

COUNCIL MEETING – 8 NOVEMBER 2023

WRITTEN REPLIES TO COUNCIL QUESTIONS

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

Questions from members of the public

3. From Local resident Robert Bearsby to Councillor Caroline Newton, Cabinet Member for Education:

As parents of a year 6 child at Shenstone School, can you advise us if either planning permission is not granted for the proposed temporary accommodation for our children or works are not finished in time for September 2024 for the current year 6's, what are your plans for the education of our children?

Reply

The decision to install temporary accommodation for pupils that will be moving into Year 7 at Shenstone in September 2024 has had to be taken following a recent unsuccessful tender exercise to appoint a building contractor that would deliver the permanent buildings for this expansion. We are working in partnership with TKAT, the Academy Trust which manages and oversees Shenstone School, on a temporary solution.

Our initial enquiry with the Planners regarding this solution has been positive and there are no obvious concerns for a temporary accommodation. However, like all planning applications, until this planning application is submitted there is no guarantee on approval. Bexley Council holds the statutory responsibility to provide a school place for all of our pupils and if this temporary planning approval could not be secured the Council would work with the school and Trust to look at all options including alternative schools or alternative temporary sites ensuring that working with our partners, the delivery of the provision within their EHCPs is met.

4. From local resident John Browning to Councillor Baroness O'Neill of Bexley OBE, Leader of the Council:

How many of the photographs used in the Conservative political leaflet distributed last August and September were the property of the Council?

Reply – given during the Council Meeting

5. From local resident Pat Styles to Councillor Diment, Cabinet Member for Places:

Why is it that street cleaning is regularly not taking place and why is it public money is being spent on a service that is not being provided or adequately monitored by Bexley Council?

Reply

Street Cleansing is contracted to be carried out at set frequencies:

- Residential Street Cleansing - 3 weekly
- Major Shopping Areas (Bexleyheath, Sidcup, Welling & Erith Town Centres) - continuous daily presence
- Local Shopping Areas - 2 to 6 times per week depending on the classification

- Alleyways and Footpaths - 3 weekly
- Car Parks - weekly

The monitoring of street cleansing is carried out by Highways Technicians on a small number of roads either randomly or where there are known issues. Street cleansing completion confirmations are received 3 times a day from the contractor and sample inspections are carried out as soon as possible after this has been completed.

Where cleansing is found to be below the required standard a rejection will be issued for the contractor to reattend; this will be reinspected and if not carried out or not to the correct standard, a financial penalty will be issued in the form of a contract default.

Cleansing issues are also brought to the attention of the contractor through the weekly contract meeting to raise with the crews, and supervisor / chargehand attendance is often requested to monitor and confirm completion of the works.

Questions from Members of the Council:

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

Will the Leader of the Council confirm that she is part of the LGA Conservative Group Executive that published the LGA Conservative Group manifesto in September 2023 which calls on the Government to remove caps on Council Tax?

Reply

Yes, but I've always been clear that removal of the cap comes hand in hand with a level playing field and we would have no problem at all if we got the same level of grant funding as neighbouring Labour Councils.

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

Can the Cabinet Member for Resources provide an update on the support being provided to residents with costs of living pressures?

Reply

I am grateful to Councillor Ward-Wilson and other Members for their interest in the Household Support Fund and wider activities that the Council is involved in to help and signpost to help households affected by costs of living pressures.

In line with commitments I have given, at every meeting of the FCS OSC I provide an update on costs of living activities and I know that Councillor Ward-Wilson and other Members have engaged with me on these issues on a more frequent basis. I welcome those discussions and input into decision making over the use of the funds we have available.

On 30 October 2023 I emailed to Members and Substitute Members of FCS OSC an update on the use of funds in Round 4 of the Household Support Fund during the first six months of the financial year and we are currently deciding how to deploy the remaining funds we have any adjustments we need to make.

6. From Councillor Hall to Councillor Leaf, Cabinet Member for Resources:

Can the Cabinet Member for Resources give us the details of action taken to survey for RAAC on properties owned by the Council and the outcome of those surveys?

Reply

There is public interest in the issue of RAAC in public buildings following the issues involving schools and reported on in the summer. At the recent meeting of the FCS OSC on 18 October 2023, an update was provided in the papers, which can be found at the weblink:

<https://democracy.bexley.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=155&MId=29963&Ver=4>

Visual surveys were undertaken on ten properties fitting the RAAC profile. A further intrusive survey was carried out on four of the properties. Seven are clear of RAAC. Two are deemed unlikely to have RAAC, but the presence of asbestos has prevented the certification of being clear of RAAC. This will need specialist attendance with an asbestos contractor to clear this off and this is being organised. One property identified with RAAC, in situ at roof level, but not dangerous. Further assessments are being undertaken to ascertain any remedial works that may be required on this site.

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

Could the Cabinet Member state how many tonnes of waste are collected from our streets, from kerbside collection, from Bexley litter bins, from fly tipping and from litter picked from the roads and pavements?

Reply

2022/23 tonnages:

Kerbside Residual Waste Collections 37,485.56 tonnes

Street Cleansing Overall Tonnages 1,383.22 tonnes of which 721.5 tonnes is litter generated from scheduled cleansing activities and litter bins.

Remaining 661.72 tonnes is street cleansing detritus.

Flytipping 335.10 tonnes (56 tonne of which via tipper)

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

Could the Cabinet Member confirm if we have made representations to Kent County Council in relation to the potential closure of the Civic Amenity site at Dartford Heath?

