which freeze council tax for 2011/12. The Council will consider its response to this when further details become available.

Question 19

Councillor Alan Schneiderman

How much money has Barnet lost as a result of the Con-Dem government's emergency budget?

Answer by Councillor Daniel Thomas

My answer to question two gives an indication of how much the Council's funding will decrease.

Question 20

Councillor Ansuya Sodha

Mapledown School came fourth in the "Best Small Place to work in the UK" competition run by the Great Place to Work Group. Would the Cabinet Member join me in congratulating them?

Answer by Councillor Andrew Harper

I would. It is a great testament to all staff at the school.

Question 21

Councillor Ross Houston

How much money will Barnet lose from the Con-Dem government's capping of Housing Benefit, and what impact will this policy have on ordinary local residents' ability to afford to live near their families?

Answer by Councillor Richard Cornelius

Barnet Council will not lose any money by this change. There will be an impact on those people receiving very large amounts of housing benefit. We hope not to have more news stories causing resentment amongst hard working tax payers who feel the community is being ripped off.

Question 22

Councillor Alan Schneiderman

The Administration made a commitment to publish all expenditure over £500 online – why hasn't this been implemented yet?

Answer by Councillor Daniel Thomas

The Council committed to publishing items of expenditure in excess of £500 with effect from 1 April 2010. This is being undertaken quarterly in arrears and therefore the first due date is 30 June. It will take a couple of weeks to summarise and validate the data into a format that can be posted on the website but it is expected that this will be achieved by mid-July which is earlier than many other Councils.

Question 23

Councillor Alan Schneiderman

Would the Leader comment on the Council's council tax collection rate this year?

Answer by Councillor Daniel Thomas

As the Cabinet Member for Resources and Performance it falls upon me to answer questions related to Council Tax collection. The Council Tax collection rate as reported to the Government at 31.3.10 was 96.34%. This was the highest rate ever achieved in Barnet.

We anticipate that this excellent collection performance will be maintained.

Question 24

Councillor Alan Schneiderman

How much has the Future Shape Project cost council tax payers so far?

Answer by Councillor Daniel Thomas

Current year costs will be considered for approval with the quarter one monitoring report to Cabinet Resources Committee in September. We currently anticipate that costs for the financial year 2010/11 will be within a revised and lower ceiling of £1.5m.

A key element of Future Shape is the delivery of significant savings which will contribute substantially to meeting the forecast revenue funding gap in future years.

Question 25

Councillor Anne Hutton

How many Barnet schools are considering Academy status because the Council gives little or no support to them?

Answer by Councillor Andrew Harper

Nine of our secondary schools and 20 of our primary schools are rated outstanding, and are therefore eligible to become Academies from September 2010. A number of our outstanding secondary schools are considering Academy status, but there is no evidence to suggest that this is because they feel unsupported by the Council.

In fact a large proportion of our schools choose to purchase additional support such as catering and IT support from the Council rather than private suppliers, which suggests we offer a high quality service.

Question 26

Councillor Geof Cooke

When will safety measures at Henlys Corner be implemented?

Answer by Councillor Brian Coleman

TfL plans to start construction of the Henlys Corner improvement scheme in early 2011.

Question 27

Councillor Jim Tierney

If the London Councils Grant Scheme ends, will the Administration ring fence their contribution for the local voluntary sector?

Answer by Councillor Daniel Thomas

The current four-year commissioning of services by London Councils extends to 2012.

The Council is not at this stage making any commitment to ring fence current contributions for future years.

Question 28

Councillor Agnes Slocombe

What batteries are accepted in the door-step re-cycling box, and has there been a change in policy on what batteries will or won't be collected i.e. AA type batteries?

Answer by Councillor Brian Coleman

In Barnet all household batteries left in the recycling boxes will be collected. All undamaged car batteries left beside the recycling boxes will also be collected. There has been no change in policy on the collection of batteries.

Question 29

Councillor Pauline Coakley Webb

The Administration gave a commitment to provide more allotment plots in Coppetts ward, but so far nothing has happened. When will these additional allotments actually be provided?

Answer by Councillor Brian Coleman

In due course.

Question 30

Councillor Alison Moore

Given the huge number of potholes and deteriorating patches of tarmac on roads that have been resurfaced in recent years, what redress will the Council be seeking from its contractors for poor quality road maintenance?

