

Responses to Questions not put at the Council meeting on 19th January 2022

11.2 Question from Councillor Kabir Ahmed

Supplementary question from Councillor Kabir Ahmed:

Can you explain the circumstances around purchase of free homes in Erith – including – how they were identified, was it value for money, and who authorised the purchase?

Response to supplementary question:

AP1 payments are authorised by the budget holder based on the Council's scheme of delegation. There are additional levels of authorisation rather than an 'upper limit'.

The limit for a BACs (Bankers Automated Clearing Services) payment is £2.5m. Very often property transactions and many payments made by the Treasury team are above that level, or require same day transfers of funds, and require payment by CHAPs (Clearing House Automated Payment System) payments, all of which are made via the 'AP1' procedure.

'AP1' procedures are not only used for 'exceptional payments' but they are also used in any instance where there is no invoice or it's a 'non regular' payment. Examples would include ad-hoc foster carer allowances, grants paid out by the council, refunds and long service awards.

The 'AP1' procedures are used for a wide variety of different purposes – not just for payments made under 'exceptional circumstances'. The 'AP1' procedure is common for the use of high value and property transactions, and council procedures have been followed correctly.

In response to the specific point about purchasing homes in Erith, AP1s are used for certain types of payments, in this case to solicitors for holding funds against three intended leasehold property purchases in Erith.

As with many authorities facing huge demand for temporary accommodation for homeless households, properties were bought outside of the borough as they were less expensive and represented better value for money than those in borough. A small number, 24, out of borough properties were acquired to help meet demand. A major consideration in determining where to buy was the length of time it took to travel back to Tower Hamlets.

Properties were valued by independent valuers to ensure that the Council was paying the appropriate market price. The properties purchased in Erith were leasehold flats. One of the originally intended purchases fell through at the last moment necessitating the refund of money held by solicitors to the Council.

11.11 Question from Councillor Shah Ameen

Can the Lead Member provide an update on what the Council is doing to improve air quality across the borough and protect the health of its residents?

Response of Councillor Asma Islam, Cabinet Member for Environment and Planning:

The council is currently consulting on the refreshed Air Quality Action Plan which will be brought to cabinet for approval in the Summer. The council currently operates 90 diffusion nitrogen dioxide monitoring tubes across the borough and has four continuous monitoring sites which monitor a range of pollutants. We are currently installing a further monitor along The Highway in Wapping.

Our successful School Streets programme improves air quality at schools by closing roads outside schools during pick up and drop off time.

We are also encouraging the switch to electric vehicles by installing electric charging points across the borough and penalising high-emissions vehicles by charging these vehicles more for resident parking permits.

The London Atmospheric Emissions Inventory released in December 2021 shows a significant improvement in all pollutant measures. For Tower Hamlets, 7.5% of the population now live in areas exceeding legal limit for NO₂ as opposed to 76.2% in 2016.

While this is a huge improvement, we need to go further to ensure that none of residents have to live in areas exceeding these legal limits.

A further 400 EV charging points are due by March 2023 - That's 150 by end this April and a further 250 by March 2023