Reply

The Council has not made representations to KCC about this matter.

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

Can the Cabinet Member for Growth update us on the progress of the Welling Banking Hub?

Reply

Good progress has been made since the Hub was announced and premises secured. Planning permission was required at the premises (the former Barclays Bank branch) to enable relocation of external air conditioning units. Some final technical detail is being provided and The Banking Hub hope to open before Christmas.

10. From Councillor Carew to Councillor Seymour, Cabinet Member for Adults' Services:

Could the Cabinet Member for Adults' Services outline the aims of the Health and Wellbeing Strategy?

Reply

The overall aim of delivering the strategy is to improve the health and wellbeing of all Bexley residents, with a clear focus on reducing local health inequalities.

Determined by local need and data, the four key health and wellbeing priorities that the strategy focuses on are:

- **Priority 1:** Ageing Well (including frailty and dementia)
- **Priority 2:** Mental Health and Wellbeing
- **Priority 3:** Obesity
- **Priority 4:** Children and Young People

Under each priority area there are specific strategic aims, and an action plan is being developed with partners from across the local public sector partnership to put words into action.

11. From Councillor Asunramu to Councillor Newton, Cabinet Member for Education:

Could you please update us on when we will receive the results of the outstanding schools Council commissioned surveys of which schools have RAAC present?

Reply

The Leader of the Council, within her report to the Council Meeting on 8 November 2023 has confirmed that no RAAC has been found in any of the education establishments where the Council undertook independent specialist surveys.

This announcement has been made following the recent completion of the surveys that the Council undertook on 17 of our maintained and voluntary aided schools together with the Learning and Enterprise College Bexley (LECB)

For all other schools, as these are academies, any survey work has and is falling to the DfE who we are closely liaising with to understand any concerns that have or may arise on this matter. Currently the only school or public building within Bexley where there is a confirmed case of RAAC is Cleeve Park School which has resulted in them having to close a small part of their school. The school is receiving support from the DfE on the temporary classrooms and safety work required.

12. From Councillor Ferguson to Councillor Diment, Cabinet Member for Places:

Considering Bexley's fly-tipping and litter problem, will the Council return all bins removed from areas around the Borough for non-financial reasons separate to the funding received for a new allocation of bins?

Reply

There are currently 680 street litter bins across the Borough in town centres and on residential streets. The Council is making a capital investment of £232K in the Borough's litter bin infrastructure as part of a forthcoming litter bin refresh and modernisation project.

New locations for litter bins are being determined based on new criteria developed in partnership with the street cleansing contractor and other stakeholders. Litter bins will be sited in areas where they will be most effective such as high pedestrian footfall areas and litter hot spots. We have asked elected Members to provide suggested sites in their wards and we will consider these locations together with those that will be determined by officers and the contractor.

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

Can the Cabinet Member for Places advise the levels of funding received for transport schemes from the Mayor of London?

Reply

The Council has secured £1.644m of transport funding from the Mayor of London in the current financial year (2023/2024).

14. From Councillor O'Hare to Councillor Gower MBE, Cabinet Member for Communities and Housing:

Could the Cabinet Member update us on the action the Council and partners have taken to address crime and disorder issues around Abbey Wood station?

Reply

The Council's Community Safety Team led a co-ordinated response to address the complex issues and allow highways surveys to be undertaken sooner than planned. Cross-council and partner working included:

- work with the individuals to move on and seek housing support
- drug and alcohol intervention work
- Police 'Design Out Crime' advice
- Use of Anti-Social Behaviour laws to seek a Closure Order
- A clean-up operation of the site
- Police engagement and enforcement

The people that were rough sleeping were moved on, at the time, without a need for enforcement. However, a closure notice was issued on 20th September and within 48 hours legal and community safety presented at Bromley magistrates court and were successful in obtaining a 3-month closure order. This ensured the location was protected whilst work was carried out.

Whilst the closure was implemented, the Council and associated contractors carried out a mass clean-up of the area and made environmental changes to the location. Long term plans for the location are being informed by this experience.

Support services were offered to the individuals frequenting the location for substance misuse and housing advice throughout. The outcome was a cleaner, safer neighbourhood and reports were received from residents thanking the Council for the work and stating the difference it has made to their quality of life.

15. From Councillor Day to Councillor Seymour, Cabinet Member for Adults' Services:

Could the Cabinet Member advise how sure he is that the Government will provide further funding to Bexley in November once our discharge funds are exhausted?

