



Q & A with Croydon's Mayor, Jason Perry

via Zoom

Tuesday, 10 January 2023

7pm – 8.30pm

Present: Elizabeth Ash (Chair), Tahirish Abbasi, Chris Adams, Dominique Andrushkiv, Damien Austin, Ken Baker, Paul Beaumont, Pierre Beyne, Cllr Margaret Bird, Sharon Burke, Kenneth Chare, John Clarke, Rebecca Cooper, Karen Cornelius, Catherine Crawford-Bond, Beverley Davies, Kosta Dexiades, Michelle Dumont, Sue Eardley, Colin Etheridge, Melanie Felten, Natalie Fernandez, Beverley Foulkes-Jones, Peter Francis, Bridget Galloway, Ramesh Gandhi, Rev Gitau, Libby Hamilton, Carole Hembest, Michael Hembest, Michael Hennessy, Tony Hawker, Will Hoyles, Rhi Hughes (SWLLC), Trevor Jones, Carolyn Kellaris, Cllr Ola Kolade, Ian Leggatt, Henry Lelen, Ian Leonard, Clive Locke, Ian Marvin, Mike McConnell, Gerry Meredith-Smith, Jane Mitchell, Khaleel Miyan, Linda Morris, Pett Norville, Bharat Patel, Ranil Perera, Mayor Jason Perry, Jo Quantrill, Veronica Reed, Alecia Roach, Cllr Scott Roche, Adrian Smith, Marilyn Smithies, Doreen Soukup, Peter Staveley, Ray Stibbards, Janet Stollery, Cllr Andy Stranack, Olivia Taylor, Dan Thomas, Sergei Valevka, Paul Voden, Cllr Robert Ward, Sally Ward-Lee, Shanna Williams, Adrian Winchester, John Woodhouse

Apologies: Philip Bayes, Mahbub Sadiq Bhatti, Avril Coutinho, Mark Healey, David Hooper, Maureen Levy, Rita Lewis, John Patterson

Welcome and introductions:

Everyone was welcomed. Prior to the Mayor joining the meeting the councillors present introduced themselves and cabinet members outlined their cabinet role.

Rhi Hughes from South West London Law Centres (SWLLC) also introduced herself. Find details of the current project she is running on Temporary Accommodation, focusing on Croydon and Wandsworth, [here](#) and our meeting on Housing with TCPA, [here](#), which includes details of Rhi's project. Services the SWLLC provide are detailed [here](#).

Updates and Notices

See website for current events and information. The [Holocaust Memorial Day](#) event on 27 January, Croydon Healthy Homes' [Winter Energy Week events](#) (30 Jan – 3 Feb), and more.

Meeting

Mayor Perry was welcomed to the meeting slightly later than planned due to unavoidable IT issues, and gave a short introduction, as follows:

He thanked CCC for inviting him to the public meeting with Q and A session, He is always grateful when community organisations offer an invitation for him to speak and he attends many community events and meetings.

Listening to Croydon, hearing people's concerns and responding to these is really important to the Mayor. He has an ongoing commitment to meet with various groups and communities across the borough to hear what residents have to say.

He feels that it is a great privilege to be the first elected Mayor of Croydon, takes the role very seriously and welcomes the opportunity to get Croydon back onto the right path.

Mayor Perry acknowledged that it is well known that Croydon has many challenges and has been through some very difficult times. These continue and probably will continue for some time.

He referred to the inheritance of £1.6 billion of debt and that this is costing £50 million per annum just to service the debt, before even considering the costs of offering any services to residents. The debt burden is having a huge impact on what the council can do.

The Mayor explained his key priorities. The first is balancing the books and getting to the bottom of the problem, truly understanding what the issues are for Croydon. The 'opening the books' exercise, taking a deep dive into the council's finances, which the Mayor started very early in office, is due to come to an end at the end of this month. The aim of this is to establish a full and accurate picture so that the council can rebuild as a borough and get things back on track.

He mentioned there being many other things of importance too, including planning being a big issue. SPD2, which is a supplementary planning design guide, has caused many of the problems across the borough, and has now been removed.

Cleaning up the borough is another key issue. The Mayor acknowledged that it's going to take some time to get on top of the fly-tipping, graffiti, and the general state of our streets. His aim is to put pride back into Croydon and stressed that fixing those "[broken windows](#)" is a really important part of getting Croydon back to a better place.

Tackling youth violence and knife crime is another big issue, as is anti-social behavior. The [PSPO - Public Space Protection Order](#) for the town centre (which also covers parts of South Croydon and Broad Green wards – see map in link) is now in place. This had lapsed under the previous administration. The Council is doing a lot of work around community safety, including violence against women and girls (VAWG).

Working on the regeneration of our town centre is also key as this is the major driver for our local economy. This will involve meeting with partners such as Westfield and Hammerson to get plans for Croydon Town centre redevelopment moving again, working with partners such as Croydon BID and putting in bids to government for levelling up funding to try and bring in some much-needed investment into the town centre.

The Mayor also highlighted major issues in the borough in relation to social housing and council housing. These issues are ongoing but work to address them has started. The [Residents' Charter](#) for the council's leaseholders and tenants has been adopted. Work at Regina Road is ongoing, including consultations with tenants around how the council and residents move forward with Regina Road i.e. whether the council should move forward with refurbishment or whether a full scale regeneration would be more beneficial.