Answer by Councillor Brian Coleman

I blame the weather not the contractors.

Question 31

Councillor Geof Cooke

Will the Cabinet Member advise whether traffic congestion in Barnet is increasing, stabilising or reducing?

Answer by Councillor Brian Coleman

All three in different parts of the Borough.

Question 32

Councillor Geof Cooke

Boris Johnson has decided to increase public transport fares for the third year running. What impact will this have on residents in outer-London Boroughs like Barnet who commute to go to work?

Answer by Councillor Brian Coleman

The Mayor of London needs to fill the Black hole of £1.9 billion in TfL's accounts left by the Administration of Ken Livingstone.

Question 33

Councillor Kath McGuirk

Will the Cabinet Member join me in condemning the cuts to police numbers that have been announced in London, and will the Cabinet Member also say what they have done to lobby against any cuts to police numbers occurring in Barnet?

Answer by Councillor Joanna Tambourides

To date we have not been advised of any specific proposals relating to police numbers in Barnet. At present our police officer number is 585, (though this fluctuates a little month by month), and it has remained at about this level for two years. The figure includes the officers on our Safer Neighbourhood Teams who are doing excellent work across all the wards in our Borough. All organisations are being asked by the government to look at budget reductions, the police included, and our lobbying efforts will be focused on any specific proposals affecting Barnet.

Question 34

Councillor Geof Cooke

Will the Cabinet Member advise how much secure cycle parking has been provided by the Council in the last eight years, and where?

Answer by Councillor Brian Coleman

In the last two years, (the period for which figures are available) 41 new cycle stands have been provided on street at Hadley Highstone; Finchley Road, Temple Fortune; East Finchley (Church Lane, East End Road and High Road near tube station); Station Road, Edgware; High Road, Whetstone; Woodhouse Road, Friern Barnet; North Finchley (near Sainsbury's); Chipping Barnet (near The Spires).

Question 35

Councillor Colin Rogers

Would the Cabinet Member please explain why Stanley Road Playing Fields has been fenced off?

Answer by Councillor Daniel Thomas

Stanley Road playing fields was subject to a lease which recently expired. Property Services repossessed the site at that expiry and took action to secure the site to avoid squatters and further rubbish dumping.

Although the site was leased out, the previous occupier failed to properly secure the gates, wrongly giving the impression that public access was permitted. It was not.

The site will remain secured while consideration is given to the future of the site. Property Services will undertake intermittent checks of the site until the future of the site is agreed.

Question 36

Councillor Barry Rawlings

Would the Cabinet Member say what she thinks of the value of dentistry services at Edgware Hospital?

Answer by Councillor Helena Hart

Whilst I have not had any complaints about the quality of service at the Dental Access Centre (DAC) at Edgware Hospital, I understand that activity levels at the DAC have been relatively low. This is despite NHS Barnet's efforts to increase uptake of NHS Dental services, including a mail drop to every house in Barnet with information on how to access an NHS dentist.

Perhaps greater uptake of NHS dental services across the Borough is something which should best be pursued through the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Question 37

Councillor Geof Cooke

Why did the number of road casualties in Barnet increase in 2009 in all categories except fatalities when most of London showed an improvement?

Answer by Councillor Brian Coleman

Barnet's rise in overall casualties in London between 2008 and 2009 was a common issue with other authorities in North London. The highest casualty increases all occur in north London (Haringey 25%, Enfield 20%, Islington 19%, Barnet 15%) with relatively high increases in other north and north west London boroughs (Harrow, Brent and Ealing all 8%, Hammersmith and Fulham 7% and Camden 6%). Relatively low numbers of casualties in some of the groups reported recently by TfL mean that year-on-year fluctuations are to be expected. Comparison over a longer period suggests that the increases for most groups in 2009 are consistent with the level of random variation that can be expected.

Encouragingly fatalities fell (from 18 to 8) and seriously injured casualties had a lower percentage increase than overall casualties. (The combined measure of casualties killed and seriously injured rose by one from 136 in 2008 to 137 in 2009).

Child (under 16) casualties also fell, with a 50% reduction in the numbers of children killed or seriously injured (from 12 in 2008 to 6 in 2009).