Reply

- To date, there has been no announcement from the Department for Health and Social Care as to any additional funding to support safe discharge from hospital over the winter period.
- For the financial year 2023/24 Bexley Council has received £1.9m in discharge funding grant from DHSC. An additional £1.4m workforce grant was received in August of this year, which included support for discharge as one of the purposes of the funding and we have allocated £700k of the grant to that purpose, bringing the 23/24 total to £2.6m. In the financial year 2022/23 the Council received £4.2m in Discharge Funding from DHSC including a contribution from the South East London Integrated Care Board as supplementary funding to support discharge. The SEL ICB has so far not offered any funding for 2023/24. Consequently, the total available funding for 2023/24 is lower by £1.6m therefore significantly lower than the available funding for 2022/23.
- Discharge demand, however, has not abated and we continue to see all of our local hospitals facing high levels of activity at A&E departments, leading to many needing to be admitted for treatment and a consequent pressure to discharge to ensure bed spaces are available. This has been exacerbated by Industrial Action by medics and other health professionals.
- I am pleased to be able to report that our hospitals have praised our social care teams for their fantastic response and support, ensuring that our residents are discharged timely and safely to appropriate accommodation, usually back to their own home with a package of care. But of course, quicker discharge from hospital means that people move more quickly to social care support and inevitably are discharged with higher support needs, leading to cost pressures
- We have undertaken careful analysis of the discharge grant allocation against the actual cost of additional discharge activity and it is clear that the funding received does not cover the projected costs over the whole year. Indeed, our projections show that the funding will have been depleted by the end of November. Through the good offices of the Leader of the Council, we have been able to make direct representation to Helen Whately, the Care Minister and her senior civil servants and we have pressed the case for additional winter funding, both for Bexley and more generally for adult social care. We await the outcome of those representations.
- In addition our officers, along with their counterparts in the other South East London boroughs, have provided a similar analysis to South East London ICB to seek financial support similar to the support provided last year, whilst recognising that the ICB is itself facing financial challenges. The Chief Finance Officer of the ICB has agreed to meet with our officers to consider options in the round.
- Given the likelihood that we will run out of discharge grant, we have had to take immediate actions to manage the money we have. This has included standing down the most expensive pathways, such as 24hr 1:1 enhanced support to discharge home and reducing the number of contracted 'discharge-to-assess' beds in nursing homes from 15 at the beginning of the year to 7 currently. Beyond that, if the money runs out, we will have to return to pre-discharge funding levels of activity, which will inevitably mean a slowdown in discharges. Already we have reverted to assessing people in hospital if their long-term care needs are likely to mean permanent residential care. As a financially responsible Council, we cannot spend money we do not have.
- Our Director for Adult Social Care, Mr Rowbotham, has written to the Chief Executives of Valley Hospital and Lewisham and Greenwich NHS Trust to advise that current discharge levels are unlikely to be sustained without further funding.

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

Could the Cabinet Member please provide an update on the steps being taken by the Council with key stakeholders, to address the disgraceful illegal fly tipping at Ray Lamb Way?

Reply

Council officers have been working on solutions to this issue in collaboration with the landowners and local stakeholders. Numerous options including installation of a gatehouse were not considered to be viable, and therefore we are currently working on a solution involving CCTV and natural barriers.

We have recently received proposals for installation and maintenance of high-quality numberplate recognition CCTV cameras and are currently assessing the viability of this option. Alongside this proposal, we are also supporting the landowners with a bid for funding from Defra for improvements to the infrastructure of the area. Letters of support for this application have been provided by local businesses and the Leader of the Council.

If this funding bid is successful, the current plans are for realignment of the ditches and installation of a natural barrier such as an established hedgerow to prevent access by fly-tippers. New culverts have also been proposed to improve the flow of water.

17. From Councillor Chris Taylor to Councillor Seymour, Cabinet Member for Adults' Services:

Would the Cabinet Member for Adults' Services update us on the recent 'Bexley on your Radar Event'?

Reply

28th September 2023 saw our second 'Radar' event for those aged 16 years to 25 years. 35 providers of supported living, day opportunities, residential care, employment support, health and education and college courses were represented. Young people and their parents and carers could visit eye catching stalls and talk to the friendly staff. This year the event took place at Danson Youth Centre. The event was hosted by ASC who were on hand to provide personal advice to individuals and their families. We still are in the process of evaluating the event but these are some of the comments received from the 40 – 50 attendees -

- *Excellent event*
- *Very helpful, before visiting the event I always felt overwhelmed but I now have clarity*
- *I enjoyed the information and also experience for help, for my son*
- *Good Information and more helpful things that I am taking home*
- *Very useful information and friendly desk staff*

18. From Councillor Reader to Councillor Munur, Cabinet Member for Growth:

Can the Cabinet Member for Growth lay out the plans for the £1.3m secured from the UKSPF to support local businesses?

Reply

The table below describes the expenditure of the Supporting Local Business element of the UKSPF

Supporting Local Business (SLB) Project Name	Overall Project Budget
Business support delivered on group basis via webinars and face to face	£100,000
Match funded grants for licensing/qualification to upskill staff	£25,000
Employed Business Advisor to provide bespoke 121 advice	£115,000
Retail & Hospitality sector advice service	£75,000
Start-up support programme within incubator space	£25,000
Business Survey	£8,287
TOTAL	£348,287

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

Will the Leader of the Council tell us whether she believes the Council should ask the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to commission an update of their "Local Government Finance Review – London Borough of Bexley" report of December 2021, to allow independent assessment on whether the Council has successfully implemented the recommendations within the report?

Reply

Given the first key finding of the report states 'The political leadership of the Council has demonstrated that it understands the financial challenges facing the organisation and their commitment to managing the medium-term financial resilience of the organisation' I am sure that Members will be well placed to review progress and, in addition to our own General Purposes/Audit team, we know that our external auditors will also be tracking our delivery.

20. From Councillor Gill to Councillor Diment, Cabinet Member for Places:

Could the Cabinet Member please state the progress to introducing a trial of 1-hour free parking in Mill Road Car Park, Northumberland Heath?

Reply

Officers are in the process of reviewing all parking tariffs to ensure the correct tariff and tariff sets are in place.

Officers are also considering the impact any changes would have on the local area and any possible displacement issues. Considerations include why a car park might be recommended for 1 hour's free parking over others within the Borough, would there be displacement issues from other car parks or on street parking to the free car park, causing a problem with demand on the number of parking spaces at this facility.