In conclusion, Mayor Perry said that Croydon is an amazing place.

"It's a fantastic borough, fantastic communities, wonderful people. I think that by working together, by understanding what our issues are, I'm very hopeful that we will get Croydon back on the map for the right reasons and get Croydon moving ahead again, so that we can hold our heads up high, with pride that we come from Croydon."

Q and A session:

As explained to attendees prior to the meeting, due to the huge number of questions submitted, the duplication and cross over in themes, the committee had taken the decision to amalgamate questions and prioritise those with the greatest wider interest.

In response to a question, it was explained that it was not possible to provide the names of all those asking the questions for this reason, and in some cases the person posing the question had asked for the question to be put forward on their behalf.

The following questions were addressed in the Q and A.

Value of Mayoral role

Q: Can you explain, in concrete and specific terms, what value cash-strapped Croydon ratepayers are getting from your salary?

A: Mayor Perry referred to his opening remarks, including his clear commitment and his ties to Croydon as he is Croydon born and bred. He highlighted his business background and bringing that expertise and knowledge to the council in the way that the council runs its business. He reiterated his commitment to working day and night to bring about change for Croydon and change the direction of travel for Croydon, to put it back on to the right path.

"We are examining everything that we can examine. We are looking into our finances, looking at the books, looking at how we can be more efficient, and focusing the council on the things that we have to do, the statutory responsibilities that we have, and making sure that we do those to the best of our abilities.

There are some things we do that perhaps we don't need to do, and that will be the subject of changes over the coming years, but we must do the statutory duties and we must do them well.

So, I think the council will shrink over time. The council will do the jobs that it's meant to do well, and that's my priority. And hopefully, ratepayers will view that as value for money when it comes to my salary."

Consulting residents

Q: Regarding consulting residents, you make clear commitments in your manifesto to consult with residents on key issues. Can you explain how this will be achieved? And if it's done via meetings, will they be minuted, with actions and clear deadlines?

A: The Mayor felt that this would be done via a combination of approaches. There will be official consultations on various things. The PSPO for the town centre was given as an example of an issue that had been through a formal consultation process. Around 1500 people responded to that particular consultation, with over 90% of respondents wanting the PSPO to be put in place.

Some will be done via engagement exercises. The recent engagement exercise around potential budget changes for coming year, April onwards, was offered as one example. The Mayor believed that the council will do consultations, as appropriate, to inform future decisions.

The Mayor also viewed meetings such as this and the numerous other community meetings he's attended as being part of engagement. Listening to and responding to residents' questions and concerns was important.

"The most important thing to me is that I don't disappear into the Town Hall, never to be seen again. It's very much my mission to be out and about to see residents, meet residents, hear their concerns, and hopefully respond accordingly."

Finances

A large number of questions received were summarised and put to the Mayor, as follows:

Q: The council's dire financial circumstances are well known, with an additional [£27.9 million shortfall discovered as part of your 'opening the books' exercise](#), and a further [114 notice](#) issued. What are your plans for sorting out the council's finances?

A: The opening the books exercise is ongoing. Budgets in recent years have not been as correct or accurate as they ought to be. There have been assumptions in budgets around parking income, as an example, that have been fundamentally wrong.

"We've had a number of issues around the housing revenue account, where monies have not been in the right place. We've had issues around benefits, so there are lots of different areas. We have looked into those and there was [a report that went to Cabinet back in November last year](#).

We are now working with government around how we can sort Croydon finances out. The reality is we have the debt burden £1.6 billion worth of debt and, as I said in my opening remarks, £50 million a year to service that debt. The reality is that that interest will get higher over the coming years.

As a council we have assets worth about £300 million, so if we sold everything we own, we still have this huge debt burden. The conversation with government is about how we deal with that debt burden - whether we extend our interest payments, our loan agreements, whether government will consider writing off some of the debt that we have - and that's the ongoing negotiation that we're having with government.

It's not easy for the government. Whatever they do for Croydon, other local authorities will be queuing behind us to have the same treatment, so it's going to be a very difficult period, but what we've got to do is manage the council as efficiently as we possibly can. Decisions, that will not be easy decisions, will have to be made. There will be cuts to services and it will be a difficult period. But I hope that we can get through that period and then start to rebuild our finances and rebuild our services for local people."

The Mayor went on to explain that the opening the books exercise had identified historic legacy issues of around £74 million that go back over previous years. 'Croydon Affordable Homes' is costing the authority £9 million to put right. Mayor Perry cautioned that if the external auditors, Grant Thornton, don't agree with the council, it could cost up to £70 million to put right, so a major financial issue the council may yet need to face.

"And that's an accounting issue going forward. We are looking at just under £48 million of additional pressures on budgets, each and every year going forward, just relating to things that we've uncovered [so far].

There are huge, huge issues to tackle and in order to balance the budget. At the moment, we have £130 million gap in our budget, between income and expenditure. And that's what we're working through to close that gap so that we can set a budget for next year."

Social Housing Finances

Q: What has happened to the social housing ringfenced money, and what was it used for instead of its actual purpose?

