

Council Questions to Cabinet Members
14 December 2010
Questions and Responses

Question 1

Councillor Jack Cohen

In relation to Vendor Payments & Commitments over £500 for July to September 2010 for Corporate Services please provide me with details of the six payments to Pinner Lock Centre all made on 6 September 2010 and totalling £7,000.

Answer by Councillor Daniel Thomas

Pinner Lock Centre provides secure accommodation for the most vulnerable members of our society. The organisation converts rooms within the homes of the client thereby providing some immediate sanctuary for these individuals who are under the risk of physical abuse. This is more cost effective and practical solution than relocation. Given the nature of the service it would be inappropriate to provide details of the clients or the properties involved. However six properties were converted during the period concerned.

Question 2

Councillor Brian Salinger

When was the last time that part of the weekly advertisement in the Barnet Press for homes available to let under Choice Based Lettings included details of the number of points that successful applicants had had to secure a property of their choice?

Answer by Councillor Richard Cornelius

Officers believe December 2004.

Question 3

Councillor Barry Rawlings

What has the Cabinet Member done to lobby the Government against their proposals to reduce Care Matters funding to local councils?

Answer by Councillor Andrew Harper

Care Matters is not currently a ring-fenced grant and has been absorbed within the Area Based Grant. The funding is used within social care to support children in care and those at risk of coming into care. There are currently no proposals to reduce support delivered through the previous Care Matters agenda in the year 2011/12. The Children and Young Person's Act 2008 introduced a number of statutory functions associated with 'Care Matters'; none of these functions are threatened.

Question 4

Councillor Jack Cohen

In relation to Vendor Payments & Commitments over £500 for July to September 2010 for Finance Directorate please provide me with details of the multiple payments of £5,148 to Capita on 27 August 2010.

Answer by Councillor Daniel Thomas

Veredus were appointed to assist with Assistant Director (AD) recruitment. They are part of the Capita Group. These are stage payments for recruiting into the following roles:

AD – Strategic Finance

AD – Financial Services and

AD – Commercial Assurance.

Question 5

Councillor Brian Salinger

Since the Director of Housing started the trial of the 'new allocation policy' (not yet approved by Cabinet) how many properties have been let outside of the choice based lettings system? How many prospective tenants have refused the properties that officers have selected for them?

Answer by Councillor Richard Cornelius

78 Properties have been let using the new system. There were 8 refusals, 3 because the applicants had found their own housing, 2 on medical grounds, 2 because of location and 1 because the applicants wanted a house rather than a flat.

Question 6

Councillor Alan Schneiderman

What has been done to ensure that all expenditure by the Council over £500 has been correctly accounted for online?

Answer by Councillor Daniel Thomas

The process to publish this information is being streamlined and additional checks will be introduced.

Question 7

Councillor Jack Cohen

In relation to Vendor Payments & Commitments over £500 for July to September 2010 for Planning, Housing and Regeneration please provide me with details of

- a) the payment of £11,648 to Kings College London dated 1 July;
- b) counsel fees of £17,075 dated 12 August; and
- c) six payments to Eversheds LLP totalling over £150,000 on 12 August and 28 September.

Answer by Councillor Richard Cornelius

£11,648 was paid to Kings College for work on air quality monitoring. £5,500 of this will be re-imbursed by Defra.

£ 17,075 was paid to counsel in respect of an Employment dispute.

The Eversheds payments were in respect of the Brent Cross development and will be re-imbursed by the developer.

Question 8

Councillor Graham Old

Please could the Cabinet Member outline the level of response to the Library Survey?

Answer by Councillor Robert Rams

The library survey has had an excellent level of response. By 1 December, over 1,000 responses to the online version of the survey had been received; and many more hard copies of the survey had been issued to library users. The library service consultation has also completed over 30 consultation events, to help us assess local needs and understand how we can best meet the needs of residents in the future.

Question 9

Councillor Anne Hutton

What is the anticipated effect of removing the EMA?