The final factor to consider is the income generated from parking in car parks and the running costs that need to be covered. Although car parks generate an income to the Council from which any profit is invested back into the road network, there are running costs that need to be covered. Costs such as electricity rates, signs and lines maintenance and business rates would also still need to be covered with the reduced income to the Council.

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

Would the Cabinet Member for Places tell us what happens to each of the recycling waste streams collected from homes in Bexley?

Reply

1. Non-recyclable waste collected in the green bins is taken to the incinerator in Belvedere for disposal. The incinerator turns the Borough's waste into energy to generate electricity and recovers the by-products from the energy from waste process to produce aggregate and construction materials. It also diverts waste from landfill (saving c.200kg of carbon dioxide equivalent per tonne of waste diverted).
2. Food Waste is processed at a Biogen anaerobic digestion plant in Hertfordshire. The material is broken down in the absence of oxygen in a sealed, oxygen-free tank called an anaerobic digester. The biogas naturally created in the sealed tanks is used as a fuel in a CHP (combined heat and power) unit to generate renewable energy i.e. electricity and heat. What's left from the process is a nutrient rich biofertiliser which is pasteurised to kill any pathogens and then stored in large covered tanks ready to be applied twice a year on farmland in place of fossil fuel derived fertilisers.
3. Paper/cardboard – This material is taken to Palm Paper Recycling Ltd in Norfolk for processing and is recycled into different paper products such as newsprint and corrugated paper and other packaging products.
4. Plastic/Cans/Glass- This material up until recently was being taken to a materials recycling facility (MRF) in Hertfordshire. A MRF is a specialized plant that receives, separates and prepares recyclable materials for marketing to end-user manufacturers. On 1st September the Council started a contract with a MRF within the Boundary of Bexley Borough. The N+P contract will bring reductions in transport costs and carbon emissions and enable the Council to receive higher prices for the different types of plastic which will reduce the overall cost per tonne of the material going forward.
5. Garden Waste – This material is taken to a Biogen composting site in Swanley and is delivered directly by the Council's fleet of collection vehicles. The material is recycled through windrow composting where the material can break down in the presence of oxygen. The end product is compost that can be applied in a range of end uses, within gardens, on brownfield sites, landscaping and full scale agriculture.

22. From Councillor Reader to Councillor Diment, Cabinet Member for Places:

Can the Cabinet Member for Places update Members on progress with the 2023/24 road maintenance programme?

Reply

Bexley has set aside £3.9m Capital Funding for the rolling programme of road and footway resurfacing and officers have been working through the priority list of roads needing treatment.

So far 19 roads have already been treated (£1,27m), 4 roads are being treated (£250k), and 5 more are already programmed to be treated this year (£430k). In addition, large patches of road have been treated to resolve very localised issues, with £489k worth of work to date and an additional £750k expected to be completed by the end of the year. (Total: £3.19m)

There are a few schemes on hold (£473k) pending utility works to be done before the new surface is laid, and a reserve list is held to the value of around £1.45m which will start to be

drawn down to treat as many roads as possible.

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

Will the Leader of the Council confirm how many individuals elected as a London Borough of Bexley Councillor since May 2018 does she believe have been issued a fixed penalty notice for breaches of Covid-19 regulations?

Reply

I would not have that information.

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

Will the Cabinet Member confirm which schemes within the current capital programme are anticipated to experience overspends?

Reply

Details of the Capital Programme and expenditure on schemes are published as part of the Budget Monitoring, which is regularly circulated to Members and available for debate and discussion at Public Cabinet. As colleagues know, scrutiny is something that should happen 24/7 and if Councillor Francis or other Members have questions or enquiries about specific schemes and projects in the Capital Programme they are welcome to contact me and the relevant Cabinet Member.

On the wider issue of Budget Monitoring, I am taking an interest in the ongoing work of the FCS OSC Sub-Group on this and looking forward to their report and recommendations.

25. From Councillor Jackson to Councillor Diment, Cabinet Member for Places:

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

Reply

Total number of missed collections:

The overall number of missed bins has decreased by over 50% since the beginning of the contract and is currently at 144 per 100,000 collections in September 23. The monthly target for missed bins for 2023 is 70 per 100,000 collections.

Bin placement:

A bin placement service standard document with visuals has been issued to Countrystyle and they have circulated to staff. The new service standard document will provide more clarity on the standards expected from Countrystyle's staff.

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

Can the Cabinet Member for Places tell us what progress is being made in the roll-out programme for new street waste bins?

Reply

The Environmental Services Team are in a process of procuring the litter bins for this project. The full implementation of the project from the delivery to the installation will be delivered in stages and will take up to 18 months.

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

Will the Leader of the Council confirm which schemes within the current capital programme have experienced tender processes where a contractor was unable to be appointed and the reasons for this?

Reply

The Riverside Gardens project was procured during 2022 and we were unable to award as all bids were over budget. However, this project was re-procured on a modified specification this year and we are currently on the cusp of awarding contract.

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

Will the Cabinet Member confirm how many residents have requested to opt out of Council Tax reminders received by text message and email?

Reply

I am grateful for the question, which follows discussions on this matter at recent FCS OSC meetings. The reminders have been introduced in an attempt to reduce the risk of direct debit failures and this is a process that is used by other organisations.

