

Questions and Answers

Council
Tuesday, 1st March, 2016

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Council Meeting

1 March 2016

Questions and Answers



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

(a) **Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning Economic Development, Regeneration and Pensions by Mr Gary Puffett:**

Question:

“How does the council think the cuts will impact upon the wider local economy?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning Economic Development, Regeneration and Pensions answered:

Thank you for putting your question Mr Puffett, just in the interests of clarity and good communications I assume you are the same Gary Puffett that's currently a councillor at Greenham Parish and you were the Labour candidate at last year's general election for Aldershot.

This is an economic question Chairman, so it would be a change in our total budget figure between this year and last year that matters in regard to this question, rather than the figures for savings which are themselves only part of the overall budget.

The change in the Council's total planned expenditures from last year to this is only £1.61million. It was budgeted last year at £122.86 million as against the current year's budget of, which we are proposing tonight, of £121.25 million. Now this is a very very very small amount when judged against the total local West Berkshire economy which has gross value added of circa £5.25 billion . Indeed, the reduction in the budget represents only 0.003301% and will have no measurable impact on the local economy.

Indeed it has dwarfed some 4,000 to 5,000 fold but the expected £105 million to £157 million of additional contributions to the local economy next year due to continuation 2% to 3% increase in overall growth.

We live in one of the top five most prosperous areas of the country and our local economy and those of surrounding areas is thriving and is therefore more than capable of taking this small budget reduction in its stride.

Now having said all of that there will however be some non economical impacts but I see you are planning to ask these questions of my other colleagues in your following questions.

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.

(b) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Portfolio Holder for Planning Economic Development, Regeneration and Pensions by Mr Gary Puffett :

Question:

“Has the Council undertaken an Impact Needs Analysis to establish what specific ramifications will be for the local economy in the short, medium and long-term?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning Economic Development, Regeneration and Pensions answered:

Thank you again Mr Puffett. Given the infinitesimal and almost immeasurable impact of a £1.6 million budget reduction on a £5.25 billion economy growing at 2-3% per annum, the answer to your question would be no. Indeed to do so would be a waste of tax payer’s precious money. I don’t think you would thank us for that would you?

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 Gary Puffett asked the following supplementary question:

An impact needs analysis assessment, would give us an understanding of what the could be will mean to the local economy, not just now but in the future. In that respect, how can that be a waste of tax payer’s money?

The Portfolio Holder for Planning Economic Development, Regeneration and Pensions answered:

Chairman, it’s basically because the small impact that I pointed out compared to the large impact that even 2% growth brings the economy, I’m not sure how we could ever measure.

(c) Question submitted to the Leader of the Council for by Mr Gary Puffett:

Question:

“What new revenue streams does the Council propose to look into that could protect the local population from these draconian cuts?”

The Leader of the Council answered:

Thank you Mr Puffett. Many other Councils with profitable revenue streams have them because of the historical hang over of assets.

West Berkshire Council has few inherited assets from the days of when we were part of Berkshire County Council, and that we have no essentially inherited assets or very few from which to generate revenue.

However we are actively examining opportunities available by setting up a Local Authority trading company and we will come back to that at a later time. In addition the capital debate that we are having later, we have an amendment I have seconded to actively use capital budget to generate income where it makes economic sense.

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 Partnerships, Equality, Community Safety, Environmental Health, Trading Standards, Waste and Customer Services by Mr Gary Puffett:

Question:

“Could the council go into public private partnership with a cafe in the libraries, or a broadband or energy provider in order to generate funds?”

The Portfolio Holder for Partnerships, Equality, Community Safety, Environmental Health, Trading Standards, Waste and Customer Services answered:

Yes, we have been looking over a number of years at the provision of cafes within libraries. that we will continue to consider the options for this as we have provided one within the refurbished museum.

Regards to the energy provision and broadband, the energy provision for each library is sourced through the council's central energy contract. Likewise the broadband provision is also part of the Council's corporate system, both of which maximise the best deal through economies of scale.

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 Gary Puffett asked the following supplementary question:

You say you are looking at this now, why wasn't this looked at before the proposals were made?