Answer by Councillor Andrew Harper

The Educational Maintenance Allowance, a payment made to 16- 18 year olds to support their participation in education or training is ending for new applicants in England from January 2011. This payment has been means tested for students in post 16 full time education, but awarded without means testing for those in Foundation Learning (also known as E2E) with various training providers. EMA payments are also usually related to the attendance and punctuality of the learner.

Students who currently receive EMA will continue to receive it for the remainder of this academic year, but not for next.

Connexions Personal Advisers are available to provide advice and support to students who have the EMA withdrawn, or to new students who may need support to study.

New *Discretionary Support Funds* are intended to meet special needs and circumstances of learners aged 16 or over who can't reasonably be covered by other forms of help. Colleges will determine priority groups and maximum amounts they award. The funds are prioritised for those who face financial hardship.

From 2013, all 17 year olds will be required to participate in education or training; from 2015 this will rise to 18 year olds.

Question 10

Councillor Jack Cohen

In relation to Vendor Payments & Commitments over £500 for July to September 2010 for Commercial please provide me with details of the six payments made on 14 July to Tribal consulting totalling £85,000.

Answer by Councillor Daniel Thomas

This cost relates to a piece of work that was commissioned within the One Barnet Programme and relates to a Vendor Review & Savings Opportunity Assessment. The work has identified a number of opportunities for the Council both in terms of getting better value from its purchasing power but also in terms of how it manages the procurement processes. Not all of the proposals were appropriate for the Council but the benefits that will accrue will significantly exceed the cost of the review.

Question 11

Councillor Brian Gordon

There has been considerable public discussion about pupils in High Schools being allowed to participate in protests against the Government's increase in tuition fees, and other public spending cuts. Do you agree with me that as far as Barnet is concerned, the sanctioning of such political activism in schools should be strongly discouraged?

Answer by Councillor Andrew Harper

Yes.

Question 12

Councillor Jim Tierney

Will the Council ring-fence any money re-patriated from the London Councils' Grants Scheme for the voluntary sector in Barnet, and how will that money be distributed to voluntary sector organisations?

Answer by Councillor Robert Rams

We will decide in due course how any savings that derive from changes to the London Boroughs Grants Scheme are used. Any funds that are earmarked for the voluntary and community sector are likely to focus on helping deliver front-line services in support of corporate priorities and commissioning strategies.

Question 13

Councillor Jack Cohen

In relation to Vendor Payments & Commitments over £500 for July to September 2010:

What was

- a) the total amount of payments to consultants across all departments?
- b) the total amount of payments for agency staff across all departments?

Answer by Councillor Daniel Thomas

The total amounts of payments to consultants over £500 were £8,334,478, of which £7,084,794 was Capital and £1,249,684 Revenue.

The total amounts of payments for agency staff over £500 were £2,220,111 of which £169,921 was Capital and £2,050,190 Revenue.

Question 14

Councillor Brian Gordon

Having recently participated in a visit to some of our housing estates as part of a Task and Finish Group inspection, it is apparent that many residents – and indeed Housing Managers – are feeling highly demoralised by the uncertainty about the future timescale of regeneration. Whereas much of this is outside the control of our Council, can we do as much as possible to reassure residents and provide them with as much open information as we have regarding future regeneration plans?

Answer by Councillor Richard Cornelius

In short, yes. The regeneration process is slow but is proceeding. If any Housing Manager is "highly demoralised" they need to speak to their line manager or me. The world is an uncertain place and the pace of building depends on the availability of money. It is important that all concerned are told the complete truth and that unrealistic hopes are not raised. There are already good newsletters that go out on the regeneration estates. I will make sure that Councillor Gordon receives copies.

Question 15

Councillor Barry Rawlings

Does the Cabinet Member support the reduction in support for school sports?

Answer by Councillor Andrew Harper

The Government had to make very difficult decisions with regard to public spending and a number of specific grants had to end – support for School Sports Partnerships is likely to be affected. The Government is currently in discussion with headteachers and others to develop alternative plans to maintain sport in schools and to develop competitive sport while de-ringfencing funding. School budgets were given a high priority in the Government's spending review to reflect the commitment to improving standards in education. At the same time government policy is giving schools greater freedom to decide how to spend their money to best meet the needs of their local community. I fully recognise the value of high quality school sport being available to all children and am confident that our excellent schools in Barnet will continue to include this in their overall provision.