There has been a small reduction in the monthly DD failure rate since implementation, which suggests the messaging is likely having some impact. August DD failure rate was 1.13% (compared to 1.30% in 2022) and September failure rate was 1.26% (compared to 1.39% in 2022). Although the change looks relatively small, the additional postage costs involved when a DD fails (letter must be issued to residents to advise of the rejection) and the associated manual administrative tasks needed on a failed DD mean that any improvement is welcomed. This messaging service is being provided at no additional cost to the Council.

Up to 31st October 2023, 9 residents have contacted to request they no longer receive these messages. To put this into context, in October 2023, a total of 51,740 residents received an email or text, which represents 68% of the total residents who pay by Direct Debit. Less than 0.02% of residents have requested that the messages be stopped for their account. We continue to keep this measure under review and I welcome feedback on it.

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

Will the Cabinet Member for Children's Services please update us on Bexley's recent Corporate Parenting Week?

Reply

This year the Council marked its 6th annual corporate parenting week from 9th October to 13th October. The launch and activities that followed continue to demonstrate the Council's deep commitment to children in our care, and young adults leaving our care.

As Corporate Parents, it is the collective responsibility of Bexley and its partner agencies to provide support, care and protection for children who are in our care as well as those young adults leaving our care. The week aimed to raise awareness of this, and created opportunities for officers, Councillors, partner agencies and local business to work together to raise awareness and gather additional support.

Each year, Children's Services aim to develop Corporate Parenting Week in new and meaningful ways with our support. Some of the achievements from this year's week include:

- Launching the week with a newly appointed Young Director, Helal Alkozai, who is a Bexley young adult leaving our care, and in keeping with our drive to promote equality and diversity – also represents our community of young people seeking asylum in the UK following experience of war and trauma in their home countries. Helal is our first male appointee, with previous young directors having been predominantly female or non-binary. Helal is proving to be a great role model for our young people, and he has represented Bexley throughout corporate parenting week in a range of activities.
- Targeted Youth provided additional support this year to help deliver a football event with a difference, bringing together young people in our care with key adults from social care, targeted youth and key workers from some of our residential care providers. This was about promoting positive relationships between young people and adults who support them, developed on pitch in an inclusive 5-a-side match, and followed with a special bubble football activity which created lots of laughter, and shaped positive memories. The player of the match, Joanne Jobson was superb, playing a quick, fearless and defensive game amidst predominantly male players.
- I was pleased to see the annual awards event for children in our care take place with a great turn out of children and their carers, as well as good attendance from officers and Councillors. The virtual school were challenged to deliver a cost neutral event, and this meant significant networking with sponsors and a range of companies who offered services for free or donated goods, with some of these donations facilitated by Councillors. This has been a real success, with the event costs (£6,750) fully covered by sponsorship, donations and in-kind support, and a small contribution of £150 met through Pupil Premium Plus Grant funding.

The various events, and daily stall in the Atrium has helped widely promote our corporate parenting priorities and gathered pledges of support in relation to fostering, participation activities, independent visiting and raised awareness of needs during the Christmas season which will soon be upon us, and where we want our children in care and young adults leaving our care to benefit from additional support.

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

Will the Cabinet Member for Children's Services please tell us the latest situation regarding foster carer recruitment?

Reply

We currently have 73 fostering households, many of whom will be caring for more than one young person and 23 Host and Support households. Our Host and Support carers provide support to our young people aged 16 to 25 with developing independence skills to prepare them for the transition to independent living. This is a preferred provision given that our young people can remain in a family home environment, and we are able to maintain oversight of these placements.

Since the establishment of a dedicated Fostering Recruitment and Assessment Team in October 2021, there has been a notable improvement in the recruitment of foster carers. There is a streamlined process in place to ensure enquiries are responded to efficiently, that the assessment process is seamless and that all applicants from enquiry to approval are kept within a 6-month timeframe. The quality and timeliness of the assessments has significantly improved.

Our Fostering Together initiative has proved a real asset in both recruitment and retention by demonstrating our continued commitment to wrap around support for our foster carers.

Since 1 April 2023, we have recruited 5 fostering households and 7 Host and Support providers. By end of year (March 2024) we are expecting to have recruited a further 7 fostering households and 3 Host and Support Providers. I am pleased to say that this is an improvement to the previous two years when Covid negatively impacted recruitment.

But, we are determined to increase further our in-house provision and are currently undertaking an extensive recruitment campaign to ensure that we continue to increase the number of our inhouse foster carers. The recruitment activities we are undertaking include the increased use of social media and our monthly fostering newsletter which is reaching approximately 700 people.

Our hard working and dedicated Fostering Recruitment team has also been spending a vast amount of time out in the community, building relationships and ensuring that Bexley Fostering is very visible, and they have developed very positive relationships with church communities who are supporting us with their own advertising activities and are allowing us to use their venues for information events, coffee mornings and other recruitment events.

Finally, we are currently undertaking a review of the Fostering allowances with a view of ensuring we are in line with other Local Authorities. This will not only ensure that we continue to retain our foster carers but will also attract new ones.

31. From Councillor Ball to Councillor Diment, Cabinet Member for Places:

Could the Cabinet Member update us on the spending this financial year 23/24 on pothole repairs?

Reply

Potholes are not recorded separately from other highway defects, but they are the most common form of minor repair to our carriageways.

If we look at these data for minor carriageway repairs between April and September, we have made 263 repairs (up 83 repairs / up 46% on the same period last year) either as an individual repair or as a larger area picking up a cluster of defects. Including all the traffic controls required to facilitate these works, we have spent £448k (down £130k / down 23% on the same period last year).

