

London Assembly (Mayor's Question Time) – 23 July 2014

Transcript of Agenda Item 4 – Mayor's Oral Update

Roger Evans AM (Chairman): I am going to invite the Mayor to provide an oral update of up to five minutes in length on matters occurring since the publication of his report. Mr Mayor, it would be helpful to the Assembly if you could refer to this morning's direction issued to the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority (LFEPA) whilst you are doing this.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Even though we met very recently, Members of the Assembly, plenty has happened and I will single out the launch today of the very exciting plan for a floating village at the Royal Docks. Carillion Igloo Genesis has been selected to transform 15 acres of water on that site. A transformation will be taking place there with a Venice of the north being created in the Royal Victoria Dock. It is an incredibly exciting programme.

We are, simultaneously, getting more terrestrial space released. We are working with the Government to unlock London's unused brownfield sites and you will have seen what we did down in Lewisham, where there are 500 homes going ahead on the former Catford Greyhound Stadium site.

There has been a very substantial fall in crime in London by comparison with the rest of the country. I will just point out that crime in London went down by 6% in 2013/14. That is a fall of about 70,000 offences in a single year, contrasting with what is happening now in the rest of the country.

We have unleashed a wonderful Action for High Streets plan. It is the Summer of High Streets, which will ensure that outer London high streets - as with high streets and town centres across the city - continue to be throbbing, pulsating zones of economic activity of one kind or another. We are supporting that.

You wanted me to mention the Mayoral Direction (MD) I have just issued. Accordingly, I have mentioned it, in accordance with your wishes.

Roger Evans AM (Chairman): Thank you. Is that your report or your update?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): I have not been asked for any --

Jenny Jones AM: That was a bit pathetic.

Roger Evans AM (Chairman): That was just a question. It was not a comment.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): I have not had any requests. Curiously enough, the Assembly has given me no notice of any questions they wish to ask at all. Your cup obviously runs over! Honestly, we may go to every trouble to try to accommodate you. We have

instituted this new system whereby you may request oral updates. You have not requested an oral update, in spite of the huge sums of money you are paid by the public to do so!

Tom Copley AM: Not compared to what you get paid by the *Telegraph*.

Roger Evans AM (Chairman): Can we just bear in mind that what people are paid is probably not relevant to this discussion. Mr Duvall, this is probably some sort of point of order you wish to raise?

Len Duvall AM: Yes, a sort of point of order, Chair, if I may. The Mayor's Office is aware we asked for an oral update and I think your office is aware of that.

Roger Evans AM (Chairman): Yes.

Len Duvall AM: We have agreed by some strange way that the Mayor's Office wanted the oral update to be taken under a European question. We are happy, as always, to be helpful to the Mayor in terms of these issues --

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): In that case, Len, I apologise.

Len Duvall AM: -- and, Chair, we have moved that question higher up the agenda because it was originally the last question on the order paper. We suspect that was the issue. There may well be some further issues arising from a Mayoral Direction, Chair, that I would have thought the Mayor would have wanted to talk about today because we thought he --

Roger Evans AM (Chairman): That is the point that I made when I opened the debate.

Len Duvall AM: Thank you very much.

Roger Evans AM (Chairman): You are quite correct. There was an oral update requested on comments made to a Committee, I believe, earlier this week. I decided that would be better done as a part of the question on our relationship with Europe, which of course is the first question in the list of questions that we have tabled for the Mayor, on which you have had plenty of notice and a briefing. I will take questions on the Mayor's oral update first.

Fiona Twycross AM: Thank you. I just want to talk a little bit about the Mayoral Direction that we received at 9.40am this morning, 20 minutes before this meeting started, which presumably was drafted a little bit before that. Are you aware that some of the issues you raise in relation to effectively locking firefighters out have previously been discussed at some length by the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority (LFEPA)?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): There is no intention to do any such thing and nor, of course, Fiona, is there any sinister intent in the timing of this MD. Honestly, you can take it from me or not. There was no intention to bamboozle or otherwise try to get around your invigilation of what we are trying to do and --

Fiona Twycross AM: Are you aware, though, that LFEPA has discussed this on a number of occasions?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Of course. What I have asked is for the Fire Commissioner to be able to go ahead and prepare a paper setting out the costs, the benefits and the risks entailed in the strategy concerned.