Question 16

Councillor Jack Cohen

Please provide an update on the action the Council is taking to address the shortage of primary school places in the west and south of the Borough. Will you confirm that Wessex Gardens school is admitting to what amounts to an additional class of children to meet the demand and can you confirm whether section 106 monies are being utilised to fund this and if so how much?

Answer by Councillor Andrew Harper

In preparation for September 2010 we worked with schools to create 210 temporary Reception places in seven schools, four of the classes (120 places) are in the west and south of the Borough at Dollis Infants, Woodcroft, Barnfield and Broadfields, while the others are at Monkfrith, Tudor and Holly Park. In response to emerging pressure on Year 1 places, due to children moving into the Borough this autumn, Wessex Gardens recently agreed to take an additional Year 1 class of 30 pupils, while Dollis Infants also accommodated some additional Year 1 pupils. The capital costs of the additional classroom at Wessex Gardens are funded from capital grants and there is no Section 106 funding associated with this scheme.

Question 17

Councillor Brian Gordon

It seems that the Borough is likely to get very little back, in return for the contribution it is making to public spending on the forthcoming Olympic Games? Can the Council use its influence to procure that Barnet will be more involved in the event and thereby derive some eventual benefits from it?

Answer by Councillor Robert Rams

I have already made public my disappointment that no Olympic event will take place in the Borough, however, through the Olympic Steering Group, the Council has been working with other organisation, towards ensuring that the Borough is best placed to make use of the opportunities that the Games will bring, whilst seeking to work together to mitigate some of the inevitable costs and impacts of the Games.

Barnet's residents, in particular young people, will see benefits from the Games taking place. It is hoped that the Council will be able to access 2012 related funding that could be used to upgrade or refurbish sporting facilities or to support initiatives to increase participation and inclusion in physical activity. Whilst a number of the Borough's schools received funding last year for cultural projects related to 2012 Olympiad. The Torch Relay will give us the chance to showcase our borough to a global audience, and as part of Host Borough logo agreement with LOCOG there may be opportunities for the Council to give away a number of tickets for the Games as prizes in schools and sports clubs so that some of Barnet's younger residents have the opportunity to attend the Games free of charge. The Council may also take some reassurance from the positive comments made by LOCOG about the potential of a refurbished Cophall Stadium hosting a major team.

Question 18

Councillor Anne Hutton

How are the responses to the libraries consultation being collated and when will Councillors be given the detailed results?

Answer by Councillor Robert Rams

The strategic library review has featured a broad and comprehensive consultation programme, including over 30 different consultation activities. The online consultation is due to close on 17 December, and all other consultation events will be completed by the end of December. Results from various consultation activities will be collated into one main report in early January. This will summarise and bring together results from the various consultation initiatives - from the online surveys, user and non-user focus groups, and summaries of different community group focus groups. This evidence will be used to inform and shape the Library strategy, and the consultation report will be made available to Councillors.

Question 19

Councillor Bridget Perry

Please could the Cabinet Member for Community Safety and Cohesion please inform us what action the Council is taking to tackle domestic violence given we had the International Elimination of Violence against Women Day on 25 November?

Answer by Councillor Joanna Tambourides

Barnet Council has been working hard with all its partners to promote greater awareness of domestic violence in our society at the present time. Current action taking place includes

- a poster campaign throughout December to raise awareness of domestic violence in the Borough;
- co-ordination with Brent and Harrow to see how inter-Borough working can improve the lives of domestic violence survivors;
- piloting a Safer Families project across several Children's Centres as part of an early intervention and prevention approach;
- developing the Barnet Specialist Domestic Violence Court; and
- developing a rape crisis counselling centre together with Haringey, Westminster, Kensington and Chelsea, and Islington.