The Portfolio Holder for Partnerships, Equality, Community Safety, Environmental Health, Trading Standards, Waste and Customer Services answered:

As I said Mr Puffett we have been looking over this over a number of years. I was Portfolio holder for Cultural Services in 2005 and we were looking at it. As you'll probably know most of our libraries are fairly small buildings and to try to put in cafes would be at detriment to their main purpose.

(e) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Car, Housing, Countryside, Community, Culture and Leisure Services by Mr Gary Puffett:

Question:

“What does the council plan to do with the library buildings?”

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

This hasn't been decided yet and will be subject to the outcome of the public consultation and the final proposal for the library service. Each library building would need to be considered on its own particular circumstances.

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 Gary Puffett asked the following supplementary question:

Any consideration surely wouldn't include selling any land or buildings off for a pepper corn rate as we stand Park Way, and the Newbury Gateway Project?

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

I presume when you're referring to pepper corn rate, that is if communities should come forward with proposals to work with us to run a library service.-

As I have said we haven't decided yet, there are many options through the outcome of the consultation. Parishes and communities may wish to run their own libraries, they may be able to lease the buildings from us and the buildings are that are no longer required but be considered for an alternative use if one can be found. The Council may also consider selling or leasing premises to external organisations.

But I have to stress the options will be considered but we can't take a final decision until the outcome of the consultation on the 7th of March.

(f) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Education, Property and Broadband by Mr Gary Puffett:

Question:

“What is going to happen to the books, DVDs, fittings and fixtures, audio-visual equipment and software from the libraries and children’s centres?”

The Portfolio Holder for Education, Property and Broadband answered:

There are a number of options which will be subject to the outcome of the public consultation and therefore amount of stock that becomes surplus.

We will look to offer surplus ‘younger age’ stock of books and other materials to other departments within the Council such as Children’s Services and to Schools. Some stock could be sold. There is a programme of disposal that, alongside a reduction in purchases would also see the stock diminish.

As far as furniture and fixings are concerned, we would look to retain the best for refit to any remaining branch libraries and elsewhere within the Council where appropriate. It may necessary to retain some items within the premises subject to the longer term decisions for the premises use.

These decisions cannot be made at this point, but all options where surplus book stock and furniture and fixings will be considered.

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.

(g) Question submitted to the Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Health and Wellbeing and Devolution by Mr Peter Norman and asked by David Marsh:

Question:

“Given we are in the middle of a further consultation on cuts the Council would like to implement would the Council consider a motion where they set the revenue side of the budget tonight to enable them to raise the Council Tax in line with the proposals, but postpone approving the expenditure side of the budget until after the results of the second consultation are known so that the cuts can be looked at in the round rather than put together in a piecemeal way, and therefore approve the expenditure proposals at a second Council meeting?”

The Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Health and Wellbeing and Devolution answered:

The vast majority of the expenditure plans of this Council are firm and haven't actually been subject to the consultation process. I think it is right to take those issues tonight and to resolve them.

Phase 1 savings consultation has been analysed and we will be using some of the transitional funding we've received tonight in the budget.

If we move on to Phase 2, those particular findings will be considered by Executive and the Council on 24th of this month and we will be looking at how further transitional funding can be used.

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.

(h) Question submitted to the Leader of the Council by Mr Peter Norman and asked by David Marsh:

Question:

“What, if any, additional lobbying is the Council making to Central Government to increase the settlement for West Berkshire Council, including getting our MP to better represent our interests, so that there is a smoother transition between now and the new financial arrangements for Councils in 2020?”

The Leader of the Council answered:

The local government financial settlement was approved by parliament two weeks ago. So there is no traction there to get additional funding from the local government financial settlement.

I would like to at this point again to thank the three Conservative MPs in West Berkshire who got us the transitional funding after the last government financial settlement.

I have spoken to all three of the MPs recently and all of them will continue to lobby in at least three different ways.

Particularly the Care Act, last year this Council was hit by £3 million impact from additional burdens on the carer. , We took out a judicial review out against the government which they decided to not proceed. We are still waiting for a response from the Department of Health about the Care Act funding.

That could be up to a further £3 million funding, however for the purposes for this budget we have assumed we will get no funding.