Fiona Twycross AM: We have discussed this and we have been clear that if the firefighters are taking strike action for part of a shift and then work for the remainder of a shift, then Londoners are safer for the period the firefighters are working. Do you not agree that the prime responsibility of LFEPA is to make sure that Londoners are safe?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Obviously, that should be the case, yes, in theory. That ought to be, indeed, the prime responsibility of LFEPA. It is my experience, however, that members of LFEPA occasionally use their positions to try to advance party political points or score party political points and --

Fiona Twycross AM: I have to say, referring to party --

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): -- if I can just finish the point, I do not think you should be getting --

Fiona Twycross AM: This is about you making party political points, though, if I can interrupt you.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): -- too exercised about this.

Fiona Twycross AM: I find it staggering, with respect, that at the point at which we have a new fire minister [Penny Mordaunt MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Department for Communities and Local Government] whose initial discussions appear to have been conciliatory, you are wading into battle and trying to escalate the dispute in London. Londoners will be less safe as a result of even discussing locking firefighters out when we have discussed it and agreed on LFEPA that the prime responsibility, we feel, in relation to this is around Londoners' safety. Do you not feel this is brinkmanship and posture politics at its worst?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): No, it is not, actually, and I do not think there is any compromise of safety whatever and nor would I tolerate such a thing, as I am sure you can appreciate. What you have to look at is the ongoing costs to LFEPA and to the taxpayer of a system of continual strikes that are costing £7 million already and which will eat into our ability to fight fire. That is obviously something that I do think in the long run could compromise safety. It does not come anywhere near to compromising safety now, but if you are going to persist in a style of industrial action that is so very, very expensive to the taxpayer, it is worth investigating. That is all we are doing. We are investigating whether there might be a better way forward and that is all the Commissioner is doing.

Fiona Twycross AM: Thank you.

Tony Arbour AM: On this matter, Mr Mayor, do you not think it disgraceful that the response to your eminently reasonable request to find out on behalf of Londoners how much the cost of this industrial action has been is seen immediately as an attack on our firefighters? Could it be that it is a response by the Labour Group to their paymasters in the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) to --

Tom Copley AM: They are not, Tony. They are not affiliated.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Go on, Tony! You tell them!

Tony Arbour AM: Nevertheless, the FBU openly supports the opposition. Is it not a fact, Mr Mayor, that the action which the firefighters are taking by having these intermittent strikes makes it easy for the firefighters to hold Londoners to ransom, whereas the Fire Authority, by taking its very reasonable measure of having a backup in case of industrial action, clearly is not able to respond as rapidly to periods of industrial action for which there have been insufficient notice? Therefore, for Londoners to have the reassurance that there is a backup service whilst irresponsible industrial action is being taken, clearly, is going to cost a great deal of money to London council taxpayers but infinitely less to firefighters. Under those circumstances, do you not think that Londoners are entitled to know the precise costs and benefits, which you are requesting?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Yes. I do not want this occasion to get off to a rancorous start and I want to get back to what I was trying to say. I apologise, as I say, for my hands. My chain came off on my bike. It is one of those things you have to fix, so there you go. Tony, we are going to look at the different way of doing it. I do not think that anybody should get unduly alarmed about this and there is certainly no compromise to safety involved.

Jenny Jones AM: Mr Mayor, it is lovely to hear about this Royal Victoria Dock development. What is the percentage of affordable housing?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): I cannot give you the answer to that right now but what I can tell you --

Jenny Jones AM: Is there some?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): I am afraid I cannot --

Jenny Jones AM: Any?

Tom Copley AM: Get a figure. Who has one?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): -- give you the answer to that question --

Darren Johnson AM: That is very revealing.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): -- but I can tell you, since you asked about affordable homes --

Jenny Jones AM: Not to worry. No, I am only asking about affordable housing at the Royal Victoria Dock.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): I will get back to you, if I may --

Jenny Jones AM: Thank you very much.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): -- but you may like to know that we have achieved record numbers of affordable homes across London.

Tom Copley AM: No.

Jenny Jones AM: No, please. He is wasting my time.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): You do not want to hear? You do not want to hear about the huge numbers of affordable homes we have built across this city, the record numbers? Actually, we can come to that later on.

Roger Evans AM (Chairman): Thank you. That concludes the debate on the update.