

## **REPLIES TO COUNCIL QUESTIONS – 24 APRIL 2024**

**Responses to questions put during the Council Meeting are available as part of the webcast on the Council's website.**

### **A. QUESTION FROM MEMBER OF THE PUBLIC**

1. From local resident Matthew Chapman to Councillor Leaf, Cabinet Member for Resources:

What is the estimate of Council officers' time and therefore the cost to Bexley's tax-paying residents in answering the numerous questions, freedom of information requests and complaints Mr Dimitri Shrovob has lodged since 2018?

Reply

Raising enquiries, making complaints and freedom of information requests can play an important role in the democratic process. As a local authority, we endeavour to learn from our interactions with residents and these can help us to improve the services we provide, and we have this year launched our new customer experience strategy.

There are, however, some individuals who make persistent and serial enquiries to the Council, which takes up a considerable and disproportionate level of resources and officer time to respond to. In some cases, even when their enquiries or freedom of information requests are responded to fully and substantially, they continue to make enquiries and complaints, including escalating their issues to external bodies such as the Information Commissioners Office and the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman. This means that considerable sums of taxpayers' money are being spent dealing with responding to many enquiries, complaints and information requests from a small number of individuals.

I will make no comment on the motives or intentions behind their activities, but would point out that a disproportionate level of resources is spent dealing with these persistent interactions which could be deployed on frontline services or engaging with other residents.

In terms of the costs to the taxpayers, it would take up time and resources to ascertain a precise cost. However, I would estimate that the persistent enquiries, complaints and information requests of one individual could run into thousands of pounds.

We may never know the full impact of those costs, but officer time and taxpayer resources could have been utilised on other work supporting and helping residents and delivering frontline services.

### **B. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL**

7. From Councillor Smith to Councillor Diment, Cabinet Member for Places:

Will the Cabinet Member for Places tell us what is being done by the Council to encourage TfL to introduce electric buses to more of their routes in Bexley?

Reply

The Council supports the introduction of electric buses where practical and will continue to engage with TfL on the roll out of electric buses in our Borough, through engagement at the Transport Users Sub-Committee and monthly officer liaison meetings with TfL Buses.

Route testing by TfL has identified the need to provide remedial works to accommodate electric buses at some locations due to their requirement for more manoeuvring space than conventional buses. The Council will provide assistance in the delivery of these works.

8. From Councillor Brooks to Councillor Munur, Cabinet Member for Growth:

Could the Cabinet Member for Growth please update us on the work being carried out from the secured £1.3 million from the UKSPF (UK Shared Prosperity Fund) by Economic Development?

Reply

### ***Community & Place***

An investment plan was produced to enable the following developments in Erith to be progressed. These were:

1. Bringing the vacant and undeveloped site of 68 Pier Road into use as a community hub, including event and room hire workspace, café and toilets. (£258,000)
2. Mixed use development of the vacant local listed building space at 70 Pier Road into commercial premises on the ground floor and 19 residential units (£654,000)
3. Modernisation of Riverside Gardens to make it a more attractive green space. (£163,000)

The following describes the current status of the projects:

68 Pier Road - Planning permission (with conditions) granted mid March 2024.

Tender period June-July 2024. Construction August-October 2024.

70 Pier Road - Design team remobilised January 2024. Planning submission mid-May 2024.


On site surveys have commenced. Tender period is expected to take place in the autumn with construction commencing early in 2025.




Riverside Gardens – Council has entered into contract with main contractor for the works.

Construction is expected to commence in the summer and complete before the end of the year.

### ***Supporting Local Business***

The table below describes the nature of support, allocated expenditure, output target and the current (RAG) status of this element of the plan.

<b>Supporting Local Business (SLB) Project Name</b>	<b>Overall Project Budget</b>	<b>Output target (non financial supported businesses / grants)</b>	<b>Status (31/3/24)</b>
<b>Business support delivered on group basis via webinars and face to face</b>	£100,000	100	

<b>Match funded grants for licensing/qualification to upskill staff</b>	£25,000	50	
<b>Employed Business Advisor to provide bespoke 121 advice</b>	£115,000	150	
<b>Retail &amp; Hospitality sector advice service</b>	£75,000	200	
<b>Start-up support programme within incubator space</b>	£25,000	30	Commencing Apr 2024
<b>Business Survey</b>	£8,287		
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£348,287</b>		

9. From Councillor Hinkley to Councillor Diment, Cabinet Member for Places:

Can the Cabinet Member confirm whether he anticipates the Public Cabinet papers in July 2024 will propose any reductions to school crossing patrol posts?

Reply

There are no plans to reduce the School Crossing Patrol Service.

10. From Councillor Day to Councillor Diment, Cabinet Member for Places:

Could the Cabinet Member provide an update following the response given at the November Council meeting on the solution to the disgraceful fly tipping at Ray Lamb Way involving CCTV, natural barriers, and the outcome of the viability assessment regarding the installation of high-quality numberplate recognition CCTV cameras?

Reply

Over the past year we have been working with Berkeley Group to evaluate possible solutions to the fly-tipping offences, and it was identified that the most practical solution would be to install AI monitored ANPR CCTV cameras, which should serve to deter fly-tipping offences and provide enforcement officers with evidence to support prosecution.

Berkeley Group agreed to provide a financial contribution to cover the costs of these cameras. The funds have now been received and officers are in the process of ordering and arranging for installation of the equipment. We expect to have the new facilities in place within the next few weeks, then will be working on plans to arrange removal of a large quantity of waste material.

11. From Councillor O'Hare to Councillor Leaf, Cabinet Member for Resources:

Can the Cabinet Member for Resources give an update on the Household Support Fund following the extension to the funding announced in the Budget on 6 March 2024 by the Chancellor of the Exchequer?

