

# Questions and Answers

## Executive

Thursday 11 February 2016

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# **Executive Meeting**

## **11 February 2016**

Questions and Answers



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# Public Questions as specified in the Council's Procedure Rules of the Constitution

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**(a) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Highways, Transport and Emergency Planning by Mr Tony Stone**

**Question:**

*"Please can you tell us why the Council have a Survey on our Cottage called the Ardent Report and not do the work?"*

**The Portfolio Holder for Highways, Transport and Emergency Planning answered:**

Ardent Consulting Engineers were commissioned by the Council in November 2014 to conduct and complete a property level protection survey at Brook Cottage, Boxford. The survey was completed in February 2015 and the report was submitted to the Council in November 2015. Since then quotations have been sort for various items. Unfortunately the affected properties in Boxford are marginally listed more than in historic character. of necessity these flood protection fittings are of a bespoke nature and the quotation process is taking much longer than that for modern houses. According to West Berks' flood engineers and their records Brook Cottage was flooded internally in 2007 and the garden was flooded in 2014.

From the assessment of the flood risk a number of measures were recommended in the report including the installation of flood barriers to the front and side doors, airbrick covers and non-return valves on waste water pipes.

Ardent are currently obtaining quotes from suppliers for this work to be completed, once agreed, the measures will be installed and paid for by the Council in the cases where flood victims meet the DEFRA funding criteria of property level protection. I understand you have been briefed about this matter by West Berks.

**The Chairman asked:** *"Do you have a supplementary question arising directly out of the answer to your original question. A supplementary should be relevant to the original question and not introduce any new material?"*

**Mr Tony Stone asked the following supplementary question:**

*"You said I was not flooded inside When there was a grant for people who got flood water inside the Cottage (like we did) 2014 why are being told we made a phone call to say we did not get flood when we did not make the call, so we failed to get the grant, no appeal system. But Richard Benyon came the next morning to see us moping out, then being told we would get the grant."*

**The Portfolio Holder for Highways, Transport and Emergency Planning answered:**

After the flooding in 2014 def made available funding up to 5,000 per household. To be allegeable for grant properties these must have been flooded internally in the inhabitable areas between the dates of 1st December 2013 and the 31st March 2014. All applicants were asked to provide photographic evidence that they flooded internally within these specified dates, I understand that you didn't provide any such supporting evidence therefore your application was reversed. However once the Ardent quotations have been received West Berks' Council will ask for future grant funding through the local levy to support the instillation of these property specific items, including your property.

**(b) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Highways, Transport and Emergency Planning by Mr Paul Reeves**

**Question:**

*“Can you please advise what the Council plans to do to ensure that my children can get to Park House School from Inkpen once you have removed the no3 bus route?”*

**As Mr Reeves was unable to attend the meeting Portfolio Holder for Highways, Transport and Emergency Planning of responded with a written answer**

*Unfortunately I am not in a position to provide you with a definite answer at the present time. I am aware that Peter Walker (West Berkshire Council’s Transport Services Manager) has emailed you about this matter. He explained that Officers from the Highways team have a meeting arranged in the near future with Park House School, St Bartholomew’s School and Newbury College to examine the scope for these organisations to assist with transport provision.*

*I can not yet state categorically whether or not a bus service will remain from Inkpen to Newbury at times suitable for schoolchildren as any future bus provision will be determined through competitive tender with bus companies, and whilst we may anticipate that a service can be provided, if operator’s costs for service operation are higher than we estimate, it may not be possible. This is one of the reasons for our meeting with the schools and Newbury College.*

*In terms of eligibility for transport, you can make an application for transport support, and if you qualified, the Council would provide transport for your children. If your children did not qualify for transport under the statutory provision, it would be your responsibility to get your children to school.*

*It would also be an option to explore what other transport is available, for example there may be spaces on a Council-commissioned vehicle to Park House which you could access (if there is a vehicle running along a route near your home) but you would have to pay a fee. Park House also provide some minibus services, and you could explore what is available with the school. Unfortunately you would need to determine your own domestic arrangements if you are not entitled to transport.*

- (c) **Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care, Housing, Countryside, Community, Culture and Leisure Services by Mr Michael Hutchins (to be asked by Mr Alan Fleming)**

**Question:**

'Is the council aware of all the good work the Access Officer has undertaken over the years as highlighted by the West Berkshire Disability Alliance (WBDA) in their response to the council consultation re cuts?'

**The Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care, Housing, Countryside, Community, Culture and Leisure Services answered:**

I can confirm that that the Council is very aware of the good work undertaken by the Access Officer and I would personally like to acknowledge and thank the Access Officer for that work.