A: The council has two sets of accounts. The general fund is the everyday money to provide bin services, clean the streets and do everyday jobs. The other is the housing revenue account and this relates to council tenant and leaseholder rent monies. This pays for the housing service that the council provides for their tenants. Over a period of time, under the previous administration, a number of things have been charged to the housing revenue

account that are not appropriate going forward. In order to correct that, there's £40 million going from the general fund back into the housing revenue account.

Responsibility for the financial situation

There were also quite a number of questions about who was responsible for the financial situation, many expressing a great deal of anger and calling for action.

Q: Is anyone going to be held to account for the financial mess? Were there any consequences, and, if there were, what were they for those responsible?

A: The Mayor explained that he shared people's anger and upset about what had happened.

There are a number of things that are currently happening. The first is the Penn Report (an independent report commissioned, authored by Richard Penn). More details [here](#). For this, a number of people were interviewed about what they thought had happened and what they thought had gone wrong. A number of people were named within the report, along with their actions. Those people have been given the option to indicate whether they believe what was recorded in the report is true and accurate. A small number have disagreed, so the council is looking for evidence to substantiate the truth including meetings, emails, cabinet meetings and so on.

The second is the Kroll report, which is the fraud investigation into the Fairfield Halls, following [the second RIPI \(Report in the Public Interest\)](#). In this, although individuals were not named, council cabinet roles were named and officer roles were named.

The Mayor gave his commitment to publishing both reports, hoped this would be in the next couple of months, but only after going through the proper process.

"I would hope when we have got to the end of the process of checking facts and making sure that everything is correct as we think it can be, that we can then hand that information to the police and ask the police to take it forward, potentially go to professional bodies and say we have evidence that your member has misbehaved and ask them to look into their member's behaviour."

"I'm very clear with officers that I want people held to account for what has been done to Croydon. It's not easy to do that. [Proving] misuse of public office is a very high bar, but I think we have evidence to show that there has been abuse of public office, and I'm very much pushing that we get to a point where people are held to account. I know that's what residents want. That's what I want. That's what most people involved at the council want is people held to account for the things that have been done to the borough."

"What I don't want is to put the council in a position where we get our facts wrong, and we end up being sued for defamation and we end up losing even more money.... We need to be rock solid in our position before any of these reports are released and before we can go to that next stage. But as I say, I've made it really, really clear that I want these reports published. I want these people held to account."

Restoring Pride in Croydon

Q: What do you plan on doing to bring the borough back to its former glory, a place where local residents are proud to visit, meet friends, shop and enjoy recreational activities?

A: The Mayor referred to the rebuilding of pride in Croydon as relating to a number of things, including the areas covered in his opening remarks.

Further points included,

- working with Westfield and Hammerson. Westfield has control of the Whitgift Centre, Hammerson has control of Centrale and jointly they work together as Croydon Limited Partnership. Mayor Perry is working with these developers, pushing for them to deliver for our town centre. They are undertaking the master planning process for the town centre and Mayor Perry is in regular contact and meetings about this.
- addressing issues such as stalled development of places such as the old Nestle building,
- creating jobs for local people,
- doing what the council can. Examples given were putting in place the Town Centre PSPO, getting a grasp of the antisocial behaviour by working with the police and the borough commander, to ensure joined up working. Cleaning our streets, removing fly-tips, removing the graffiti and so on. He gave a commitment that these are all things the council is working to fix, and not always easy to resolve against a backdrop of financial constraints,
- find solutions to making parking more affordable as this is a barrier to people using the town centre,
- driving inward investment into Croydon, including applying to government for funding such as the Levelling Up funding of £20 million applied for to deliver public realm improvements to improve the look and feel of the town centre.
- not getting caught up in the negativity about Croydon but remembering and celebrating that Croydon is still an amazing place that is so well connected, being just 15 minutes from Central London and 15 minutes from Gatwick. Croydon has amazing green spaces, great schools and so many other things to be proud of.
- Putting faith back into Croydon and getting Croydon back to the borough it used to be by working together.

Croydon Town Centre

A number of questions relating to the Town Centre, summarised like this, were put to the Mayor.

Q: You've already referred to Croydon Limited Partnership's 'Westfield Hammerson' development. There are questions about what's likely to happen, and how the original plans will be modified. What sort of mix is the town centre development likely to be, e.g. retail, residential, leisure and commercial? And, at what point will the general public get to see those plans?

A: Whatever will be delivered will be very different from the original plans. A phased approach to development was far more likely than before. There will be much more reusing of existing buildings, so no wholesale demolition of the actual centre itself. It will be more focused on a mixed offer; a place where people can not only shop but where the whole family can go to eat and for entertainment such as visiting the cinema.

There is a new master plan process started, with new master planners in place, and things should get moving in the next few months. There will be the opportunity for local residents to input into that process too. There are plans to open a unit in the Whitgift Centre, called 'The Urban Room', to provide an opportunity for residents to feed in their thoughts and views of what should be considered or included. For this reason, it is too early to say what the redevelopment will look like or what it will include but it will be different to the original proposal, but hopefully just as exciting.

Q: In the meantime, what are you doing to encourage businesses, shoppers and people to come to Croydon Town Centre? And what is happening about the area around the old Alders building – an area of huge potential but currently quite depressing?