Reply

I am grateful for the question and the interest that Councillor O'Hare and other Members of the Council have taken in the Household Support Fund and our plans to utilise the £1.5m allocated by the Government.

A decision will be taken shortly on the distribution of those funds and will include support for low income families and resources for local charities to distribute to those in need.

12. From Councillor Carew to Councillor Seymour, Cabinet Member for Adults' Services and Health:

Can the Cabinet Member for Adults' Services and Health outline the aims and his hopes for Adult Social Care Vision which has recently been adopted?

Reply

The vision "**Your life, your choice, working together towards the life you want**" provides a unifying vision so that aims, objectives and priorities for Adult Social Care are clear for people who use services, our own workforce and other stakeholders.

- **Life you want**

People described wanting to be seen as unique individuals with aspirations, ideas, values. They wanted ASC to see them as a whole person, not just their needs.

These principles will be embedded in our commitments to how we will deliver and monitor the quality of the support we provide to local people.

- **Choice**

People described the challenges experienced due to the limited variety of options perceived to be available in Bexley for care and support.

We will explore how we can develop a range of different care and support offers enabling choice and variety in care offers.

- **Together**

People described the importance of the social care workforce working together in partnership with local people and their loved ones, and wider partners and the community. This includes working with people in regard to the process of assessment and support planning and being informed about peoples' assessed needs.

We will be committed to good communication and engagement with local people and their families and continuing the development of partnerships with local communities and partners across the health and care system.

The ASC vision describes commitments in how we work towards this vision. The vision inspires and motivates staff, gives focus for strategic development and provides a statement to align all activity and service developments.

13. From Councillor Borella to Councillor Diment, Cabinet Member for Places:

Can the Cabinet Member update Members on the Council response to the recent TfL consultation on the proposed DLR extension to Thamesmead?

Reply

In its response the Council supported the DLR extension to Thamesmead by 2034 in principle but confirmed that it should be designed to enable a further extension to major growth areas in the Borough including Belvedere. It also challenged the reasons for not proposing an extension into Bexley as part of the first phase.

The response further stated that the Council believes that the related bus transit should link to the key growth area of Belvedere and will need to be provided in advance of the delivery of the

DLR extension. The Council welcomed continued engagement with its officers in developing this bus transit scheme.

The Council's response also sought clarification on TfL's current position regarding future river crossings of the Thames in the context of the DLR proposals.

TfL is hoping to publish the outcome of their consultation by the end of June 2024.

14. From Councillor Asunramu to Councillor Diment, Cabinet Member for Places:

Can the Cabinet Member please outline the Council's plan to ensure the safety of residents and visitors to Bexley, around the lakes, ponds, canals, and Thames paths that exist across the Borough?

Reply

Thames Path works relates to keeping the paths passable and safe.

Where we have watercourses running through the Borough (River Cray, River Shuttle, Wyncham Stream), during the growing season, we allow the banks of the rivers to grow, reducing flooding, creating wildlife corridors and buffer zones along the watercourses. The majority of these are cut and cleared once a year in the autumn.

Lakes and ponds within our Parks & Open Spaces are included in our Off Highway Winter Maintenance Procedure and following sub-zero temperatures, they are inspected and if necessary, ice is broken around the perimeter. (these are Danson Lake & ponds, Foots Cray Meadows Lake & ponds, Lesnes Abbey ponds, Parish Wood pond, Lamorbey Park lake & Rutland Shaw pond).

#### **Danson Park lake**

Seasonal Weekly water testing, regular lake inspections (water quality, health and safety and safe flow of water course)

- Regular weed cutting to ensure if anyone does enter the lake, they do not become tangled and get stuck in the lake.
- Blue green algae monitored and if present signage introduced and public informed comms sent out.
- Anglers told not to enter the lake while fishing.
- Participants briefing before each session about water safety before activities.
- Safety boat, buoyancy aids when activities are operating
- Debris removed from the lake to prevent entrapments.
- Life ring float available when water sports centre is open
- Winter ice breaking

#### **Lesnes Abbey**

- There are danger deep water signs at most of the ponds except for the shallow Fountain Pond.
- Most ponds have a degree of fencing, again except for the shallow Fountain Pond.
- There is a throw line which is used when volunteers work on the ponds

#### **Footscray Meadows**

In collaboration with Emergancy Services and Sidcup Partners a throw line was installed just over 12 months ago – it has been vandalised twice and removed once in 12 months.

15. From Councillor Ward-Wilson to Councillor Newton, Cabinet Member for Education:

Will the Cabinet Member for Education give an update on progress around the Shenstone Secondary School expansion?

Reply

In January 2024, following a successful procurement exercise the London Borough of Bexley appointed Apex Ltd as the contractor for the Shenstone Secondary School expansion project with the works due to be completed by the start of the school year in September. The Council is working in partnership with TKAT (The Kemnal Academies Trust) and Apex Ltd, to achieve this expansion project.

As the school expanded to an 'all through' in September 2022 its first 2 secondary year groups have been based in temporary accommodation adjacent to St Augustine's School. To provide the additional space for the new year 7 cohort of pupils moving to the Shenstone Secondary element in September, Officers have been discussing with both the school and TKAT a range of possible temporary options for the 2024/25 academic year. Following these discussions, a new temporary location will be created within the Jubilee Primary School site. Shenstone School will jointly occupy the school within a separate and designated space. This arrangement will allow all the secondary students to be together on one ground floor site with sufficient classroom and outdoor space together with the additional requirements that were requested by the school for the students and agreed by the Council. Parents and carers have been advised of this.