A successful domestic violence event was hosted by the Sangam Centre on 25 November. Following on from this, there will be a further three presentations at the Domestic Violence Forum on 7 December. Local agencies are regularly invited to share good practice at the Domestic Violence Forum, and there is a clear multi-agency governance structure to tackle domestic violence in the Borough.

A successful domestic violence event was hosted by the Sangam Centre on 25 November. Following on from this, there will be a further three presentations at the Domestic Violence Forum on 7 December. Local agencies are regularly invited to share good practice at the Domestic Violence Forum, and there is a clear multi-agency governance structure to tackle domestic violence in the Borough.

The Council and its partners have set out their strategic priorities in the Multi-Agency Barnet Domestic Violence Strategy 2010/11-2010/13. Priorities include:

- raising awareness and taking an early intervention approach;
- ensuring safe and effective provision for domestic violence survivors;
- safeguarding children and young people affected by domestic violence;
- delivering an effective criminal justice system;
- and co-ordinated action across all agencies.

Domestic violence provision across the Borough is currently under review with a view to making improvements to services as part of the commissioning process for 2011/12.

We and all our partners are working to make everyone aware of this usually hidden crime and ensure that it is dealt with properly and sensitively by everyone involved.

Question 20

Councillor Alison Moore

Why are Area Environment Sub-Committees being cancelled, and will the Cabinet Member give me an assurance that they will not be scrapped?

Answer by Councillor Lynne Hillan, Leader of the Council

Over the last two cycles of Council meetings, 5 out of 6 Area Environment Sub-Committee meetings have taken place. On 13 October 2010, the Special Committee (Constitutional Review) agreed that the arrangements for both Residents Forums and Area Environment Sub-Committees should be reviewed and the Special Committee (Constitutional Review) will be considering the review of those arrangements at meetings in the New Year.

Question 21

Councillor Stephen Sowerby

Will the Cabinet Member join me in congratulating Ravenscroft School in their bid to become an Academy?

Answer by Councillor Andrew Harper

I am very pleased that The Ravenscroft School has now been approved by the Department for Education to convert to Academy status. The Council will support the Governors and school leadership to make this a successful transition.

Question 22

Councillor Pauline Coakley Webb

Can the Cabinet Member assure me and all the families of deaf children that the budget for specialist support services for deaf children for next year will not be affected by budget cuts?

Answer by Councillor Andrew Harper

The budget proposal aims to reduce management costs and will not affect services for deaf children.

Question 23

Councillor Mark Shooter

Does the Leader of the Council agree with our Prime Minister, who was quoted as saying – "When it comes to looking at and trimming your budgets, don't do the easy thing, which is to cut money to the voluntary bodies and organisations working in our communities. Look at your core costs?"

(<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm100915/debtext/100915-0001.htm> – column 877)

Answer by Councillor Lynne Hillan, Leader of the Council

We are sympathetic with the Prime Minister's remarks regarding voluntary organisations and cutting core costs but we are in a different place regarding our costs and funding per head of population than a lot of other councils.

A Council as efficient as Barnet, with one of lowest back office costs in London, has limited places to look for savings but we will still squeeze as much value as possible from what we spend on core costs. We will also need all bodies we pay for services, charitable and non-charitable, to look for efficiencies.

Delivering public services in the future will require us to work closer with our residents and community bodies. To achieve this, we recognise that capacity and skills will need to be developed amongst some individuals and groups. We're therefore proposing to create a new time-limited Big Society Innovation Fund and would welcome ideas on how such resource might be best targeted.

Question 24

Councillor Alex Brodkin

How will removing security of tenure from council tenants help reward those who work in the Borough?

Answer by Councillor Richard Cornelius

Social Housing exists to help people in need whilst they need help. The direction of Government policy is to ensure that those who become new tenants and then no longer need help, should move on and free up accommodation for those who do need help. This will mean that more can be helped. There has not been any suggestion that security of tenure should be removed from existing tenants.