32. From Councillor Ball to Councillor Diment, Cabinet Member for Places:

Could the Cabinet Member outline the monitoring of the weed spraying schedule for the Borough?

Reply

Weed spraying is carried out as 3 applications per year (usually commencing in April, June and September).

Completions are received when each of the 18 cells has been attended to which are forwarded to Highways Technicians to monitor the effectiveness of the weed spraying whilst carrying out

their other duties. Weeds should show evidence of dieback 7-14 days following application with dead weed being removed on the next scheduled 3 weekly cleansing cycle. For areas not showing dieback the contractor is reinstructed to re-attend up to 4 weeks after application.

33. From Councillor O'Hare to Councillor Read, Cabinet Member for Children's Services:

Will the Cabinet Member for Children's Services please tell us how the current number of children in the care of Bexley compares with this time last year?

Reply

Bexley has a lower rate of children in our care than both England and statutory neighbours, this remains the case despite increasing pressures on Children's Social Care following the Covid pandemic. Our Children's Services have a relentless focus on prevention and ensuring that families are supported to be able to care for their children. Where this is not possible within the immediate family to look at support within their extended family. Of course, this is not always possible and in such circumstances we have a strong community of dedicated foster carers who are our first call for support to allow children to remain in their local community and in a family environment. In saying this we still need more foster carers and are actively recruiting. As at October 2022 there were 263 children and as at 1st November 2023 there were 277 children in our care.

34. From Councillor Chris Taylor to Councillor Gower MBE, Cabinet Member for Communities and Housing:

Given the events in Israel and Gaza, can the Cabinet Member reassure residents of the Council's support at this time - both in terms of community cohesion and reporting of Hate Crimes?

Reply

Nationally there has been and increase in antisemitism and Islamophobia over the last three weeks. The Community Security Trust has recorded the highest ever number of antisemitic incidents across this 17-day period. However, locally in Bexley we have not experienced the same significant rise in hate crime reports * or any concerning events. We have engaged with faith leaders and the Council has sent communications offering reassurance and information about specific support available in the event of Islamophobic and anti-Semitic abuse. Information about supporting victims of hate crime has been dispersed to the Bexley Hate Crime Working Group and faith groups, namely Tell MAMA (leading anti-Muslim hate charity) and Community Security Trust (leading anti-Semitic hate charity), as well as an offer of resources. The Bexley Community Safety Partnership has shared on social media a message signposting specialist support services for victims of anti-faith hate crimes.

The Council has also sent a reminder of Stop Hate UK service to internal staff and members. The service Stop Hate UK has been recommissioned by the Council for a second year and is available 24/7 to support victims of hate and hate crime, and Stop Hate UK have established connections with local services so they are able to directly refer to further support, such as the Victim Support Bobby Van for home security improvements. Our Community Safety Team is also regularly in touch with the interfaith forum offering training and guidance on reporting and tackling Hate Crime. The Interfaith Forum held its awards ceremony on 15th November. I thank the forum for their work on this and this was a great occasion to celebrate our community togetherness in Bexley.

*As at 27 October 2023

35. From Councillor Perfect to Councillor Leaf, Cabinet Member for Resources:

Could you outline what surveys have been undertaken to determine if any of the buildings owned by the Council have been affected by RAAC?

Reply

There is public interest in the issue of RAAC in public buildings following the issues involving schools and reported on in the summer. At the recent meeting of the FCS OSC on 18 October 2023 an update was provided in the papers, which can be found at the weblink:

<https://democracy.bexley.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=155&MId=29963&Ver=4>

Visual surveys were undertaken on ten properties fitting the RAAC profile. A further intrusive survey was carried out on four of the properties. Seven are clear of RAAC.

Two are deemed unlikely to have RAAC, but the presence of asbestos has prevented the certification of being clear of RAAC. This will need specialist attendance with an asbestos contractor to clear this off and this is being organised.

One property identified with RAAC, in situ at roof level, but not dangerous. Further assessments are being undertaken to ascertain any remedial works that may be required on this site.

36. From Councillor Asunramu to Councillor Newton, Cabinet Member for Education:

Could the Cabinet Member tell us the latest figures we have for attendance across the Borough for each level of education (primary, secondary)?

Reply

The latest available figures are for the 22/23 academic year.

Bexley – Secondary – 91.6%, Primary – 93.7%, Special – 87.2%, PRU – 69.8%

National – Secondary – 93.7%, Primary – 91.2%, Special – 86.6%, PRU – 60.2%

We are engaging with DfE attendance lead. Education Welfare Service are working directly with schools providing advice to schools and following legal routes where necessary to ensure attendance rates are improved. Four Secondary Schools, which are all Academies, do not commission the Bexley Education Welfare Service therefore it can be challenging for the Council to have an impact on the attendance rates in these schools.

The Council continues to look at ways to strengthen this area of work and these include a new subgroup within the Strategic Education Partnership looking at behaviour, safeguarding and attendance issues and a re-structure within the Education Service which will further ensure closer and rigorous working within the team on this matter.

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

Could you please outline what the Council is doing to support teachers and ensure that there is no child with undiagnosed SEN within our schools?