16. From Councillor Brooks to Councillor Baroness O'Neill of Bexley OBE, Leader of the Council:

Can the Leader of the Council give her assessment of the impact of the expanded ULEZ on Bexley since 29 August 2023?

Reply

There have been many anecdotal impacts/stories brought to our attention since last September – including shops moving from Bexley, people no longer shopping in our high streets, residents (especially elderly) not able to afford to visit family and friends or to drive to health appointments or do shopping but, perhaps the starkest numbers are the following, which is the number of PCN's issued for Bexley from Sept 2023 to Jan 2024 (£90 if paid within 14 days or £180 if after that period);

<b><u>Borough</u></b>	<b><u>Aug-23</u></b>	<b><u>Sep-23</u></b>	<b><u>Oct-23</u></b>	<b><u>Nov-23</u></b>	<b><u>Dec-23</u></b>	<b><u>Jan-24</u></b>	<b><u>Grand Total</u></b>
Bexley	0	97	2,625	3,050	2,803	3,291	11,994

The numbers above/attached (including the incorrect summation to 11,994 instead of 11,866) were provided by TfL and, if you apply the reduced sum of £90 (paid within 14 days) the amount due from Bexley for the 5 months would over £1m. Given the majority of those people will be owners who can't afford to change their vehicles to be compliant, that means that TfL are taking £1m from people who can least afford it.

17. From Councillor Day to Councillor Gower MBE, Cabinet Member for Communities and Housing:

Please could the Cabinet Member join me in thanking the emergency services, Orbit staff, Council staff and the community spirit and patience of Slade Green residents on the morning of Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> when a fire broke out at an Orbit property, Grange House, in Slade Green?

Reply

I am very happy to add my thanks to the emergency services, and both Orbit and Council staff for the effective help and support they provided when a fire broke out at an Orbit property, Grange House, in Slade Green on the morning of Saturday 16th April. I would also like to commend the community spirit and patience of those Slade Green residents who were affected and also to thank them for the way in which they dealt with a very difficult situation.

18. From Councillor Hinkley to Councillor Diment, Cabinet Member for Places:

Can the Cabinet Member confirm whether he anticipates the Public Cabinet papers in July 2024 will propose any reductions to the frequency of household refuse collections?

Reply

No reductions to the frequency of household refuse collections will be proposed in July 2024.

19. From Councillor Reader to Councillor Leaf, Cabinet Member for Resources:

What is the Cabinet Member for Resources assessment of the proposed course of action by the Government to address the backlogs, delays and other problems identified with the external auditing of local authority accounts?

Reply

I am grateful to Councillor Reader in his role as Chairman of GPAC and to his Vice Chairman, Councillor Mrs Slaughter, for their interest in this issue. In addition to my comments made during the Leader's Report item at the 24 April 2024 Council meeting, Councillor Reader will be aware that with his and Councillor Mrs Slaughter's assistance we responded to the Government's consultation on the future of local authority external audits.

It agreed in our response that the first phase was required to facilitate progress on the 2023/24 audit. However, given the likelihood of audit opinions on the 2022/23 accounts being disclaimed, the response made it clear that measures will need to be in place to ensure that audit reports are transparent and fairly reflect the reasons for these opinions being issued, to provide assurance to the general public and users of the accounts.

The response agreed that the use of statutory 'backstop' dates for future audited accounts is necessary to bring audit timescales back into line over a period of time and restore confidence in the process. There was an acknowledgement that this phase places emphasis on the audit of opening balances in 2023/24, which effectively becomes an additional area of audit work which is likely to place additional time and resource pressures on audit firms. The completion of audit work in line with these dates will greatly depend on how efficiently this work is carried out and how this is factored into planning procedures.

The response also endorsed the need for further longer term work to address the systemic issues that have resulted in the current backlog.

We remain frustrated that progress on the external audit of our 2022/23 accounts has paused and welcome the discussions that Councillor Reader has facilitated on this issue at GPAC meetings. I continue to keep track of the activity around this issue and welcome the ongoing interest of GPAC and will update GPAC in due course.

20. From Councillor Adams to Councillor Baroness O'Neill of Bexley OBE, Leader of the Council:

Can the Leader of the Council advise the financial and resource implications of continuous questions/ complaints and FOIs from some residents?

Reply

Most residents contact Councillors appropriately when they have an enquiry or an issue to resolve and we are happy to respond or help. We're a public body and we're here to provide services to residents so it is important that residents are able to contact us when they need to. However, unfortunately a small number of residents do contact us repeatedly – either about the same or similar issues, even once that issue has been resolved – or occasionally about a very wide range of different issues.

Clearly it takes us time to reply to every enquiry we receive – and, as our time and funds are limited, inevitably this time is diverted away from other work which could be done. It is difficult to quantify this precisely as obviously the implications depend on the nature of the enquiries. But, to take an example, we have received 115 separate requests from one single resident over an 18-month period, many of which resulted in a number of further, follow up questions. Another resident sent 14 long emails to a wide range of officers and Members about a matter which had already been resolved, over the course of a single weekend.

In terms of the cost of this work, the Council budgets £190k to employ a small team of three people to deal directly with Complaints and Freedom of Information requests, but complaints and enquiries are handled by staff right across the Council and involve staff at all levels of the organisation up to the Chief Executive. The corresponding Councillor time is not included in those numbers.

21. From Councillor Nicola Taylor to Councillor Seymour, Cabinet Member for Adults' Services and Health:

Could the Cabinet Member outline what discussions with NHS are being undertaken to improve healthcare capacity, in particular Erith Hospital to meet present and future healthcare demands across the Borough?

Reply

The Bexley Wellbeing Partnership together with partners Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust – a major local service provider, are currently in the process of developing a Strategic Outline Case (SOC) for potential investment into Erith Hospital.