Question 25

Councillor Mark Shooter

The Council used to be very strict in not allowing potential or projected savings to be included in budgets but only certain or identifiable ones. What test is used now?

Answer by Councillor Daniel Thomas

The Local Government Act 2003 requires the Chief Finance Officer (CFO) to report to the Council at budget-setting on the robustness of the estimates. There has been no recent change to these requirements. In making this judgement, the CFO will have regard to the nature of the budget process and in particular to the degree of professional rigour and challenge in the process. I am confident that the CFO will issue a positive report when Council comes to finalise the budget.

Question 26

Councillor Ross Houston

Given that capacity in the private rented sector is now shrinking as a result of the Government's housing benefit cuts, how and where will the Council house the 15,000 families that they are about to remove from the housing register?

Answer by Councillor Richard Cornelius

Capacity in the Private Rented Sector fluctuates and it is too early to see what the changes in housing benefit and mortgage availability will do to that supply. The majority of those on the list probably never would have been housed by the Council. The whole problem with the list has been that it reflects demand rather than need and as such going on the register can arouse a false hope of eventual Council housing. The aim of the new allocations policy is to get a system that is both simpler and fairer.

Question 27

Councillor John Marshall

Will the Cabinet Member join me in congratulating Oak Lodge School in achieving an Outstanding rating from Ofsted?

Answer by Councillor Andrew Harper

I am delighted to congratulate Oak Lodge School on the 'Outstanding' rating they received from Ofsted this term. This external validation of the high quality provision at the school is a tribute to the staff, governors and whole school community.

As Councillors will know the figures for Barnet schools judged as 'Good' and 'Outstanding' are well above national averages and it is a great achievement that all four Special Schools in the Borough are now in the 'Outstanding' category.

Question 28

Councillor Alison Moore

Why are the Council predicting they will save exactly the same amount of money each year under some strands of the easyCouncil programme – is this double accounting?

Answer by Councillor Robert Rams

The projects in the One-Barnet programme are seeking to deliver on-going savings to the base budget cost of our services. So over a given period of time, the total saving for a project would be the total of the savings in each year. This is not 'double accounting' – a point that was agreed at the Audit Committee last week.

Question 29

Councillor Julie Johnson

Recently, some parents were consulted on services at Children's Centres. Who commissioned this consultation, who administered this consultation, how many parents took part in the consultation and what were the results of this consultation?

Answer by Councillor Andrew Harper

The pre-consultation questionnaire was issued during a one week window between the 8-12 November, by the Council. Children's Centres staff were asked to meet with parents to discuss the questionnaires and complete them either on a one on one basis or in a group forum, questionnaires were not to be issued directly to parents. This information was subsequently assessed and has fed into the initial shaping of Children's Centres business case which will be formally consulted on. Approximately 1000 parents participated during this one week, the analysis will be reported in the business case.

Question 30

Councillor Julie Johnson

Recently, the Cabinet Member wrote to parents and carers about Children's Centres. How many parents and carers did this letter go to, and have all parents now been informed that there is a review of Children's Centres in the Borough?

Answer by Councillor Andrew Harper

The letter went to 1,359 parents and carers. Further letters have been made available in Children's Centres for parents to take away, and information is also displayed on noticeboards in all centres.

Question 31

Councillor Anne Hutton

Would the Cabinet Member advise what the exact attendance figures are for each Children's Centre in Barnet, and what the exact registration figures are for each Children's Centre in Barnet?

Answer by Councillor Andrew Harper

	Children registered	Number of different children who have visited the centre
Barnfield	612	1,200
Bell Lane	552	760
Canada Villa	197	127
Child's Hill	298	430
Chipping Barnet	278	210
Church End	290	179
Coppetts Wood	536	1,000

	Children registered	Number of different children who have visited the centre
Edgware	195	100
Fairway	413	609
Hampden way	287	770
Kennedy Leigh	398	769
Mill Hill	257	56
Newstead	416	663
North Finchley	190	174
Parkfield	316	610
St Margarets	314	466
Stonegrove	449	600
Sweets Way	224	223
The Hyde	428	706
Underhill	337	731
Wingfield	606	660
Children who are registered but live in an area of Barnet not yet assigned a centre. This will be addressed through the review.	1286	N/A
Children who do not live in Barnet	837	711
TOTAL	10861	9,421

Question 32

Councillor Julie Johnson

Will the Cabinet Member assure me that a marketing suite will not be located on the site of the sailing base during the regeneration of the West Hendon estate?