A: Mayor Perry is hoping that Alders will have a meanwhile use. This should happen in the Spring now. Mayor Perry believes this would be a game changer and start to show that change is happening, making the place look and feel a lot nicer and drawing more people into the town centre.

Mayor Perry spoke of the opportunities offered by Croydon being London Borough of Culture, which starts in April 2023. There will be a number of events running through the year, many of which will take place in the town centre.

Katherine Street is currently closed because the one-way system is being reversed to allow buses serving the south of the borough to use this route rather than follow the existing longer route all the way around the Town Hall, round the Fairfield roundabout and down the flyover before being able to start heading south.

"Small things like changing the bus routes in the town centre will make life easier for many bus users and make the town centre more accessible."

Q: A number of questions submitted related to the number of high-rise apartments that are going up and whether housing will be part of the redevelopment of central Croydon. This is bringing far more residents into the town centre, but the concern was that there won't be the infrastructure such as transport, leisure, shops, healthcare, etc, to support those residents.

A: Mayor Perry agreed that there has been a lot of high-rise development and that there will undoubtedly be more to come. He acknowledged that planning has been a very contentious issue for Croydon for the last few years, not just for the town centre but across the borough.

The council has housing targets that are set by the Greater London Authority and the Mayor of London. These have to be achieved and the targets for Croydon are quite high, so there is a need for development to achieve these targets.

Creating a residential environment in the town centre will help with footfall - visits to shops etc. The Mayor acknowledged the clear need to plan appropriately for doctor surgeries, dental services and the various other support mechanisms, and that's where the Community Infrastructure Levy (often referred to as CIL money) should play its part, in that the money that comes from development helps to improve these things. Some of the developments in the town centre have spoken of having health clinics and other facilities built in as part of the development.

The Mayor felt that if we want to move away from the kind of development that's affected many parts of the borough in recent years, developing in the town and district centres is probably the way to do it.

The Local Plan

Q: When is it likely that the Local Plan consultation will be available?

A: The council is currently starting on the process of revisiting the Local Plan. There are lots of elements of the Local Plan that need to be looked at as part of this. The Mayor has asked officers to put a paper together to bring to Cabinet, probably in February or March 2023. This will kick-start the process. Starting to formalise the new Local Plan will be subject to statutory consultation. The council needs to follow certain rules and regulations but also needs to be talking to residents about what they want to see and the issues they identify to make sure they consider all the issues, not just the ones the council has already identified.

"We may not be able to address everything in the Local Plan, but I believe that we can have a Local Plan that is far more responsive to local residents needs rather than a plan that currently rides roughshod over local residents."

Planning guidance - SPD2

Q: SPD2 has been torn up. Prior to its replacement in some two years' time, following a consultation exercise, what guidance are planning officers working to in the meantime?

A: The Local Plan is the Local Plan; I may not agree with lots of elements of the Local Plan, but it is what it is. It's been adopted; it's our local planning policy.

SPD2 was a supplementary policy which drove a lot of the development in the borough around knocking down family homes, building blocks of flats, which brought about a change of character, and that had an impact on many areas across the borough.

SPD2 was revoked and immediately stopped being part of Croydon's planning policy. The council still has the full Local Plan, so decisions are now being made against the full Local Plan.

What has been seen since SPD2 has been revoked, is that a lot more applications have been refused by officers under delegated business and a lot more applications have been refused by the planning committee themselves. Quite importantly, a number of items refused have gone to appeal and they have also been refused on appeal. Some of those appeals cite that SPD2 now does not exist and therefore can't be used to judge this application, so the refusal is upheld.

Fly-tipping, litter and graffiti

Again, a considerable number of questions had been submitted, summarised as follows:

Q: Fly-tipping, litter and graffiti are a massive issue for Croydon. What can be done to stop fly-tipping of general waste, large household items and commercial waste?

The Love Clean Streets app is a solution to having items cleared, but does it also signal that it's okay to leave items on the street without consequence?

A: The app is successful at getting reported items cleared so whilst Croydon still has a major problem with fly-tipping, there is now a quicker response to reports.

A lot of work has gone into modifying the app to improve it. Cllr Roche has spent a huge amount of time with Veolia understanding how they work, but also putting pressure on them to deliver. They are paid a lot of money to deliver their contract, and that contract was not being managed properly. Cllr Roche and officers are investing a huge amount of time into managing the contract properly.

Mayor Perry made the wider point that proper management of contracts is key. The council spend millions upon millions of pounds a year, be it on housing repairs, cleaning the streets, etc. but none of these contracts were being managed by the council so the council under his leadership is now putting proper contract management back into place to make sure that the contractors are delivering. If they're not, the contractor is being fined or dealt with appropriately. This is going to take time, but we are starting to see some changes.

With regards to fly-tipping, we have hotspots. If they are cleared regularly it can encourage people to fly-tip more with the expectation it will be cleared. He highlighted the need for proper enforcement. It's not just unscrupulous businesses and people that are fly-tipping but sometimes it's down to local residents dumping on their own streets.

He spoke of the need to create an environment where that's not acceptable. Additionally, though, he spoke of the need to create a system where it's easier for people to deal with their rubbish. Cllr Roche is looking at this, charges for bulky waste collection, etc. The council is starting the process of looking at the new contract, how to build these issues into that new contract, to try and make that deliver better in the future.