To enable development of the SOC, the Bexley Wellbeing Partnership commissioned Healthwatch Bexley to conduct a resident engagement programme in North Bexley. The objective was to better understand the needs and aspirations of the local community who access services at the site for their health and wellbeing. In parallel, engagement with local system stakeholders in North Bexley has been undertaken to understand how services should respond to local health demands.

A new *Health & Wellbeing Roadmap* and service model is currently being finalised setting out how the local system proposes to respond to the findings of the engagement.

A demand and capacity modelling exercise is now underway to project the future demand for services over the next twenty years. The outputs will support scoping the space requirements and estates plans for the site.



The *Demand and Capacity* modelling exercise will project capacity requirements for these services together with any new services identified. The significant increase of the population due to local housing development in the North of the Borough has been factored in, together with organic population growth for the area.

This programme is expected to be completed in June 2024, which will then feed into the development of estates plans for Erith Hospital.

22. From Councillor Borella to Councillor Gower MBE, Cabinet Member for Communities and Housing:

Can the Cabinet Member confirm the new arrangements for the management of Hurst Community Centre?

Reply

Following the departure of YADT in December 2023, the Council has assumed the day to day management of Hurst Community Centre.

The Library Service is managing community bookings and the management of the building. We are pleased that the Council has been able to keep this important community asset from closing after it was handed back.

Whilst the short timeframe for the handover provided logistical challenges, I am pleased to report that almost all of the hirers have kept their bookings and we have since taken on new hirers too. I am pleased to report that the centre continues to thrive as a place for all sorts of groups, classes, events and activities.

Residents can enquire about making a booking via email to a dedicated mailbox which is looked after by the libraries business team.

23. From Councillor Curtois to Councillor Munur, Cabinet Member for Growth:

Would the Cabinet Member for Growth join me in congratulating Bexleyheath BID on reintroducing the Bexleyheath night markets?

Reply

Councillor Curtois' comments are noted and will be sure to be passed on to the team at Bexleyheath BID.

It is hoped the events will continue to be a success and under the BIDs leadership, night markets can become a mainstay of Bexleyheath's evening economy.

24. From Councillor Brooks to Councillor Diment, Cabinet Member for Places:

Would the Cabinet Member for Places tell us what is being done to target fly-tipping in Bexley?

Reply

Between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2023 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024, 1885 Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs) were issued for fly-tipping offences, with a further 21 FPNs issued to waste carriers who failed to provide the correct documentation for transfer of waste.

We are in the process of tendering a new Environmental Enforcement contract, which will introduce new powers to the new supplier, including business and householder duty of care, issues relating to waste receptacles, and powers to issue higher FPNs for fly-tipping offences. Officers will also soon be authorised to conduct doorstep interviews under caution, which will simplify the enforcement process and support officers in gathering evidence for prosecution. We are also planning to increase the working hours of the enforcement officers to cover Mon-Fri 7am-7pm, and Sat-Sun 7am-3pm.

We have also recently introduced higher penalties for fly-tipping offences, with FPNs now being set at levels of £200, £500 and £1000 depending on the severity of the offence. This replaces the previous levels of £150 for small offences and £400 for all other offences.

25. From Councillor Day to Councillor Gower MBE, Cabinet Member for Communities and Housing:

Could the Cabinet Member please provide an update on the number identified and assistance given from the rough sleeper count on the 23-24 November?

Reply

11 people were found Rough Sleeping on the night.

2 of RS had social housing tenancy and advised to return to their accommodation.

2 accessed homeless shelter and they were reconnected to their local authority.

1 reconnected with family and no longer rough sleeping.

3 were supported into PRS accommodation with support from the RSI team.

3 of the RS are long term non-engagers and are still rough sleeping.

RS sleepers were provided with information pack on warm spaces, and housing options available to them in Bexley.

26. From Councillor Borella to Councillor Diment, Cabinet Member for Places:

Will Cabinet Member join me in congratulating the Mayor of London on introducing the SL3 Super Loop bus route through Bexley?

Reply

Improvements to public transport are always welcome. I am particularly pleased that the Mayor of London and TfL recognised that their original proposal to terminate the SL3 Superloop at Bexleyheath would have been shortsighted and accepted Bexley Council's call to extend the northern end of the route to serve Abbey Wood Station and Thamesmead. It was disappointing that our representations to use electric buses on the SL3, to stop in Bexley Village and provide links to the Erith and Slade Green were ignored.

27. From Councillor Slaughter to Councillor Diment, Cabinet Member for Places:

Can the Cabinet Member for Places explain what is being done to improve the appearance of the roundabouts outside the Civic Centre and at the junctions of Albion Road with Gravel Hill, Highland Road and Townley Road?

Reply

It is unfortunate that the originally planted wildflowers have not successfully taken, and that impatient drivers are riding over the kerbs, which impacts on the appearance and planting. We already plan to improve the situation through increasing the kerb heights around these locations, and to replace the planting with grass and bulbs. This work is subject to street works permits, especially given the proximity to the town centre and level traffic use but is expected to be carried out in the summer. Spring flowering bulbs will be planted in the Autumn planting season, ready for the new year.

28. From Councillor Chris Taylor to Councillor Newton, Cabinet Member for Education:

Can the Cabinet Member for Education provide an update on the Safety Valve programme?

Reply

In the first year of the Safety Valve Programme Bexley received £11.96m towards the DSG deficit and £9.5m High Needs Capital. A further £2.56m, of agreed funding, has been received following satisfactory progress against the conditions in the Safety Valve Agreement. Bexley is currently on track to eliminate the deficit by the end of the Safety Valve programme in 2028-29. However, the programme is complex and not without risk, so it will be important to monitor this closely.