Reply

To support our schools, we have rolled out the Quality First Teaching (QFT) and SEN support Toolkit, with the three toolkits, that our schools and settings have received training on, targeting our Early Years, School Age and Post 16 pupils. The toolkit is designed to guide teachers and support staff to meet the needs of the children within their class/school. It is broken down into

different areas of SEND need and lists strategies that may be used to meet these needs taking class teachers through a process of applying strategies to meet the needs of the child or young person, to completing an early identification of need to start discussions with the SENCo and through to completing an SEN Support plan involving parent/carer, the child and key school staff. Schools have also been provided with pre-recorded training on the use of the toolkit, to share with any new staff as they start, with additional training opportunities provided periodically to our schools.

In addition to the toolkit, officers have regular early intervention planning meetings with schools where a multi-disciplinary team works with them to problem solve, look at strategies and advise on the next steps they should take to assist their pupils, with recommendations for next steps. Further work also takes place to upskill SENCo's to allow them to take these skills back into the school and disseminate to staff. This includes a SENCo mentoring programme, termly SENCo forums and other specific training opportunities.

38. From Councillor Asunramu to Councillor Read, Cabinet Member for Children's Services:

Could the Cabinet Member state the number of care experienced children and young people we currently have in the Criminal Justice System?

Reply

The Youth Justice Service currently works with 5 children who are in our care as well as one care leaver. In addition, the service supports 2 children who are in the care of other local authorities placed in Bexley.

39. From Councillor Perfect to Councillor Newton, Cabinet Member for Education:

Could you please update us on the current exclusion rates within the Borough and outline the work the Council is doing to eradicate those numbers and move towards becoming a no exclusions Borough?

Reply

There have been 19 permanent exclusions so far this academic year with the main reason being continuous disruptive behaviour. There have been 474 suspensions (305 -Secondary, 36- Primary, 33 – Special /PRU). The main reason for suspension is also continuous disruptive behaviour. The Local Authority have restructured the inclusion team to build capacity so that more direct support can be provided to schools. A meeting is due to be convened with secondary head teachers to address challenges and focus on approaches to continue to deliver the work towards the no need to exclude ambition.

40. From Councillor Asunramu to Councillor Read, Cabinet Member for Children's Services:

Can we get an update on how the Council is implementing the recommendations and initiatives in the Government's latest Children's Social Care Implementation Strategy?

Reply

As yet there have been no recommendations made by the Government. However, we are following the progress of the Implementation Group and will review any recommendations and apply them when made.

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

As Bexley already has a £7m overspend which looks set to continue rising, what is the projected figure by the end of the financial year and how will it be addressed?

Reply

I am grateful for the question and welcome the interest taken in the Budget Monitoring Reports. Budget Monitoring Reports are circulated to Members regularly and are also available for debate and discussion at Public Cabinet. Moreover, in line with our 24/7 approach to scrutiny, Members are welcome to contact me and the relevant Cabinet Member at any time about respective budget lines and services. These reports analyse current and expected spend in the respective service areas along with other assumptions, and the report presents a forecast position based on this. Forecasts do vary throughout the year for various reasons, which are covered in the reports. Many other local authorities in London and across the country are also forecasting overspend positions for the current financial year.

On the wider issue of Budget Monitoring, I am taking an interest in the ongoing work of the FCS OSC Sub-Group on this and looking forward to their report and recommendations.

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

With Climate Change having more of an effect, what measures does Bexley have in place for dealing with extreme weather conditions and how they affect residents?

Reply

To address the issues the Council has in place the following:

Flood Plan: This highlights all of the at risk areas within the Borough and sets out response procedures.

Severe Weather Plan: This plan covers extreme weather conditions, and the Council's operational response.

We also have a communications strategy which responds to the different levels of alert, thereby warning and informing our residents of any potential issues and provides advice as required.

We also have a 24 hour rota to respond to any operational emergencies should they occur without prior warning.

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

Please confirm whether Bexley Council Homeless Service has already or will be imminently taking part in this year's rough sleeper count which is carried out by Councils across London to collect an annual picture of rough sleeping in each borough?

Reply

Yes, Bexley Council will take part in this year's rough sleeper count from the night of 23rd November to the morning of 24th November. That is the date agreed with DLUHC and Homeless Link for the street count to take place on a single night in south-east London.

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

Could the Cabinet Member join me in placing on the record the dissatisfaction at the length of time taken by some of the Borough's largest housing providers to respond to enquiries or respond to residents' urgent housing issues?

Reply

Along with all Members, I expect our local housing providers to deal promptly and efficiently with issues raised by their tenants and I regularly highlight cases of concern to them in my capacity as Cabinet Member. Performance is also discussed at the Strategic Housing Board which meets four times a year. Tenant satisfaction should be at the heart of all they do and I am pleased the government has taken new legislative action to hold them to account.

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

What assessment has been made on the Council's financial position if Kent County Council use a Sec114 notice which will effectively be declaring municipal bankruptcy?

Reply

I am not aware that Kent CC have issued a S114 notice.

46. From Councillor Borella to Councillor Leaf, Cabinet Member for Resources:

With the latest budget monitoring report showing that £2.4m of the expected £5.5m from the 2022 deep dive mitigations will not be delivered, what is the impact on the Council's financial position?

Reply

I am grateful for the question and welcome the interest taken in the Budget Monitoring Reports. Councillor Borella is aware that the financial position we are in and our reserves position is stronger than it would be under Labour, for all the reasons I have given in previous exchanges.