However the Council finds itself in a very difficult financial position and has been forced to make some very tough decisions including in this case the potential loss of the Access Officer post.

**The Chairman asked:** *“Do you have a supplementary question arising directly out of the answer to your original question. A supplementary should be relevant to the original question and not introduce any new material?”*

There was no supplementary question.

**(d) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care, Housing, Countryside, Community, Culture and Leisure Services by Mr Michael Hutchins (to be asked by Mr Alan Fleming)**

**Question:**

“If the council decides to axe this post, how does the council propose to ensure that this vital work is continued?”

**The Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care, Housing, Countryside, Community, Culture and Leisure Services answered:**

As I’ve just said in my response to the previous question Council has been faced with some very difficult decisions.

Although the Access Panel which comments on planning applications will no longer have the services of the Access Officer there is no reason why the panel which is comprised mainly of people from the voluntary sector cannot continue to meet and comment on planning applications.

Additionally it should be understood that a development will still have to conform with the standards as set out in Part M of the Building Regulations which requires access and facilities for people with disabilities.

The Council will still have a duty to ensure it provides services for people with disabilities. This good work will be continued by all front line Council services.

I am also sure that West Berkshire Disability Alliance will continue with their acknowledged good work on behalf of those with disabilities.

**The Chairman asked:** *“Do you have a supplementary question arising directly out of the answer to your original question. A supplementary should be relevant to the original question and not introduce any new material?”*

There was no supplementary question asked.

**(e) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care, Housing, Countryside, Community, Culture and Leisure Services by Mr Alan Fleming**

**Question:**

“Who else within the council has as broad a knowledge as the Access Officer about the needs of the disabled or the empathy towards the disabled in their needs?**The Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care, Housing, Countryside, Community, Culture and Leisure Services answered:**

There isn't any one individual, however staff are aware of equalities matters and access issues in relation to the public and to the delivery of services.

**The Chairman asked:** *“Do you have a supplementary question arising directly out of the answer to your original question. A supplementary should be relevant to the original question and not introduce any new material?”*

**Mr Alan Fleming asked the following supplementary question:**

*Does that mean then that we will not just have one point of reference, it will be various individuals within the council and will they have or show the same empathy towards disabled people?*

**The Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care, Housing, Countryside, Community, Culture and Leisure Services answered:**

That is the case, which ever service that is dealing with the issue will have individuals within that service and I sincerely hope that all officers and indeed all Members show empathy with all our residents, whether they are disabled or abled. Officers are expected to do that as part of the public service that they offer.



**(f) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Education, Property and Broadband by Mr Peter Hudson**

**Question:**

*“With reference to the Home To School Transport walking route assessment between Mortimer and the Willink School, which is under review in the budget proposal being discussed at this Executive meeting, will the Council reconsider its view that in determining the walking route to be available, it does not need to assess the safety of the route?”*

**As Mr Hudson was unable to attend the meeting Portfolio Holder for Education, Property and Broadband responded with a written answer**

*The Council has assessed the route using the nationally recognised Road Safety GB guidelines. This involves determining the level of risk attached to a route. Assessments do not determine whether a route is “safe” or “dangerous”. All roads may be thought of as presenting some element of road safety risk, whether they are heavily trafficked urban routes, or more lightly trafficked rural routes. Therefore the term used is an “available” route, and not a “safe” route.*

*The assessment of a route is solely to determine whether the child qualifies for free transport under the regulations. The test is whether a child could walk the route “in reasonable safety” accompanied by an adult. Therefore, the Council does assess risk and consider safety aspects in making a determination about a route.*

*The Council has undertaken a detailed assessment of the On-Highways aspect of the route and this has been assessed as a low risk overall, with a medium risk in relation to crossing Goring Lane. We have considered what actions to take as a result of the assessment. For example, the addition of warning signs at the Goring Lane crossing, or removing vegetation to increase access to step-offs/verges.*

*Following feedback from the community about the On-Highways aspect, the Education Service commissioned an independent review which confirmed the findings of the Council’s highways engineers that the Highways aspect of this route is a suitable route to school.*

*A footpath must be of a reasonable walking width and be clear of shrubs and trees obstructing the footpath. Therefore, in terms of assessing entitlement only, there were no hazards identified for the route through Wokefield Common that would prevent a suitably accompanied child walking the route. Residents’ feedback about lack of signs across the Common are being addressed.*

*We do not determine the arrangements a parent may wish to put in place for their child. It is the parents’ responsibility to determine how their child will get to school and this includes making appropriate arrangements if they do not wish to walk.*