The implementation of Safety Valve interventions is being rolled out in 2 phases. In Phase 1, 6 interventions successfully launched in the Autumn term 2023. For Phase 2, a further 5 interventions will launch in the Summer and Autumn terms of 2024. The first cohort of young people have completed their interventions and the impact of this is currently being analysed.

I would like to thank Council officers and wider stakeholders who have worked hard to turn our Safety Valve Agreement into a reality, for the benefit of the Council and our children and young people.

29. From Councillor Ferguson to Councillor Leaf, Cabinet Member for Resources:

Can the Cabinet Member confirm how many Bexley residents have applied for a Voter Authority Certificate?

Reply

As Councillor Ferguson will be aware, this issue has been discussed at meetings of the Finance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee. It has also been discussed at the General Purposes and Audit Committee and there has been an All Member Briefing covering elections, including this issue. 295 Voter Authority Certificates have been issued and we have been proactive in communicating to residents the importance of bringing Voter ID to polling stations to vote and also to check their ID in advance and apply for a Voter Authority Certificate if needed.

30. From Councillor Francis to Councillor Leaf, Cabinet Member for Resources:

Can the Cabinet Member confirm how many Overseas Voters have been added to Bexley's electoral register since 16 January 2024?

Reply

As Councillor Francis will be aware, matters relating to the administration of elections and recent legislative changes have been discussed at meetings of the Finance and Corporate

Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the General Purposes and Audit Committee. There has also been an All Member Briefing covering elections, including this issue.

Since 16 January 2024, 109 new overseas electors have been registered, and there are 269 overseas electors in total registered to vote in the London Borough of Bexley.

31. From Councillor Moore to Councillor Newton, Cabinet Member for Education:

Will the Cabinet Member for Education provide some details on the Winter and Easter Holiday Activity and Food programmes in the Borough?

Reply

The Government's Holiday Activities and Food Programme was delivered in Bexley over both the Christmas and Easter School Holidays to great success. The scheme provided enjoyable activities and healthy food for school-aged children between Reception and Year 11. During the Christmas holidays 21 providers ran 26 schemes offering 3,518 spaces/sessions, whilst during the Easter holidays 23 providers ran 26 schemes offering 3,650 spaces.

Activities included sports sessions, food-making, arts and crafts, computer coding, and CV writing workshops. Places on the Programme were free to any children who are eligible for Free School Meals.

The attendance data for the HAF Programme that took place during the Easter holidays is currently being collated and will be available in May.

32. From Councillor Ward-Wilson to Councillor Leaf, Cabinet Member for Resources:

Can the Cabinet Member for Resources provide an update on his assessment of the Council's financial position and the steps being taken over the medium term?

Reply

Our latest update on the Council's financial position was provided in the MTFS published with the 22 February 2024 Public Cabinet papers and an update for the 2023/24 budget monitoring position was provided in the 16 April 2024 Public Cabinet papers.

The next update of the MTFS, 2023/24 Outturn position, and 2024/25 in-year Budget Monitoring is scheduled to be reported on at the next Public Cabinet meeting, provisionally scheduled for 11 July 2024.

33. From Councillor Francis to Councillor Leaf, Cabinet Member for Resources:

Can the Cabinet Member confirm how much of the discretionary support element of the Government's 2023/24 Council Tax Support Fund has been administered since 1<sup>st</sup> March 2024 and how many households have received this?

Reply

The Government announced £100m of additional funding for local authorities to support the most vulnerable households in England with their 2023/24 Council Tax bills. This funding allowed for an award of up to £25 per Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS) recipient (based on their outstanding bill after the main CTRS award and any other discounts), whilst also allowing Councils to determine discretionary awards for their area should the funding available exceed that required to support the core scheme eligible households in the 2023/24 billing year. The core scheme awards were granted to all those already in receipt of CTRS on 01 April

2023, and all new claimants who started to receive a CTRS award (where weekly entitlement was less than 100% of liability) during the 2023/24 billing year.

In Bexley, it was decided to use the remaining funding following the granting of the above noted core scheme awards, to grant one off credits of up to £100 to all recipients of a Care Leaver discount (i.e., those not fully exempt from Council Tax) or a Disabled Band Reduction on their Council Tax account. These discretionary scheme awards were applied to qualifying Council Tax accounts in March 2024 (based on the position of the outstanding bill as at 30 November 2023). A total of £56,558 was awarded in discretionary scheme payments, to a total of 602 households.

34. From Councillor Amaning to Councillor Diment, Cabinet Member for Places:

How is the Council managing the considerable number of emergency works from private utility companies which are causing excessive traffic and disruption across the Borough?

Reply

The Council's Street Works Team has a duty to co-ordinate works but cannot refuse utility companies from maintaining their equipment or installing new services. Planned works can be co-ordinated, but obviously emergency works (such as gas or water leaks) cannot. The utilities can commence emergency works without prior approval, but do need to register them with the Council within 2 hours. Once aware of the unplanned works taking place, the Council considers this for any planned works permits being applied for, and seeks to liaise with utilities at other works nearby to see if traffic controls can be changed to reduce the impact on the area; although this is often difficult as the road has already been dug up and cannot be reopened for traffic use.

35. From Councillor Bishop to Councillor Read, Cabinet Member for Children's Services:

Will the Cabinet Member for Children's Services please update us on foster care recruitment?

Reply

As of 15/04/24 Fostering data as follows:

**226 carers in total = (143 Households)**

Foster Carers – 141 (81 households)

Connected Carers – 29 (23 households)

Host and Support – 32 (24 households)

Regulation 24 – 20 (15 households)

Our fostering recruitment continues to make good progress and we have an ambitious 5 year plan which aims to increase the volume of in-house carers year on year.