Answer by Councillor Richard Cornelius

The marketing suite may well be located on this site.

Question 33

Councillor Agnes Slocombe

Would the Cabinet Member detail how the local economy has benefited from migration?

Answer by Councillor Daniel Thomas

The impact of migration on the local economy is difficult to quantify. For a start, it is important to note that many Barnet residents commute out of Barnet to work, so information about the impact of exclusively Barnet-based migrants on the local economy is very hard to calculate (likewise, data about migrants working in the Barnet economy but living elsewhere).

However, I pay tribute to the contribution that all of Barnet's diverse community makes to the economy, be it nationally, in London, and locally here in and Barnet.

Question 34

Councillor Anne Hutton

Will the Cabinet Member confirm that he will not close any Children's Centres?

Answer by Councillor Andrew Harper

Barnet Council has full funding for all our 21 children's centres until the end of the current financial year (March 2011). These children's centres are paid for entirely out of central government's "Sure Start" grants and we will not know the level of funding we will receive for the next financial year until around mid-December. We will obviously develop plans for next year in the light of the money available for the Council to spend. We will then discuss these plans with parents, staff and partner agencies across the Borough. Changes, if any, to what we provide in Barnet will be targeted to ensure that services and support are there for those parents and children most in need of the Council's help.

Question 35**Councillor Anne Hutton**

Are libraries with the lowest usage / number of visits under threat of closure?

Answer by Councillor Robert Rams

The strategic library review has two key aims: Firstly, to make sure that library services meet the needs of our residents in the future; and secondly, in a difficult financial environment, we must consider ways to make our services more effective and efficient.

Visits to our libraries do vary considerably, from 796,000 per year at our busiest library to 16,000 per year in our least visited library. However, no proposals have been made for any specific library sites, and the starting point of the strategic review is to assess needs across the Borough, identify areas of strength, weakness, and options to improve library services in the future.

Consultation with users, non-users, and those who are disconnected from use of libraries is ongoing.

Question 36**Councillor Alison Moore**

What is the Secretary of State's response to the Leader's letter about Government funding for housing (housing benefit and homelessness), and primary school places?

Answer by Councillor Lynne Hillan, Leader of the Council

Bob Neill MP has visited Barnet and we have discussed the implications with him and raised our concerns.

Question 37**Councillor Alison Moore**

How many youth centres will close in Barnet as a result of the Administration's budget?

Answer by Councillor Andrew Harper

The children's service is currently looking at several options regarding the reduction in budget which will include evaluation of young people's needs. Following consideration of these options, there will be a consultation process with all stakeholders and key partners before we know the full impact on the service delivery, including any potential impact on youth centres.

Question 38**Councillor Kath McGuirk**

How much money has been spent on mending potholes and in light of the current weather and the continuing poor state of Barnet's roads what money has the Cabinet Member built in to his budget to deal with damage to roads that may be caused by cold weather this winter?

Answer by Councillor Brian Coleman

The spend on pothole related works during this financial year (to date) has been £3,112,604. I am sure the Councillor will want to congratulate the Administration and the Officers on the successful completion of this project.

The breakdown of this expenditure is as follows:

Pot Hole Elimination programme (PEP) Phase 1 – Main road network – £660,000

Pot Hole Elimination programme (PEP) Phase 2 – All other Borough roads – £2,145,000

Reactive Pot Hole repairs prior to PEP commencement – £307,604

The remaining Responsive Maintenance budget for this financial year stands at £309,679. This budget is available to respond to all safety defects on the highway and as such is not just for pot holes.

The annual responsive maintenance budget for 2011/12 financial year is expected to be £1.9m.