Find details of the newly-launched consultation on waste management, [here](#). This closes on 25 Feb 2023.

Cllr Roche was invited to add anything if he wished. He explained the work he had been carrying out with officers to address issues. He met with officers to discuss how the app works. They explored, amongst other things, what is and isn't working, what can be tweaked in terms of user experience, the data that can be collected, the speed at which reports are dealt with and what information is provided to the reporter so they know the outcome of their report.

Love Clean Streets is a third-party app, so they are exploring what changes it is possible to make. They have found that the app is not always accurate e.g. showing a fly-tip to have been cleared when it hasn't, as discussed in a previous meeting [here](#).

There is a big push to encourage people to report as much as possible because it creates hotspot data. It's important to know where the problems are but the hotspot data is only as good as the data received. Cllr Roche added that they are looking at the contract as a whole, working with Cllr Ward, who's the Deputy for Contract Management.

Q. One of the first things that you did when you came into office was reinstate the graffiti removal team. Now the service has been reinstated, what standards are the teams working to, i.e. the service level agreement?

A: Mayor Perry stated that he is not happy with this as it's not yet as responsive as he would like. Offensive graffiti should be removed within 24 hours. Other graffiti should be dealt with within 10 days, although it is being cleared, on the whole, much quicker.

Mayor Perry would like to deep clean problem areas across the borough, to blitz through and clean everything to create a clean environment. The aim would be to get the areas to a decent standard that the council can then maintain, with the support of local people, businesses, organisations and shop keepers. Then when tags appear on buildings, signage or utility boxes the council can push for the owner/operator to remove it promptly or use the powers that the council has to clear it and charge the owner/provider for this via a fine.

"What we want is our district centres, as a starting point, to look like decent places you want to go to do your shopping and spend time, go for a coffee, meet your friends, and do whatever you want to do."

Mayor Perry is already in conversation with the corporate director about how to get this programme into place and make a real difference to district centres.

Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs)

Q: You say that you believe that LTNs are unfair revenue-generating mechanisms that damage communities and you've pledged to get rid of them, yet the experimental schemes in a number of areas including South Norwood and West Croydon continue to negatively affect the community. The resident was being told by the local councillors that this is the Mayor's doing and you have the power to remove them. Is this right?

A: Mayor Perry does not support LTNs as the way that they have been introduced and put into place has not been done properly or done in proper consultation with local residents.

He did not pledge to remove all the LTNs. He said that he made it clear that he didn't think he was in a position to remove them because the previous administration, having put many of these LTNs in, then predicated budgets based on income from those LTNs. A number approved and decided prior to May 2022, have been implemented post May.

Mayor Perry reiterated the point,

"I did not at any point say that I would remove all the LTNs because I just knew it was not a pledge that I could uphold.

Going forward, (and again, Cllr Roche and I have been working very closely on this), I've made it very clear to officers that, if we truly believe in Low Traffic Neighbourhoods, if we truly believe that walking and cycling is the way forward and the way that we create a more healthy environment, that the way we do that is not by fining our residents. Any future schemes coming forward should not be based on fining residents in order to achieve it."

At present it's all camera enforcement and fines. If we want to get people out of their cars, we need to create an environment or alternatives that help people to make that change, not just rely on fines.

Mayor Perry spoke of the need to lobby TfL around bus services because bus services in many parts of the borough are not up to scratch. He spoke about Monk's Hill, for example, receiving a bus service run on a 45-minute timetable which is far too infrequent. He also spoke of needing to create an environment where the buses are clean and efficient and operate to a decent timetable, and routes to walk and cycle are appropriate and safe. There is much work to be done on this.

The voluntary sector and voluntary sector funding

The questions offered were summarised as follows:

Qs: Why are grants to voluntary organisations being cut?

What percentage of the council money is spent on out of borough organisations?

What is the plan to meet increased demand resulting from not renewing funding to some of the Croydon-based voluntary organisations?

How large is the fundraising team at the council? Can the community and voluntary organisations engage with the bid writers to ensure that they are both partnered with us on future bids and act on our behalf?

A: Mayor Perry acknowledged that this was a difficult area and referenced the discussion previously about the legacy of the council's finances, and the need for difficult decisions to be taken, to balance the council's books.

The Community Fund was a three-year programme. The second round of this comes to an end in March 2023. The funding has therefore not been cut but there are no plans to launch another round, due to the finances.

The Council is looking at how and where money is spent in the voluntary and community sector. In the last financial year, Croydon spent round about £23 million in the voluntary and community sector. That's money spent in Croydon, but not all that money went to the local voluntary community. Some of it will have gone to national bodies, some of it will have gone to London regional bodies, etc. to deliver services in the borough.

Cllr Stranack has been doing a lot of work on this as the council didn't know how much or where the money was being spent. It is now known, through this work, not only the amount spent across departments and budgets, but what has been spent on statutory services that cannot change e.g. funding of care packages covering people's residential care. This work has also identified contracts and commissioning that could potentially go to the local voluntary sector in future if local organisations bid for them.