Recruitment and Assessment:

We currently hold information events twice a month – these are offered as both face to face and virtual events. They mainly occur in the evenings as per the need of the applicants.

## Current Recruitment Data

Data to date from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2024:

Fostering households in assessment – 16

Host and Support Households in assessment – 5

Initial enquires – 4

Initial visits - 6

36. From Councillor Jackson to Councillor Leaf, Cabinet Member for Resources:

Will the Cabinet Member for Resources give us his estimate of the number of businesses that have benefited from the freeze in the business rates multiplier for small businesses in the Borough?

Reply

The small business multiplier has remained frozen at 0.499 for the last 5 years and has therefore not risen with inflation. This action taken by the Conservative Government has benefited small businesses across the Borough by keeping their business rates liabilities down.

From the annual billing data, there are 4,677 business hereditaments that are charged the small business multiplier. Many rate reliefs, including 100% reliefs, reducing their bills. The freeze therefore directly benefits 2,738 businesses in the Borough.

37. From Councillor Ball to Councillor Gower MBE, Cabinet Member for Communities and Housing:

While levels of crime in Bexley remain historically low, why then is recorded rate of Domestic Abuse in Bexley much higher than many other boroughs?

Reply

Domestic Abuse is a key strategic priority for the Community Safety Partnership in 2024/2025. Whilst reports of other types of crimes in Bexley remain low in comparison to other boroughs – it is clear that Bexley's residents are frequently reporting Domestic Abuse.

The reasons for this are largely unknown and are complex but two key points require consideration:

- Firstly, in general terms domestic abuse is a crime that is often under reported. With this in mind, the Community Safety Partnership has done a lot of work to promote the reporting of domestic abuse in Bexley. It has also got a very active Domestic Abuse Strategic Partnership which has made significant progress in training the partnership workforce to 'identify' domestic abuse.
- That said, you cannot 'identify' incidences if they do not exist. We know the prevalence of domestic abuse within Bexley is significant enough for the Borough to be ranking 20<sup>th</sup> across London and for Bexley to have a current rate of 9.3 per 1000 population. This concerns our partnership deeply.

The data referred to (the recorded crime rate) is based on reports to the Police. We as a partnership have also reviewed other local data as part of our serious violence needs

assessment and recent Joint Strategic Assessment which also indicate that domestic abuse is prevalent in Bexley.

Other crime types have stronger correlations with socio-economic factors and so Bexley is considered comparatively safer than most other London Boroughs. Domestic abuse does not share that same correlation so strongly – it exists in all walks of life.

As set out in our Domestic Abuse Strategy, our partnership is wholly committed to prevention, quality provision, protecting victims and continually improving our response - taking local and national learning to continue to improve outcomes for victims, perpetrators and children and reduce the incidence of abuse.

It is with this local context, we encourage all employers in Bexley to work towards White Ribbon Accreditation. [Working with organisations to end VAWG — White Ribbon UK](#)

38. From Councillor Ferguson to Councillor Baroness O'Neill of Bexley OBE, Leader of the Council:

What timescale does the Leader think reasonable for the BexleyCo development in Lesney Park to be initiated?

Reply

Council officers are in negotiations with NHS England for the settlement of an existing capital grant agreement and its reversion against the land to be retained for learning disability accommodation.

Once valuations are agreed, a new capital grant agreement will be entered into and officers have been advised to allow up to six months.

Once the capital grant agreement is in place, the Council will be free to simultaneously exchange and complete the sale to BexleyCo. Following transfer, BexleyCo will need to procure its main contractor and there will be a mobilisation period. We are advised that, typically, this can take 12 months.

39. From Councillor Chris Taylor to Councillor Read, Cabinet Member for Children's Services:

Will the Cabinet Member for Children's Services please tell us how many children are in the care of Bexley?

Reply

At the end of March 2024, 304 children and young people were looked after in Bexley. This is an increase from the 265 children and young people reported in March 2023. Our numbers reflect that in Bexley we continue to have a lower rate than the National and Statistical Neighbour averages.

**2022/23 per 10k**

Bexley – 46

Statistical Neighbours – 60.4

National - 71

The number of children coming into the care of Local Authorities, continues to be a rising trend nationally.

40. From Councillor Slaughter to Councillor Diment, Cabinet Member for Places:

Could the Cabinet Member for Places provide an update on progress with the partnership between the Council and the Lawn Tennis Association to improve public tennis courts in Bexley?

Reply

- Construction work has now started
- Works are due to be completed June 2024
- An operator is being sought to manage the courts and deliver a range of community tennis activities
- A court booking system will be introduced and a charge to use the courts brought back (we don't yet have the charging details as this is something the tennis operator would need to be involved in when appointed)

41. From Councillor Ball to Councillor Gower MBE, Cabinet Member for Communities and Housing:

Could the Cabinet Member update Members on what is the relationship like between Bexley Council and the key local residential house building companies?

Reply

I would say very positive. We all know the challenges facing the sector but officers remain encouraging of the right type of quality development with the right combination of home size and tenure the Borough needs.

42. From Councillor Day to Councillor Diment, Cabinet Member for Places:

Do we have an outcome for the bid for funding from Defra which would provide funds for realignment of the ditches and installation of a natural barrier to prevent access by fly-tippers, and new culverts on Ray Lamb Way?

Reply

The Council understands that the bid to DeFRA was unsuccessful, but that the feedback on this being provided directly to Berkeley Homes. We will be seeking to understand the nature of the rejection, and whether we would be able to support a revised bid.

43. From Councillor Ward-Wilson to Councillor Seymour, Cabinet Member for Adults' Services and Health:

Can the Cabinet Member for Adults' Services and Health update us on the new community hubs for service users with a physical disability?

