

MINUTES OF ASSEMBLY

Wednesday, 21 January 2015
(7:00 - 7:59 pm)

PRESENT

Cllr Tony Ramsay (Chair)
Cllr Syed Ghani (Deputy Chair)

Cllr Saima Ashraf	Cllr Simon Bremner	Cllr Sade Bright
Cllr Laila Butt	Cllr Evelyn Carpenter	Cllr Josephine Channer
Cllr Faruk Choudhury	Cllr Edna Fergus	Cllr Irma Freeborn
Cllr Cameron Geddes	Cllr Rocky Gill	Cllr Kashif Haroon
Cllr Chris Hughes	Cllr Amardeep Singh Jamu	Cllr Jane Jones
Cllr Elizabeth Kangethe	Cllr Eileen Keller	Cllr Mick McCarthy
Cllr Giasuddin Miah	Cllr Margaret Mullane	Cllr James Ogungbose
Cllr Adegboyega Oluwole	Cllr Moin Quadri	Cllr Hardial Singh Rai
Cllr Linda Reason	Cllr Chris Rice	Cllr Lynda Rice
Cllr Darren Rodwell	Cllr Faraaz Shaukat	Cllr Danielle Smith
Cllr Liam Smith	Cllr Sam Tarry	Cllr Bill Turner
Cllr Dominic Twomey	Cllr Jeff Wade	Cllr Phil Waker
Cllr John White	Cllr Maureen Worby	Cllr Linda Zanitchkhah

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Cllr Syed Ahammad	Cllr Sanchia Alasia	Cllr Jeanne Alexander
Cllr Abdul Aziz	Cllr Melanie Bartlett	Cllr Peter Chand
Cllr Danielle Lawrence	Cllr Dave Miles	Cllr Lee Waker
Cllr Dan Young		

36. Declaration of Members' Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

37. Minutes (25 November)

The minutes of the extraordinary and ordinary meetings held on 25 November 2014 were confirmed as correct.

38. Minutes of JNC Appointments Panel (25 November 2014)

The minutes of the JNC Appointments Panel held on 25 November 2014 were noted.

39. Leader's Statement

Councillor Rodwell presented a verbal statement updating the Assembly on the arrangements being put in place to celebrate the 50th anniversary of becoming a London Borough. This was kick started with the raising of a new celebratory flag

designed by a local student at both the Town Hall and Civic Centre. The flag will fly throughout 2015 and will act as a symbol of being one Borough and one Community.

Councillor Rodwell referred to the varied programme of activities and events that will be taking place across the borough over the year. He emphasised that residents will be leading on many of the projects championed through former councillor Milton McKenzie, the aim being to showcase to everyone that this is the growth borough in London to do business with. The Council is anticipating local businesses will sponsor many of the events. Councillor Rodwell concluded his statement that despite the challenges facing this Council he is confident that the collaboration of the Council facilitating, the community leading and local business sponsoring will engender a sense of Borough pride and create social responsibility towards each other in Barking and Dagenham over the coming year.

40. Death of Former Councillor Val Rush

The Assembly noted with deep regret that former Councillor Val Rush had passed away on 22 December 2014 following a long illness. Her funeral took place on 10 January 2015 at Forest Park Crematorium in Hainault and was attended by a number of councillors.

Councillor Rodwell led the tributes to Val with further reflections from the Chair and other Councillors who all commented on her hard work and dedication both to the Council and her constituents, as well as being a tireless political campaigner.

The Assembly stood for a minute's silence as a mark of respect.

41. Appointments

The Assembly **resolved** to appoint Councillors Fergus, Haroon, Keller and Kangethe to make up a pool of four non-Cabinet Members to serve on various JNC Panels.

42. Proposed Changes to the Council Tax Support Scheme 2015/16

The Assembly received a report from the Cabinet Member for Finance setting out proposals to establish a revised Local Council Tax Support Scheme (LCTSS) from April 2015.

The Cabinet Member explained that the LCTSS was introduced from April 2013 following the abolition of Council Tax benefit as a consequence of the Welfare Act 2012. Support through the local scheme attracted central funding by way of a fixed two year grant, based on prevailing expenditure set in 2012/13 but with a factored reduction of 10%. The existing local scheme had included and replicated annual uprating of social security rates for housing benefit and it was proposed that this would continue in 2015/16. In addition, the new scheme would continue to include many of the features of the existing scheme including those discretionary elements as detailed in the report.

The proposed changes to the current scheme were summarised as:

- Support for working age recipients would be capped at 75% as opposed to 85% under the current scheme meaning that, as a minimum, recipients would need to make a 25% contribution of their Council Tax charge;
- Removal of the second Adult rebate scheme as an alternative award of support;
- Removal of backdated claims for working age residents;
- Reducing the maximum capital threshold for working age residents for CTSS eligibility from £16,000 to £6,000.