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## Members' Questions as specified in the Council's Procedure Rules of the Constitution

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(a) Question submitted to the Leader of the Council from Councillor Lee Dillon

**Question:**

*"Can we have an update on the negotiations with Parkway?"*

**The Leader of the Council answered**

Standard Life investments have confirmed that alterations to the affordable units in Parkway are due to be completed next week – that is very welcome news. Following the completion an inspection will undertaken by One Housing Group who are the nominated registered provider and after their inspection the sale of the affordable units will be then completed. One Housing Group may then wish to carry out some of their own works in the affordable housing unit but the expectation is that One Housing Group will then agree nominations to the affordable units with the Council. As such we are hopeful of many people moving in there by the Summer. My hopefulness has been dashed a few times but the Standard Life work is close to completion

**The Chairman asked:** *"Do you have a supplementary question arising directly out of the answer to your original question. A supplementary should be relevant to the original question and not introduce any new material?"*

**Councillor Lee Dillon the following supplementary question:**

*It's welcome to see those units finally being taken up with the shortage of affordable housing in the district we want every available unit to have tenants in. Do we have any update in regards to car parking charges negotiations?*

**The Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care, Housing, Countryside, Community, Culture and Leisure Services answered:**

Once the transfer of the affordable housing unit is complete we will then complete negotiations over the freehold transfer to Parkway development as part of that, at a simultaneous time the parking will be resolved at the same time I hope this will be done within 2-3 months of the Parkway affordable housing being complete.

**(b) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care, Housing, Countryside, Community, Culture and Leisure Services by Councillor Alan Macro**

**Question:**

“Can the Executive Member for Adult Social Care, Housing, Countryside, Community, Culture and Leisure Services please give me the latest figures for homes standing empty for six months or more and compare those from a year ago. “

**The Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care, Housing, Countryside, Community, Culture and Leisure Services answered:**

I have to say that this is a question that not is capable of being answered from Council tax records as they are currently configured. Data is held against discount types and exemption types which often run consecutively on individual accounts and there is no query which allows tracking back over time to look at periods in excess of a specific time period such as 6 months.

**The Chairman asked:** *“Do you have a supplementary question arising directly out of the answer to your original question. A supplementary should be relevant to the original question and not introduce any new material?”*

I'm disappointed in that answer. We used to have the number of empty homes reported to us quite regularly and i was hoping we could do a comparison.

**The Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care, Housing, Countryside, Community, Culture and Leisure Services answered:**

If I may, the earlier discount regime we had changes to the level of discount at the 6 month anniversary but under the current scheme we have a changes 28 days and 2 years. You may recall at Council a while ago we had changes to that Council tax exception so that we resolved an anomaly As a result of doing that we are not able to actually do these comparisons.

We do, in addition, we have periods of empty exceptions followed by discount or vice versa, which has proved impossible to track with query tools, there isn't a simple way to extract and acquire data and it would take an awful lot of time and officer time to do it. As I've said, on the early discount scheme we had a clear change at the 6 month point as the accounts went onto the next level of charge as that change no longer occurs at the 6 month officers no longer have anything to use as a starting point, Whilst agree with you it is disappointing, Councillor Macro, I can also fully understand that if we haven't got the tools to do the job, it would be an impossible for officers to spend time delving into.

**(c) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Education, Property and Broadband submitted by Councillor Mollie Lock**

**Question:**

“Will the Portfolio Holder for education please tell us how many West Berkshire Council children are currently being taught at home and their age when they began home tuition?”

**The Portfolio Holder for Education, Property and Broadband answered:**

There are **62** children who are electively home educated (EHE) at the moment. I have a breakdown of the ages of those children when they were registered which I can send to you in a table.

**The Chairman asked:** *“Do you have a supplementary question arising directly out of the answer to your original question. A supplementary should be relevant to the original question and not introduce any new material?”*

What are we doing or what we can we do to find those ‘invisible’ children? Those who have moved from this authority into this area and haven’t registered in a West Berks school, perhaps who have always been home educated, in a private school and have left and gone into home education, maybe even pre schools where leave them. What can we do to find these ‘invisible’ children?

**The Portfolio Holder for Education, Property and Broadband answered:**

We are not currently going out to search for children that are invisible. When such children come the attention of the Council for example through other contacts, perhaps if they leave mainstream then we can infer perhaps they are being educated form home, but we don’t actively search for ‘invisible’ children. Don’t forget that parents are much obliged to let us know that they have children that are of education age.