Details of the variations in forecast from budget are presented in the Budget Monitoring Reports. As Councillor Borella is aware, there are processes in place to monitor spending and the cumulative impacts of overspends and underspends across various budget lines are considered corporately and the net position is resolved in accordance with our financial procedures. We set aside corporate contingency to be utilised if necessary and we also hold reserves should they be required to cover overspends. This is detailed in the Budget Monitoring Reports and Councillor Borella or any other Member is welcome to raise queries directly with me and the relevant Cabinet Member if there are specific questions about budget lines and deep dive mitigations, in line with our 24/7 approach to scrutiny.

On the wider issue of Budget Monitoring, I am taking an interest in the ongoing work of the FCS OSC Sub-Group on this and looking forward to their report and recommendations.

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

With the existing selective licensing area expiring on 31 August, what is the reason for the for much delayed selective licensing consultation process?

Reply

The selective licensing scheme documents have been drafted and checked over by legal. They were also reviewed by counsel to ensure that they could stand up to scrutiny and any challenge. The consultation documents will be available on the website for people to review. Before they can be added to the website the documents need to be made accessible and this has taken longer than expected. We anticipate that the consultation will start at some point this month or early December and will run for a minimum of 10 weeks.

48. From Councillor Amaning to Councillor Seymour, Cabinet Member for Adults' Services:

Could the Cabinet Member comment if there is a considered and sensitive way that data on people taking their life could be reported to the relevant authorities to aid a reduction in suicide and self-harm?

Reply

Thrive LDN is the regional lead for suicide prevention in London on behalf of NHS England. They have developed a real-time surveillance system which the Council, Police, and other public services update to identify and track suspected and confirmed suicides. The Bexley Public Health Team access and use this information to inform local suicide audits and to monitor trends over time. This information is shared in an appropriate way at the Bexley Suicide Prevention Partnership.

The Public Health Team also monitor safeguarding adult referrals and local intelligence from partners to ensure there is a full picture on the number of suicides in the Borough.

49. From Councillor Amaning to Councillor Gower MBE, Cabinet Member for Communities and Housing:

Could the Cabinet Member confirm what discussions have been had with the Bexley Borough Superintendent on practicing effective stop and search in Bexley that does not discriminate unfairly against young black boys?

Reply

The Council is in continuous discussions with the Bexley Borough Superintendent and his senior management team about practicing effective 'Stop and Search' in Bexley that does not discriminate.

We have discussed Baroness Casey's call for a 'fundamental reset' of the use of Stop and Search and the subsequent actions set out in the New Met for London plan; including the development of a Stop and Search Charter.

Whilst the consultation phase of the Charter has now concluded, Superintendent Corbin has informed me that there will be further opportunities for engagement and approval by community representatives before it is formally adopted.

One of the themes coming out of this consultation has been the disproportionate use of 'Stop and Search' directed at people who are Black and Asian. In fact, the Met's statistics for Bexley confirm that you are three times more likely to be stopped and searched if you are Black (2.9 times)* or Asian (3.1)*. Superintendent Corbin has informed us that he expects the new Charter to focus heavily on disproportionate use of 'Stop and Search' being directed at individuals who are Black and Asian.

There has been some good work achieved by the Overview and Community Sub Group looking into disproportionality in the Youth Justice System, but it is also a topic for discussion with Police colleagues at Youth Justice Board and the Community Safety Partnership. Performance relating

to 'Stop and Search' is continually monitored and shared at the Community Safety Partnership quarterly, for which I am Chairman. This includes issues relating to disproportionality.

A key priority locally for Superintendent Corbin is to make sure young people are better represented at the local Stop and Search Panel.

The other priority, given that Bexley's positive outcome rate is at 24.9%*, is to improve Bexley Police's precision. Superintendent Corbin is very clear that supervisors have a duty under the Codes of Practice to ensure that officers conduct 'Stop and Search' lawfully and fairly.

On a positive note, the Southeast BCU has a very effective Stop and Search workshop that we as a partnership offer to local youth settings. We have most recently had interest from Christ the King college. The workshop has two key outcomes, to inform young people of their rights and also, to help them better understand police decision making and consequences in real time.

We continue to liaise regularly about the issue and the development of the Stop and Search Charter.

**Met Data as of August 2023*

50. From Councillor Amaning to Councillor Seymour, Cabinet Member for Adults' Services:

Has the Council made an assessment on the effect that the closure of the BCU life skills centre in Bexleyheath will have on residents with mental health issues?

Reply

A Mental Health Commissioner met with a representative from BCU shortly after receiving this information to discuss the situation and gather information to understand the impact of closure and any associated risks. It was established that an intended closure date for the service had been set for 31st August 2023, subject to a final decision from their board members. At that time approximately 20 clients were in receipt of longer-term 1-2-1 counselling from BCU. The reason for closure was financially driven relating to reduced fundraising capacity and the general tightening of eligibility criteria being applied to their main recent funder, 'Trust for London'. BCU were no longer able to meet their funding criteria and had last received a grant from TFL in January 2020. In addition to this, the church that they operated from had started to charge rent in the region of £400 per month, which was unaffordable and two long-standing and experienced volunteers had stepped down.

This situation was discussed at the Bexley Mental Health and Wellbeing Partnership Board with the outcome being that Mind in Bexley (current NHS contracted Talking Therapies and Mental Health Recovery and Employment Service provider) would offer an assessment of need to all current BCU clients. Following assessment and subject to eligibility, an offer of Talking Therapy (counselling / CBT etc), Recovery College/Employment/IPS support, or a combination options, could be offered. This offer was communicated to BCU on 11th August along with contact details for Mind in Bexley and confirmation that LBB/ICB could not offer any financial support.