The other key area is resetting the relationship with the voluntary sector. Mayor Perry acknowledged that the last couple of years have been really difficult for the borough and for the voluntary sector. He referred to the council pulling the shutters down. They stopped talking to people, trust was broken and contracts were cancelled at short notice. The aim

now was to rebuild that trust, to rebuild that relationship with the voluntary and community sector, and to work together as partners to move forward to make sure that together the services that help residents the most are delivered. Cllr Stranack is leading this process, meeting with lots of groups, as is the Mayor.

There are a number of avenues being pursued, including considering how the council can help groups to source other funding and assist with bid-writing, and how to get the sector to collaborate more rather than being in competition with one another. The voluntary sector can apply for funding the council can't. The council is also working with health partners around how health money is spent, and Mayor Perry acknowledged that, to some degree, the council has been subsidising health spend in recent years.

Mayor Perry referred to the [recent announcement of government funding awarded to Croydon for reablement packages](#). Some of that funding will end up going to the voluntary sector to fund the work they do to support residents when they leave hospitals into supporting them back into their own homes and to independence again.

Mayor Perry concluded by saying that a lot was being done, that there are opportunities that needed to be harnessed, but that the council is going to have to work differently, including its work with the voluntary sector and health partners.

"Sadly, there may be some groups that don't survive. It upsets me that we're in that position, but we have to balance the council's books and we have to get things onto a more normal sustainable footing for local government in Croydon.

So, as I say, we are working really hard with the sector, discussing how we can work together and the opportunities that we can look at to hopefully come out the other side in a better place, but it's going to be a tough journey and it's not going to be easy for any of us, frankly."

Culture and Croydon's year as London Borough of Culture

This year, Croydon being London Borough of Culture seems like an exceptional opportunity to revitalize the borough and restore some positivity. There are a number of questions relating to this:

Q: The website for Croydon as Borough of Culture and associated media accounts have recently been launched, which CCC will promote, and the programme is being developed. What more can you share about the plans for this?

Q: With regards to the Fairfield Halls, what is happening?

Q: We've got the community-run David Lean Cinema running there but will the Clocktower complex be better used and promoted during the borough of culture? For example, the museum reopening, making better use of the Braithwaite Hall as a concert and events venue? Will new banners be replacing the ones that were on the poles at the front of the entrance of the Clocktower?

A: Mayor Perry said there was a huge amount going on and being planned, and invited Cllr Stranack to add any details as Cabinet member.

The Mayor felt that Croydon being London Borough of Culture this year offers a great opportunity to revitalise and build back pride in Croydon. The council are viewing this as an inward investment piece, about bringing things into Croydon and having something that's long lasting from it that we can look at in years to come and appreciate as being part of Croydon's year as London's Borough of Culture.

Mayor Perry referred to the borough being very successful in securing funding on the back of being Borough of Culture, e.g. Arts Council funding. He spoke of the amazing venues and offer in Croydon, including Stanley Arts, Talawa Theatre and the Fairfield Halls.

There will be large scale events going on across the borough. There will also be smaller scale community events, across the borough. Central library will be used to host some of the events and the spaces in the Clocktower will be used for a range of exhibitions as well.

The aim is to do as much as possible, with the assets that Croydon has, and as borough-wide as possible, not just focusing on the town centre.

With regards to Fairfield Halls, Mayor Perry assumed this question related to the Kroll report and the investigation into Fairfield Halls, he'd already touched on.

He went on to say that £70 million has been spent on Fairfield Halls and he felt we were all rather underwhelmed by what's actually been done with that £70 million, so that's been investigated. BH Live is in place. Mayor Perry explained that he has been vocal that he does not believe that they are the right operator for Croydon, believing that Fairfield Halls would be better under local control. Having said that, Mayor Perry explained that he had met with BH Live who have a new director running things who is trying very hard to make Fairfield Halls part of Croydon's cultural life again, so he was open to seeing how that relationship develops.

Being London Borough of Culture is an opportunity to give a bit of a kickstart to Fairfield Halls and to rekindle our love with Fairfield Halls. It just feels as if the place is closed and empty and Mayor Perry knows that the community wanted to feel that it's open and available. One step towards this was that, thanks to the work of Cllr Stranack, the box office is back, so people can visit to buy tickets now.

Mayor Perry acknowledged that whilst things have changed, there's still a lot more work to do.

Cllr Stranack added that there was a huge offer being planned for borough of culture. This will kick off in April with a big launch event in March to attract local, national and international media attention. Every part of the borough will be involved, with some international cultural events over the year too.

The widest possible view of culture is being taken, also, to include as wider range of events and groups.

In terms of the Museum of Croydon, there's a full programme of activities that will go on in the museum as part of London Borough of Culture, so we will be using the Clocktower complex as part of the overall programme extensively as well as other venues across the borough.

Q: You refer to funding bids. There have been two rounds of funding so far with the mention of a third round for smaller groups or events. Is that so?

A: Cllr Stranack confirmed that there have been two rounds of funding and they had been inundated with bids. The second round of funding is just being processed and the decision on those bids will be known very shortly. The third round of funding will be dependent on the second round being looked at in terms of whether there are any gaps geographically or, for example, if there are gaps in the type of event, so that any third round can focus on filling gaps identified.

The Chair added that the idea of a Fringe Festival had been suggested but those floating this idea had actively been encouraged to become part of the Borough of Culture offer.