Reply

Initially it was hoped that LECB would form part of the Hub offer, unfortunately following guest visits by clients it was felt that the access was not to required standards. In conjunction with families and those using the service, Wolsley House and a further library were acceptable. For a small proportion of those using the service a changing place is required and the intention is to use the former wheelchair centre at 10D Whitehall Lane whilst a venue with a CP is sought. Inspire are discussing with our projects teams the possibility of space in the community building being refurbished (with CP installed) at Pier Road Erith, which is expected to be complete September/October 2024.



All users have been consulted with and we are now awaiting the final refurbishment of disabled toilets at the library and the transition will take place. This is an exciting opportunity to transform a traditional service and ASC look forward to presenting the evaluation to Members.

44. From Councillor Chris Taylor to Councillor Seymour, Cabinet Member for Adults' Services and Health:

Can the Cabinet Member for Adults' Services and Health provide some detail on the recently launched Bexley Barbershop Project?

Reply

The Barbershop Project in Bexley launched in October 2023. We currently have 12 barbershops who have signed up to take part. 8 barbers have taken part in the training programme with a further 6 to undertake training soon. 52 mental health discussions with clients have taken place, and 78 leaflets about local services have been taken. Recent social media promotion has attracted significant interest with 13,000 views. A formal evaluation of the project will be undertaken, and this will determine any future investment beyond the current pilot. In the meantime, we are in early-stage discussions with Mind in Bexley to consider the feasibility of broadening the project into other venues such as hairdressers and nail bars.

45. From Councillor Amaning to Councillor Newton, Cabinet Member for Education:

Could the Cabinet Member confirm that assessments for children with autism are being made in the recommended timeframes?

Reply

In Bexley, Oxleas Specialist Children's Services leads on the Autism Assessment Pathway for children with the Council's Educational Psychologists contributing to this multi-disciplinary process. Information is also gathered from the school, SENCo, parents/carers and the child as part of a diagnostic assessment.

295 children were seen for Autism Diagnostic Assessment March 2023-February 2024. Between March 2023 and January 2024 an average of 24 children's diagnostic assessments were completed per month. Each diagnostic assessment has preliminary work including a developmental assessment with a paediatrician.

The average waiting time for first appointment in the Autism Diagnostic Assessment Pathway for a child or young person was 43 weeks in February 2024, an increase since February 2023. The pathway is a paediatric-led pathway and considers the holistic needs of each child, therefore multiple assessments may be indicated as part of this pathway and waiting times will differ for each individual based on this holistic approach.

Oxleas NHS Trust have increased capacity for Bexley children's Autism diagnostic assessments from March 2024. The impact on the waiting time will be known in the reporting period March 2024-August 2024, and is expected to reduce the waiting time for children and young people.

While waiting, all children on the Autism Diagnostic Pathway can access support such as:

- Autism Advisory Teacher advice to schools
- SEN Toolkit of approaches in every school and nursery
- Speech and Language advice
- Social Prescribing

- Voluntary sector support and activities such as Act for Change; Galaxy Club

46. From Councillor Chris Taylor to Councillor Seymour, Cabinet Member for Adults' Services and Health:

Can the Cabinet Member for Adults' Services and Health provide some detail on the Shared Lives Scheme which provides support for young adults?

Reply

The Bexley Shared Lives scheme provides care in family homes across Bexley for adults with a learning disability, physical disability, mental health, or other sensory needs.

Shared Lives is a social care model whereby a vulnerable adult with care and support needs, who is unable to live independently, is matched to a Shared Lives Carer, sharing their home and family life with the individual.

Shared Lives promotes independence, supporting vulnerable adults to learn through experiential experiences and routine family life.

Shared Lives can be a least restrictive approach to care and support, providing people the opportunity to live in a family support network, rather than more formal care arrangements such as supported living.

The Shared Lives team match carers who are willing to share their homes, lives, interests, experiences and skills with adults who need support to live to the fullest.

47. From Councillor Ward-Wilson to Councillor Seymour, Cabinet Member for Adults' Services and Health:

Does the Cabinet Member for Adults' Services and Health welcome the recent 6 month update on ASC Direct Payments?

Reply

The recommendations provided by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in regard to improve the uptake of direct payments was welcomed by Adult Services and has shaped the service development programme currently underway.

The 6 month update demonstrated the range of actions being taken to improve the direct payment uptake including:

- The development of guidance regarding direct payments
- Allocating resources to develop a Personal Assistant Register and direct payment support service.
- Digital developments to support people to find care and support offers.
- Training and development within adult social care.

Work continues in relation to this change programme which is underpinned by the aspirations within the Adult Social Care vision.

48. From Councillor Brooks to Councillor Diment, Cabinet Member for Places:

Will the Cabinet Member for Places update Members on the performance of the waste collection service in Bexley?

Reply

Total number of missed collections – the overall number of missed bins has increased slightly from 130 in November 23 to 143 per 100,000 collections in December 23. The performance is similar to October's performance where we've had 142 missed bins per 100,000. However, if we compare the contractor's performance with the same period last year (246 per 100,000), we can see that the total number of missed collections has reduced by approximately 40%.

Number of assisted missed collections – the number of missed assisted collections has remained stable at 133 per 100,000 collections in November and December. If we compare the total number of assisted missed to the same period last year, we can see a decrease of approximately 64%. The number of properties remaining on our hot spot list has also decreased.

The total number of missed collections per 100,000 for February 2024 was 119 which indicates that the service is performing well. Please note that the monthly target for missed bins for 2023/24 is 70 per 100,000 collections, so there is work to be done to reduce the figure even further.

