

REIGATE AND BANSTEAD BOROUGH COUNCIL

COUNCIL: 11 APRIL 2019

Questions by Members

| No. | Question by: | To be answered by: | Subject |
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| 1. | Councillor M.J. Selby | Councillor M.A. Brunt, Leader of the Council <i>The Leader nominated Cllr G.J. Knight, Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Housing and Benefits, to respond.</i> | Social Media |
| 2. | Councillor H. Brown | Councillor G.J. Knight, Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Housing and Benefits | Empty Homes |
| 3. | Councillor H. Brown | Councillor R.H. Ashford, Executive Member for Leisure and Wellbeing. Written Response | Children's Centres |
| 4. | Councillor J.C.S. Essex | Councillor K. Foreman, Executive Member for Planning Policy | National Planning Policy Framework (Housing Numbers) |

Council Meeting: 11 April 2019

Councillor M.J. Selby will ask the **Leader of the Council, Councillor M.A. Brunt** the following question:

Question: Social Media

Does the Leader of the Council agree that it would be wise for the Council not to patronise social media platforms i.e. Facebook and Twitter in the light of recent worldwide events for fear of bringing the Council into disrepute when the Council has a perfectly good website of its own?

(The Leader nominated Cllr G.J. Knight, Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Housing and Benefits, to respond.)

Response / Observations:

Thank you to Cllr Selby for his question.

The simple answer to your question is no we don't agree with you that it would be wise for the council to not patronise social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter especially at this time when residents are taking more and more of their news from social media platforms.

As a test of this, prior to this meeting, we posed this question to local residents and asked them what their thoughts were on how helpful and effective they found it to have the council and their local councillors active on social media. From this we gained some indicative feedback, for example:

- *“fast and useful way of communicating a local issue”*
- *“surely it's a good thing to get more people involved in local issues”*
- *“if it's used to honestly engage with people then it's great”*
- *“engaging with locals via social media is to be applauded”*

Like all forms of communication, it has to be used appropriately, managed well, honest in its content, timely and be used alongside a range of communication.

It is worth noting that statistics show us that 67% of the UK population are active on social media today, so for us not to be actively involved in and leading conversations on social media risks the voice of the council being missing for the conversations our residents are engaged in and our silence be taken as a view that we don't care.

We recognise that the social media can be an uncomfortable and scary place for some residents and we will continue to support all councillors with training and coaching over the next year.

Council Meeting: 11 April 2019

Councillor H. Brown will ask the **Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Housing and Benefits, Councillor G.J. Knight** the following question:

Question: Empty Homes

On April 1 the government ruled that 100% extra council tax can be charged on long term empty homes. Is the council committing to that and could you provide information on the number of properties empty for over six months, the number of empty offices and the number of empty spaces above shops?

Response / Observations:

The council already applies a charge of an extra 50% to properties which have been empty for over two years. On 18th April The Executive will be considering the adoption a policy to increase this additional charge to 100% in line with the new legislation, and increasing the additional charge to 200% where the property has been empty for over five years.

The increase in the Council Tax charge is to incentivise owners to bring their properties back into use, and help to address our housing shortage.

The current number of domestic properties that have been empty for over six months is 401 at 9th April. This includes all properties that have been empty for at least 6 months, and includes 60 which are classed as “long term empty” and are already paying the 50% additional council tax premium. It is only the long term empty properties that will attract the 100% premium on council tax.

There were 123 empty offices or business premises at 9th April, and 14 empty flats situated above retail outlets.

Council Meeting: 11 April 2019

Councillor H. Brown will ask the **Executive Member for Leisure and Wellbeing, Councillor R.H. Ashford**, the following question:

Question: Children's Centre

Council pledged to support children's centres a year ago. But Centres are closing with jobs lost. Could you confirm what support has been provided?

Response / Observations

The Borough has been very aware that Surrey County Council's restructuring of Sure Start Children's Centres to create new Family Centres, will have a direct impact on our residents.

Therefore, since our 2018 annual council meeting we have been working together with the Children's Centres to try to find a solution which brings about the very best outcomes for the Borough's residents.

Previously there were eight physical places providing Children's Centre services to Reigate & Banstead's residents. As one of those is located in Tandridge it will now become part of the restructure in that Borough. From the remaining seven centres, three of the schools that previously delivered Children's Centre services have indicated to the County that they no longer wish to be involved in shaping the delivery of services in the Borough.

The four remaining service providers are actively working on schemes, either singly or together, to deliver services to the County's newly re-branded Family Centres in our Borough. Although Reigate and Banstead Borough Council has no remit to interfere in the County's budget proposals, we have been meeting regularly with the remaining providers and County officers.

Over the coming weeks we will continue to engage with all parties as Surrey's plans are finalised. This will be to ensure that our complimentary services, such as the Family Support Team, Housing, Benefits, Community Development and Community Safety, are linked in with the new role of the Family Centres. In so doing, we want to make sure that the provision of targeted services is reaching those who most need it, wherever they are based in our Borough.

We have also started conversations with other partners, including those from health and the third sector. Our aim is to look at how we might help enable the ongoing provision of some of the universal services that will no longer be provided from the new Family Centres.

Although physically, some of the present centres will no longer exist, we believe there are opportunities to continue delivery of services across different venues and buildings that already exist in our communities.

We are very aware that some families are worried about this issue but we would like to reassure them that the Borough Council has and will continue to work with Surrey County Council, Family Centre providers and other community partners to ensure a smooth transition to the new service model over the next few months.

ENDS.

Council Meeting: 11 April 2019

Councillor J.C.S. Essex will ask the **Executive Member for Planning Policy, Councillor K. Foreman** the following question:

Question: National Planning Policy Framework (Housing Numbers)

I understand that the government has set out new planning rules in the revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) released last year, and that this would mean our housing numbers could change from this July, potentially almost doubling the our local housing target. If this is accepted it will mean that the land needed to be reserved before Green Belt is released for development at least doubles overnight - so identified Green Belt sites around Redhill, Merstham and Reigate may then be rapidly released for housing and more Greenbelt, such as around Redhill Aerodrome will be once again under threat if the council accepts such a higher rate of housebuilding into the future.

The Campaign for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE) describe this change as, "a speculative developers' charter and will lead to the death of the plan-led system."

Please confirm what the Council understands these changes will mean for us, and in particular whether the Council proposes to accept the higher target proposed by the government (called the Objectively Assessed Need).

Response / Observations:

Firstly, let me just say that as a Council, we have had concerns with the new approach from the outset when the Government first consulted on it last year. We lobbied the Government extensively and robustly – both individually and as a collective voice with our Surrey neighbours – from the very outset to stress the potential consequences of the substantial new housing requirements on our area and call for a more carefully considered approach.

We also engaged with our Local MPs and we are continuing to do so in order to ensure that the challenges facing Green Belt areas such as ours are recognised and acknowledged. We have not therefore accepted the higher housing target and are continuing to fight it.

However it is important that we understand and prepare for the challenges that it presents and this is what we have been doing. It is true that in the short term, from July, it could increase pressure for development of greenfield sites outside the urban

area and result in an increase in speculative applications in this regard. I am sure these planning applications will be resisted as robustly as is possible.

So, whilst we continue to fight against the new methodology and housing need figure it presents, we also have the option to prepare a new strategic plan to argue for a lower housing number that is more appropriate to our Borough and community. We have already started this work and it is important that we focus our efforts and resources on working to replace our Core Strategy with a new Plan. Ensuring we have an up to date plan with a sustainable housing need figure within it will be a priority for this Portfolio over the coming years.