Libraries

A large number of questions had been submitted and it was acknowledged that it may not be possible to cover all of them or in any depth in the time remaining so may be better as the subject of a future meeting, but the following were asked:

Q: Are you committed to keeping our libraries open, staffed and stocked?

Q: Library opening hours are now so short. Libraries are ideal for providing warm spaces, as well as their core purpose. The limited opening hours restrict people's access to and use of libraries, which the council has a statutory duty to provide. Are there any plans to increase opening hours?

A: Some of our libraries are open two days a week, some are open three days a week, depending on the library, and they are available as warm spaces.

The council does have a section on the website around the [cost of living pressures and signposting people to the various support that's available](#), and [Warm Spaces](#) is part of that. The Mayor invited anyone with information about other warm spaces to submit the details for inclusion.

With regard to library opening hours and the council's obligation to provide a statutory service, Mayor Perry offered,

"I don't think any of us are happy with a library service that's open two days a week. We've got 13 libraries and the main library, and we know about the financial constraints we have. We know that there is a risk to libraries.

What we are doing is undertaking a transformation programme around looking at libraries and community hubs about how we can make libraries a better facility for local people. The buildings are there. How can we get health in there? How can we get housing there? How can we make it a community hub that people can go to get advice, take their book out, buy a coffee, have a warm space, whatever it may be? "

Mayor Perry went on to explain that the council is looking seriously at our libraries and whether having 13 libraries that are open two to three days a week is what people really want.

"Or do we want six or seven or eight libraries that are open five or six days a week and actually provide a proper service for local residents and provide a local focus for local residents where they can access services, and where they can meet friends and do whatever they want to do?"

"We do have a problem with our libraries. The service we're offering, at the moment, is frankly, poor. But that's [down to] the kind of cuts that were made to the service in previous years, so we're working through that process at the moment."

"The idea of closing libraries is not something that any of us look forward to but if we can provide a better overall service, and whether some of those libraries that don't fit a community hub model, whether the local community can take those on themselves and run them as a community centre or hub so that the building remains in community use, these are all things that we're exploring at the moment, so there's not an easy answer."

Mayor Perry referred to the asset disposal list that went to Cabinet, explaining that it listed libraries along with other council assets up for consideration. He explained that he was trying to be as open and transparent as possible when saying that potentially we could end up losing some of our libraries.

"There's no point pretending that we can just carry on as we are. The council has to make cuts to what it's doing but, if we have to do that, let's try and do it in a way where we can get better services in most parts of the borough in the process. I'm working with community groups about how we can do that."

Whilst there are no immediate closures on the books, Mayor Perry made it clear that, this is something that they are actively looking at.

Consultations

In response to a question about consulting on libraries, Mayor Perry confirmed that they will consult. In fact, it goes beyond consultation as the council has to have government approval to do various things.

The poor quality of consultations in the past on a range of issues was raised, with leading questions, giving the council the answers they sought. This has led to lack of trust too.

Mayor Perry thought that the problem with consultations is that it may give people the impression that it is possible that something's not going to happen. Consultations need to be honest. Not doing something is not an option. He spoke of the need to be upfront with consultations and honest with people about the changes that need to be made to get the borough back on an even keel.

Parks and green spaces, including homelessness

Q: What work is being done to improve green spaces across the borough, including Norbury? Parks are often poorly maintained, have high volumes of litter, and a number of our parks have people living in tents in them.

A: Some of them have not been well maintained. The council in recent years has become more reliant on friends' groups to look after our local parks, but in doing so has not supported them or just allowed them to do what they like.

"We've taken a very different view around friends' groups, and we appreciate the huge amount of work that a number of our friends' groups put into our parks... It's around appreciating what they do and working with them."

Cllr Roche has been meeting friends' groups across the borough and continues to do so.

Mayor Perry spoke about grass cutting as a major problem. He felt that in order to get things back on track the council needed to be working with and consulting groups about how we manage the parks better. This is an ongoing piece of work.

"And, again, it's about being honest. I get a lot of casework come in about littering, parks and various other things. And the officers give me a response that says we clear the bins in this park every day. And I go back and say, No, you don't. You're not clearing the bins every day. Why are you saying this to people? It's not true."

The council needs to be honest about the services it's providing in parks, work with our friends' groups, and try to create a better environment.

There are lots of conversations going on with sport bodies such as the football, lawn tennis and cricket associations as well around how we can improve our parks and the sports offer. The council has just taken on a new sport development officer.

Croydon has a big issue around homelessness, generally, including people living in tents in parks. This can be for different reasons. Some in tents are workers. They're sharing beds and

sharing properties so, for example when one's in the bed, others are in the park. There is a need to unpack some of the difficult socio-economic backgrounds that sit behind some of the activities that are ongoing.

Croydon is doing a lot of work around homelessness, supporting people who are on the streets into accommodation, supporting them with their complex needs which may be around mental health, drugs or alcohol addiction. The council uses charities such as [Thames Reach](#) to reach out to those on the streets. Regarding the parks, it's a slightly different situation for some but the council is tackling that as well. The Council is employing a multidisciplinary approach, working with police, health services, charities etc. to support people off the streets. There also comes a point where the council needs to enforce if people will not engage with the system or the street teams.