49. From Councillor Bacon to Councillor Diment, Cabinet Member for Places:

Can the Cabinet Member for Places update the Council on the progress with installing EV charging points across Bexley?

Reply

Bexley has provided 109 electric vehicle charge points on-street and in our car parks, which will increase to 170 by the end of May. The most recent 100 sites within street lighting columns have deliberately been spread across all areas of the Borough, so that residents are never too far from a charge point.

Officers have been successful in a bid to government funding to introduce further on-street units and are currently working on a combined bid with 3 other boroughs for other grant funding.

The current focus is to continue to roll out more on-street charge points across the Borough, to provide greater access to EV charging for all.

50. From Councillor Chris Taylor to Councillor Read, Cabinet Member for Children's Services:

Will the Cabinet Member for Children's Services tell us what percentage of the Children's Services staff are permanently employed, as distinct from being agency workers?

Reply

91.57% of Children's Services staff (including Learning Enterprise College Bexley) are filled by permanent staff with a further 1.99% of positions filled by secondees. These secondees are from Bexley substantive posts. The remaining 6.44% of posts are filled by agency staff with 0.37% of these positions filled by off contract staff.

51. From Councillor Jackson to Councillor Newton, Cabinet Member for Education:

Will the Cabinet Member for Education join me in congratulating the team which put on the Bexley Apprenticeship and Participation event held during Apprenticeship Week?

Reply

I would be delighted to add my congratulations to the team who worked diligently, with our partners and stakeholders, to put on our annual Bexley Apprenticeship and Participation event which took part on Monday 5 February 2024, at the Civic Offices.

The event caters specifically to young individuals aged 16 to 24 and their parents or carers. This year, the nearly 900 young people who registered to attend the event were able to engage with the 40 employers, training providers, and support organisations that were present providing them with the opportunity to explore apprenticeships and training opportunities, as well as receive guidance to navigate the path towards their desired courses or jobs. There was a genuine excitement and enthusiasm from those that attended, and it was also great to see a number of our staff present with both their own children, but also there to support the young people that they work with.

52. From Councillor Moore to Councillor Read, Cabinet Member for Children's Services:

Will the Cabinet Member for Children's Services please provide us with information on progress in the reorganisation of Bexley's Children's Centres?

Reply

The reconfigured Children's Centre offer went live in November 2021 with the aim of focusing on the first 1001 days of life from the antenatal period until a child's third birthday. That is in line with guidance within 'The Best Start for Life, A vision for the First 1001 Critical Days,' published by Government in 2021. That recognised this is a critical time for development when babies and young children are at their most vulnerable. It also sets the foundations for an individual's cognitive, emotional, and physical development.

The data shows that the majority of registrations are within most deprived areas of the borough, indicating that the targeted services and areas correlate with need in the community as intended by the reorganisation.

Our Children Centre Offer has a main hub situated in Erith, West Street with 4 more buildings situated in Slade Green (Northend Children's Centre), Northumberland Heath (Northumberland Health Children Centre), St Mary's & St James (North Cray Children Centre) and Crook Log (Danson Children Centre) plus our SEND hub in Barnehurst at the Normandy Children Centre.

But, in addition to that there are also groups and activities delivered by the Children Centre staff, in two Thamesmead East locations (Greenmead & The Nest), and at East Wickham School. Crayford Library offer their own stay and play groups as well as toddler singing groups where the Children Centre practitioners attend as part of their outreach work.

Most importantly the Children Centre practitioners undertake that outreach to community groups and activities once a month, keeping up to date with changing trends and needs in the community. Thamesmead remains an area of need alongside Belvedere, Erith, Slade Green and Northend and the South of St Mary's & St James, where North Cray Children Centre is located.

There is a Partnership Board which meets quarterly with community members and tracks the changing needs of families in Bexley in order to ensure that the programmes delivered within the Children Centre are responding to the need in the community.

Finally, there are currently 1056 children attending services, with some attending groups regularly, and this equates to 3739 attendances overall.

53. From Councillor Ward-Wilson to Councillor Read, Cabinet Member for Children's Services:

Will the Cabinet Member for Children's Services please update us on the number of children and young people being supported by the Children with Disabilities team?

Reply

To be offered a service by the specialist Disabled Children's Service the child or young person must have a disability that has been formerly diagnosed and be permanent or long term. For example:

- a severe or profound learning disability.
- a severe or profound physical disability.
- significant or profound sensory disability.
- complex medical needs or long-term condition expected to disable the child for more than one year.
- life threatening illness.
- severe communication disabilities or behavioural difficulties related to the child's disability (e.g. autism).
- severe development delay.

These criteria are based on the definition of disability set out in the Children Act 1989. The criteria does **not** include :

- children with mental health disorders unless in conjunction with a learning, physical or communication disability
- a disability or disabilities that are not severe
- behavioural problems due to social/environmental factors (i.e. not associated to a disability)
- a diagnosis of ADHD or ADD unless in conjunction with a learning, physical or communication disability

All referrals to the Children with Disabilities Service are followed up with a "registration visit", this visit is used in determining whether or not threshold is met for a service. To establish if the child/young person meets the threshold of severe and profound needs the Children with Disabilities Matrix of need is applied. This is an in-house assessment tool that ensures there is equity in our assessment as terms such as 'severe' and 'profound' do not carry the same meaning across professional disciplines.

All children open to the service have an annual updating child and family assessment to review their needs. Social workers must attend all annual reviews of the Education Health and Social Care Plan.

If parents do not agree with the outcome of the threshold decision, an assessment will still be offered to fully explore the child and family's support needs. Alternatively the following actions are taken:

- Signposting to the local offer and community services
- Social workers ensure that the family have adequate support from Universal services

- Social workers will also consider any safeguarding issues and support needs and this may result in a referral to MASH