The Cabinet Member explained that as there were proposed changes to the existing LCTSS an extensive consultation exercise was carried out. Disappointingly, of the 16,000 residents who were written to only 147 responses were received and there was a relatively low turnout at two public meetings. A full report on the consultation was appended to the report together with a detailed equalities impact assessment that was undertaken in the light of the public consultation.

It was noted that the Public Accounts and Audit Select Committee had also considered the changes to the scheme as part of the budget savings exercise. The Committee had supported the proposals subject to a review as to whether any additional funds could be made available to top up the Discretionary Housing Payments scheme in order to provide support to those most vulnerable sections of the community. The Cabinet Member confirmed that some funding had been identified which would act as a financial safety net and this would be closely monitored, as would the collection rates which had proved higher than was expected.

In response to the report Councillor Gill asked the Cabinet Member to clarify:

- (a) The criteria that would be applied to the use of the discretionary monies and the estimated cost of administering the scheme; and
- (b) How the changes would affect the most vulnerable, also bearing in mind a possible Council Tax increase in the coming year.

The Cabinet Member explained the approach that would be adopted, including a close alignment to the discretionary housing support policy criteria but added that the amount of discretionary funding that would be available would be limited and therefore it was important to ensure that the available funding was used to support those most in need. He stated that, as with any policy, it would be kept under review as it developed.

The Assembly, taking into account the response to the consultation, **resolved** to:

- (i) Approve a revised LCTSS for 2015/16 for working aged residents based on:
 - Amending the maximum liability level for assessment from 85% to 75%;
 - Withdrawing the Second Adult Rebate Scheme;
 - Reducing the capital threshold for working age claimants to £6,000;
 - Removing the provision to backdate claims from the amended scheme for working age claimants.

- (ii) Retain the following discretionary areas:
- To continue to disregard War Widows and War Disablement income from income assessment for the scheme;
 - To continue the extended payment scheme in line with the Housing Benefit scheme;
 - To replicate the annual uprating of social security rates for Housing benefit in the 2015/16 LCTSS.
- (iii) Approve the creation of a discretionary exceptional hardship fund from additional income generated across all savings proposals related to Council Tax for 2015/16.

43. Questions With Notice

Question 1

From Councillor McCarthy

“The Cabinet Member for Regeneration stated at the last Assembly meeting on 25 November 2014 that £190m had been brought in for the London Overground extension to Barking Riverside. However, the Chancellor George Osborne only announced a government loan of £55m to support the scheme at the last Autumn Statement. Could the Cabinet Member for Regeneration please explain the shortfall in funding and how the financial gap will be addressed?”

Response from Councillor Geddes, Cabinet Member for Regeneration

“Cllr. McCarthy is correct in that, when the Chancellor announced in the Autumn Statement that he was providing funding for the project, it was on the basis of providing a loan for only £55m of the project's total costs of around £190m. Nevertheless, this sum bridges the remaining funding gap and means that progress can take place.

The Government contribution constitutes roughly 30% of the total project costs. The GLA via TfL are contributing about 45% of the costs, Barking Riverside Ltd. are putting in another 20%, whilst Barking and Dagenham's loan of £9m provides the remaining 5%.”

Supplementary question from Councillor McCarthy

“What written guarantees does the Cabinet Member have that the £55m will be forthcoming?”

Response from Councillor Geddes

“Although there is not to my knowledge any formal sign off of the monies from the GLA to which I will seek to secure, I am confident they will honour the funding commitment they have made. Furthermore I and officers are continuing to make representations to attract more funding for Barking Riverside for a range of new facilities such as health as the housing development grows apace.”

Question 2

From Councillor P Waker

“Could the relevant Cabinet Member tell the Assembly if Council officers have been given delegated powers that allow officer bodies such as Departmental Management Teams etc. to set new fees and charges for residents?”

Response from Councillor Twomey, Cabinet Member for Finance

“Not to my knowledge nor approved at any Cabinet meeting I am aware of.”

Supplementary question from Councillor Waker

“I have been told that a Divisional Management Team has set charges for car parking for flatted communal areas. Can I ask that going forward where such considerations arise that the views of ward councillors be taken into account?”

Response from Councillor Twomey

“I am happy to look into the specifics of the issue highlighted by Councillor Waker.”

Question 3

From Councillor Gill

“What actions is the Cabinet Member for Housing taking to deal with the urgent problems such as the deteriorating condition of the service roads and continuous daily fly-tipping at the Council owned Longbridge Road flats?”

Response from Councillor Ashraf Cabinet Member for Housing

“Following a visit by the Interim Director of Housing to Longbridge Estate in December Housing have commissioned a survey from Highways that will provide up to date condition information on estate service roads across the Borough The Highways report will assess roads and pavements on housing land and submit recommendations on what works are needed and the priority in which they should be addressed. Once the list is confirmed, I will share it with colleagues.