The Mayor mentioned receiving some levelling up funding around parks as well. Whitehorse Rec. will have £85,000 to upgrade the park facilities. There will be a consultation with local residents.

The aim of all this work is to put the pride back in our parks, but it will take time and investment to achieve this.

Threat of closure of Cherry Orchard Garden Centre

Moving to a fairly specific but still very important question:

Q: People are concerned about the loss of the facility for adults with learning difficulties, with the proposed closure of Cherry Orchard Garden Centre. In fact, there's [a petition against the closure](#).

The closure would lead to additional support costs and reduction in quality of life for service users. Can you give an assurance that a proper assessment will be made, and that this isn't driven by the potential site value for redevelopment, as sale of land is irreversible, and generally a negative action, that can't be a long-term solution to the Council's financial problems?

A: This is something that's being looked at as part of the proposals around how to tackle the finances and get the council onto a more sustainable footing. Should a local authority be running a garden centre? The staffing costs are around £185,000. The income for the garden centre is around £10,000 - £11,000 a year, of which around about £6,000 is then spent on purchasing plants, etc, so the finances of the current setup do not stack up. There are 20-23 users that currently use the facility and it's just part of a wider care package for the service users. There are ongoing discussions with all of those people about how the council can support them.

If the decision is to not continue running the garden centre, then the priority will be to support the service users that currently use the facility, those that volunteer and those who do work at the garden centre. There are ongoing conversations with the service users. If the garden centre were to close there will be a package of support for service users who can also use the facilities of the Cherry Hub next door.

Hate Crime

Croydon is a very diverse borough and an inclusive borough, so we finish the meeting with this very important question.

Q: Is the Mayor committed to ensuring that there is no place for any form of hate crime in Croydon? With the loss of Croydon Council's hate crime officer, Sharon Kilbourne. last year and the cutting of funding of Metro charity's Croydon hate crime service, what provisions remain or are you putting in place to tackle rising levels of hate crime in Croydon?

A:

“This is a really important issue that cuts across all our communities,

As you so rightly say we've got great diverse communities in Croydon, and it's an absolute pleasure to go and meet with them and engage in activities with the various communities we have.

A real strength is that we have such amazing things going on within our borough.”

With regard to addressing hate crime, there is the Prevent team within the council, who are working really hard to deal with hate crime. It's a devoted team. They also deal with counter-terrorism issues.

The council is undertaking initiatives around '[Nobody's Listening](#)'. The Mayor referred to a recent exhibition at Fairfield Halls, which was part of the Home Office's work around hate crime. It was a virtual reality exhibition that really brought home to people what hate crime is about, what goes on around the world and how we mustn't allow that to happen.

In Croydon we have the Safer Croydon Partnership working on this issue too and on community safety.

Mayor Perry referred to the huge amount of work Cllr Ola Kolade was doing in regard to community safety and rebooting the Community Safety Strategy. The Safer Croydon Partnership is refreshed, making sure that all the statutory bodies that should be on it, are on it. Work will move on to the Community Safety Strategy, focusing on delivery plans around violence against women and girls (VAWG) around hotspots, around youth crime, counterterrorism work and so on.

The Mayor mentioned that the council has adopted [the George Floyd Race Matters pledge](#), which local businesses and residents are encouraged to adopt as well, and there is a review of this planned this year. There is also the Council's [Anti-Hate Crime pledge](#), which individuals and organisations can sign up to.

Mayor Perry was very clear: Hate crime should not be happening. When we witness it, we should be calling it out and saying that we're not going to accept that behavior in our borough.

Cllr Kolade added that over the past couple of years, hate crime has moved from happening in our public spaces to more of it occurring online, especially as a result of COVID and people spending more time online. Through the Safer Croydon Partnership, Cllr Kolade explained that they will be looking at safety in our public spaces to keep our young people, women and our whole community safe from crime but more importantly, looking at the activities happening online, and working in partnership with the police and also national government to ensure that the Croydon is safeguarding young people, our community, and our residents against hate crime.

Post meeting note: *Hate Crime in Croydon has not increased, according to Met Police figures covering the past 12 months, received after the meeting.*

Closing remarks

Mayor Perry and councillors were thanked for attending to engage with residents, for offering additional time to the meeting, and they were given a round of applause.

The committee had prioritised asking the widest range of questions possible in the time with the most interest expressed. This has inevitably left some questions unanswered, due to the huge volume of questions received.

CCC indicated a commitment to explore how to get answers to any questions that were not included in the meeting and agreed to stay on following the meeting close if anyone had any comments or questions.

Information via email was promised, with the notes being published following Mayor Perry and councillors having the opportunity to check them prior to publication.

Conclusion

Everyone was thanked for attending and submitting questions.

Joining committee or getting more involved

People were encouraged to get in touch if they were interested in getting more involved or if they wanted to know more. CCC is currently looking for a Treasurer and a Secretary or people could join the committee as a general member. There are also one-off or smaller tasks open for people who want to help out less regularly or don't wish to join committee.

Membership

Anyone can support CCC's work, [by taking up membership](#). Membership renews on September 1 each year. Members have voting rights and are eligible to stand for committee.

Donations to support CCC's work are also very welcome! Details [here](#).

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Meeting closed: 8.45pm

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