

Leader of the Labour Group
Councillor Daniel Francis



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Cllr Teresa O'Neill OBE
Leader of the Council

Dear Teresa

I am writing to you following the Prime Minister's recent announcements regarding the next steps in the Government's recovery strategy, as well as to follow up on our recent conversation regarding how the recovery can be implemented to support residents and businesses across the borough.

Can I start by placing on my record my thanks to all our staff, partners and volunteers for all they have done over the last two months to ensure public services have been maintained and support has been in place for our most vulnerable residents.

When we spoke at the outset of the crisis on 16th March, on behalf of the Labour Group I supported the cancellation of council meetings in the short-term and that we would support the administration to do whatever was necessary to support services. While the Labour Group could have jumped on social media bandwagons and tried to find fault during the last two months, we have not, as we fully understand the pressures on our services and the need to prioritise services, particularly those supporting our most vulnerable people. I am sure there will be a time to review whether the impact of the last ten years has left us with enough capacity at a local level to deliver services in a crisis situation, but I continue to believe that is a conversation for councillors to have once the road to recovery has begun.

Given the Prime Minister's announcement, residents and businesses will begin to change their behaviour. I believe that all councillors should have the opportunity to play their part in reviewing and scrutinising how the new measures will work. While I'm sure you will say scrutiny is a 24/7 process and both officers and yourself are happy to deal with enquiries, the Labour Group believes it is critical that some level of scrutiny takes place at the earliest opportunity, in a public arena which is open to our residents.

There are emerging issues which I know are of concern to councillors which include but are not limited to:

- How the council manages its new public health responsibilities to manage testing in the borough's care homes;
- Our work with local health partners regarding hospital discharge and growing concerns about the non-presentation of residents with non-coronavirus related health issues;
- Ways in which the council can support businesses to ensure they are adhering to government guidance and legislation and are supported to re-open at an appropriate time;
- To ensure that residents and businesses are supported where possible with their council tax and business rates;
- To assist in the complex process of re-opening schools and given that most schools in the borough have been academised that there is a common approach to managing risk assessments and supporting vulnerable children and those with an Education, Health and Care plan across all schools;
- Ways in which additional road space can be made available for pedestrians and cyclists in town centres and around transport hubs;
- How the council will manage its duties to rehouse residents in evictions in the private sector rise and if the temporary measures to assist those who are street homeless are loosed;
- The impact on the council's finances and the impact this will have on the 2021/22 budget gap; and

- Arrangements in parks and policing of social distancing guidance in them given it is apparent that despite their incredible efforts that the Metropolitan Police will not have the resource to enforce this across the borough as we move into the summer months.

In the Government's COVID-19 recovery strategy published yesterday, I have noted the Government's commitment that *"it is vital that Parliament can continue to scrutinise the Government, consider the Government's ambitious legislative agenda and legislate to support the COVID-19 response. Parliament must set a national example of how business can continue in this new normal"*.

I am therefore writing to you to urge you to ensure the council undertakes a similar approach. In my email to you on 16th April and on our call on 21st April, I made clear that the priority of the Labour Group was to recommence the holding of both the planning and scrutiny committees rather than hold next week's Annual General Meeting.

My view remains that not holding a meeting of the Planning Committee for over 13 weeks, and a position where over 80% of councils in London will have held a virtual planning committee before us, does not give the impression that we are working to support those with planning applications in the system to help kick start the recovery.

From the outside, it must therefore seem incredible that we held a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on 5th May to clarify the impact on coronavirus on the council's own housebuilding development, while we allowed those awaiting confirmation of their own planning application to wait a further month. The Labour Group has also noticed the curious timing of the Cabinet Committee which appeared in the council diary with only ten days' notice.

Councillors are aware that Councillor Gareth Bacon was elected to Parliament to represent Orpington in the General Election in December 2019. Prior to the General Election, he had attended the Full Council meeting on 6th November 2019 and then given his apologies to every meeting he was expected to attend since, including the Budget Council and scrutiny meetings.

We have noted that in line with the Local Government Act 1972, Cllr Bacon would have ceased to be a member of the council if he had not attended a meeting of the council for six months following his last attendance on 6th November. It was therefore extremely convenient for him that a last-minute addition to the council calendar was added for a meeting to be held on 5th May, which he virtually dialled into and spoke at.

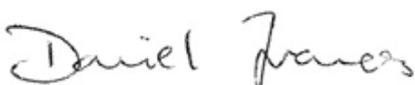
Given the council is now holding virtual committees, and if the draft calendar is agreed at next week's Annual General Meeting, then a period of four months will have elapsed without any scrutiny committees and for councillors to review the kind of issues that I have listed above.

If the council's argument is that there is no way to bring forward the next set of scrutiny meetings, then a special Covid recovery committee made up of members of all four scrutiny committees should be called, and meet (in the same way as the budget scrutiny meetings) in the first week of June to review how the council is ensuring residents and businesses are supported in the many months of recovery ahead. The committee could of course ask to meet further in the months ahead to discuss cross-departmental issues relating to the present pandemic.

This seems the only way that backbench members of the Conservative administration, opposition members and our electors can have confidence that they have been involved as the delivery of our services change in a way which we have never seen. I am sure you will see this as a reasonable request which you can agree to, in the same way that I was fully accommodating to your reasonable request to cancel all council meetings a couple of months back.

I look forward to hearing from you as to whether this request is acceptable, and the measures required for the meeting to be added to the council calendar. Given the public interest in this matter, I am releasing this letter to all members of the council and to the wider public.

Yours sincerely,



Cllr Daniel Francis