Some funds have been allocated to a newly established budget for 2015/16 that will fund estate service roads renewal. This will be allocated in accordance with the condition information as revealed in the survey that is being conducted by engineers in Highways.

It should be noted, however, that tenant priorities for stock investment are focused upon kitchen and bathroom renewal and major block and property modernization rather than on the resurfacing of estate roads and our resources for other works are inevitably quite limited.

Regarding the fly tips, as part of the Caretaking service returning to Housing Management, we now have two crews who, on a daily basis, visit housing estates to collect bulk items from agreed points. Having said that, fly tipping is a borough wide issue which we all need to tackle together with a combination of policy, education and enforcement.

I have confidence that my colleagues, the lead members for Environment and Enforcement are looking at addressing this.”

Supplementary question from Councillor Gill

“Just today I walked one of the service roads that prompted my question and

noted that although repairs to pot holes had been undertaken, the standard is very poor. Seeing that the Council has secured European investment funding of £150m of which approximately £89m is being invested in the Gascoigne ward surely the Council can find of the order of £100k to repair the service roads in Longbridge ward?"

Response from Councillor Ashraf

"My understanding is the road to which Councillor Gill refers is possibly private and that the repairs may have been undertaken on behalf of leaseholders. I am asking the officers to investigate it, in the light of which I will respond to Councillor Gill."

Question 4

From Councillor Gill

"The failure to install the traditional Christmas tree and decorations over the festive period in Longbridge Ward that have been present for over 5 years was upsetting too many local residents. Could the Leader of the Council please explain who made this decision and what consultation took place?"

Response from Councillor Rodwell, Leader of the Council

"I am a bit surprised to receive this question seeing Councillor Gill made the same enquiry to officers before Christmas and he will be aware that a response was sent in a letter dated 31 December 2014. That said I am happy to answer his question. With the significant pressure placed on already stretched budgets and taking into account the freeze on all but essential in year spend, and bearing in mind that the Council has no budget set aside for any Christmas decorations, the decision was taken to maintain at the Town Hall and Civic Centre and in Barking Town Centre. Putting that in to context are Christmas decorations and trees more important than our children's safety and welfare? I do not think so.

Going forward I am more than happy to meet with local shop owners and other local businesses to find ways to share the cost of Christmas decorations/trees so that in future years displays are not limited to only that the Council can fund."

Supplementary question from Councillor Gill

"I raised the question here because it was similarly raised with me by residents from the Leftley Estate. Is the Leader saying that despite the significant budget pressures on the council he is able to find an additional £100K to fund the cost of a full time Chief Executive but not a small amount of money to pay for an additional Christmas tree?"

Response from Councillor Rodwell

"The decision to appoint a full time Chief Executive is an invest to save initiative seeing one of his key objectives will be to attract significant inward investment in the borough which in turn will create new employment opportunities for our communities. That I suggest cannot be compared to spending money for a Christmas tree in the Longbridge ward."

Question 5

From Councillor Reason

“Could the relevant Cabinet Member assure the Assembly that the proposed Council closure of Roycraft House will mean that no Council services, whether supplied directly or through joint ventures such as Elevate, will be operated from that building?”

Response from Councillor Twomey, Cabinet Member for Finance

“I cannot give that assurance to the Assembly.”

Supplementary question from Councillor Reason

“Why?”

Response from Councillor Twomey

“The Cabinet at the meeting on 16 December 2014 agreed to dispose of Roycraft House to Agilisys with leaseback of two floors for Council office use. In so doing it will secure necessary office accommodation but remove the running costs of the building from the Council”.

44. Chief Executive

The Chair announced that this would be the last meeting of the Assembly of the Chief Executive, Graham Farrant, before he returned to his full-time position as Chief Executive of Thurrock Council, having held the position of Chief Executive of the two Councils since July 2012.

The Chair thanked Graham on behalf of the Council for leading Barking and Dagenham for a second time, having previously served as Chief Executive between 2000 and 2004. The Chair commented that during his second term, Graham had brought stability to the Council during a period of financial uncertainty.

The Leader of the Council added that it was with sadness but respect that the Council bid farewell to Graham, praising him on his achievements and, in particular, the support and guidance Graham had provided to the new leadership.

Other Members paid their own tributes and reflected on Graham’s time with the Council, expressing their thanks, both personally and on behalf of residents, for his kindness, resilience, support, openness, honesty and straightforward approach.

In response, Graham stated that he had been privileged to serve Barking and Dagenham as its Chief Executive for a second time. He added that the Council had successfully dealt with significant change and challenge and he expressed his thanks for the support he had received from Members, fellow officers and the trade unions. He acknowledged that the Council had significant financial challenges ahead and extended his best wishes to the Council and its new Chief Executive, Chris Naylor.