Question 38

Councillor Ansuya Sodha

Was the Cabinet Member aware that schools are being charged for PC encryption? Can he tell Members how much money schools have been charged in total for this, and is it fair that schools who have been responsible and not lost any data should have to pay this extra charge?

Answer by Councillor Andrew Harper

All schools have a responsibility to keep pupil data secure. We recently sent a document to schools outlining best practices and how pupil data can be kept safe. Encrypting documents is one way of keeping data safe and Barnet Council is currently in discussion with suppliers to purchase encryption software in bulk at a lower price than individual schools would be able to. Our ICT schools support is a traded service, which many of our schools buy into. It is not the Council's responsibility to provide this support. When we have finalised arrangements with a supplier, any schools interested in buying encryption software from the Council would be able to do so. No schools currently purchase encryption software via the Council.

Question 39

Councillor Alison Moore

Will the Leader advise how much money will be provided by the Con-Dem government to pay for the Census?

Answer by Councillor Daniel Thomas

We have not been advised of any additional support from government.

Question 40

Councillor Anne Hutton

Will Barnet get the £80 million allocated from Building Schools for the Future programme, and if not what will happen to those school building programmes that were going to benefit from that money?

Answer by Councillor Andrew Harper

Barnet had made a bid for funds under the BSF programme after we were invited by the previous government to make a submission; the money had not actually been allocated. As Councillor Hutton will know, the Secretary of State for Education has announced that the six projects that we proposed as part of BSF will not proceed. We are currently reviewing capital investment for our schools in light of that announcement.

Question 41

Councillor Geof Cooke

Will the Cabinet Member tell me what discussions have taken place with TfL regarding delivery of the Mayor of London's election pledge to "Put the commuter first by improving public transport in outer-London through orbital bus routes"?

Answer by Councillor Brian Coleman

Very little other than in relation to regeneration proposals.

Question 42

Councillor Geof Cooke

What progress has been made, since I last asked, on consultation and planning for suitable permanent improvements in the Borough to mark the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in February 2012?

Answer by Councillor Melvin Cohen

We will be consulting the Representative Deputy Lieutenant for the London Borough of Barnet, Mr Martin Russell, on the most appropriate way to mark the Queen's Diamond jubilee. A small working group of officers has been established within the Chief Executive's Service to explore how the Council might mark the Jubilee locally and how we might join in any capital wide celebrations.

No one is more enthusiastic about marking Her Majesty's reign than I am but the jubilee will of course take in a time of austerity and this has to be borne in mind as we talk about permanent improvements.

I will report back.

Question 43

Councillor Geof Cooke

Does the Administration "buy in" to the internal audit process?

Answer by Councillor Daniel Thomas

Yes, the administration fully supports the internal audit process as a key element of effective corporate governance.

Question 44

Councillor Agnes Slocombe

Is there a mentoring scheme for young people in the Borough that residents can get involved in?

Answer by Councillor Andrew Harper

There are several mentoring schemes in the borough, some of which residents can get involved with. For example:

- The Middlesex University Inclusion Development Ambassador Scheme which aims to widen access to Middlesex University to care leavers is due to start. The scheme is run in partnership with London Borough of Barnet and mentors are currently being trained. It is a programme for university students.
- We are currently investigating the possibility of setting up a voluntary Independent Visitor scheme (similar to a mentoring scheme) in Barnet for children in care.

- A First Time Entrants Mentoring Scheme (Council-led in partnership with police) is being developed, and 6 volunteers from the local community are currently being trained.
- Various mentoring opportunities can be accessed via the voluntary sector. Many faith groups have projects, for example there is one providing English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) for mothers and homework support for local children. Other opportunities include mentoring young men who have been involved in drug misuse.

Question 45

Councillor Ansuya Sodha

Older Children from Mapledown School attend course at a college outside the Borough. Given the huge cost of sending children with special educational needs outside the Borough what can be done to provide education for these young people at Barnet College?

Answer by Councillor Andrew Harper

Barnet Council is responsible for commissioning provision for such children from September 2011 and is very keen to improve the local offer to students with severe learning difficulties. The most popular college is currently Oaklands in Hertfordshire, which received significant additional resources from the Learning and Skills Council in 2005 in order to develop a new provision for students with severe learning difficulties.

Working with other north London boroughs Barnet has researched demand and will use this information to seek to commission further provision locally.