The second area where, is on business rates ,where the particularly the evaluations with business rates has hit us hard. , The valuation office revalued the Atomic Weapons Establishment last year I believe cost us over £1 million out of our budget, so again our MPs will be lobbying on that behalf.

And on the whole question of business rates generally, I saw Alok Sharma yesterday, he is the MP for Reading West, he is also parliamentary private secretary to the right honourable Oliver Letwin MP who is Chancellor of the Duchy on Lancaster. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster is in overall charge of the Cabinet Office, and as such for large elements of the implementation of government policy. I pressed Alok (Sharma MP) again to significantly the government to hurry up the business rates issue.

This Council hands over a very significant sum of money over to central government.

So, all three of our MPs continue to work hard on behalf of the West Berkshire residents. We shall see how successful they are.

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 David Marsh asked the following supplementary question:

Can the Council Leader address the fairly wide spread view that West Berkshire got quite a poor deal compared to some other authorities including Wokingham, which you have mentioned and also Oxfordshire. In view of that are there any avenues at all on which the government can be approached and say, “we didn’t get a fair deal, can you look at this again?”

The Leader of the Council answered:

Thank you, to answer your specific question, the local government financial settlement, you are quite right, we were the third hardest hit unitary authority in England with a 44% cut in revenue support grant. Actually Wokingham got a worse settlement than we did, we were third behind Wokingham who were hardest hit and then Rutland who were second.

So I acknowledge entirely that the formally used was very detrimental to us and I will be addressing that in the Revenue Budget speech later.

(i) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care, Housing, Countryside, Community, Culture and Leisure Services by Mr Peter Norman and asked by David Marsh:

Question:

“Given the statutory obligation to provide a comprehensive library service, does the Council agree that the proposals to close rural libraries and cut rural bus services puts the Council at risk of not meeting its statutory obligations in this regard?”

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

The service is being reduced but not stopped. A library service will continue. We are currently consulting with the public on the proposal and we will need to review and consider all the responses made before determining a final proposal for the service.

Although Local Authorities have a duty to provide bus services under the 1985 Transport Act, the level of service is not prescribed. The Council’s Passenger Transport Strategy sets out our priorities for funding bus services, and we believe that the remaining supported bus networks will meet our statutory obligations.

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 David Marsh asked the following supplementary question:

With regard to libraries, would you agree that closing the mobile service at the same time as you’re proposing to close the other libraries in particularly more of the rural areas. Doesn’t really make any sense would it not make sense to expand the mobile service if there are to be reduced services, rather than to lose that too?

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

As I have already said, the current proposals are still out for consultation The consultation will end on the 7th of March and we will carefully consider all responses before we make our final implementations.

(j) Question submitted to the Leader of the Council by Mr Peter Norman and asked by David Marsh:

Question:

“Will the Council ensure that the paltry transition relief of £2.8m over two years is used to transformative effect in the way that the Council delivers its services with a holistic review of how services are delivered and by whom?”

The Leader of the Council answered:

Thank you Chairman. If you consider £2.8 million paltry you have a different concept on the value of money to me. One of the great truths that some people are receiving other people's money, in this case the tax payers' money, do not really appreciate the work in to creating necessary wealth.

But to answer your question, I already announced at Executive last week but I can confirm again this evening that all of the transitional funding we have received will be used to help community organisations to develop new models of service delivery that are less dependent upon Council funding. At Executive I announced £400,000 worth of transitional funding to help develop new service models, short breaks for disabled children, homelessness relief, Empowering West Berkshire and for adults with learning disability.

More remain in transitional funding will be announced after the phase two consultation funding has been complete and we have been able to simulate the comments made in the consultation.

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 David Marsh asked the following supplementary question:

Just to clarify the word paltry, you yourself said the transitional were disappointingly small, I think that is what Mr Norman meant, I think can I just ask, you are saying yes is that the answer to the question?

The Leader of the Council answered:

Yes

(k) Question submitted to the Leader of the Council by Mr Peter Norman and asked by David Marsh :

Question:

“Councillors will be aware of their obligation to represent the whole of their constituencies and not just those that elected them. In fulfilling (j) above will they undertake to use the next few months to go out and engage with their constituents to get a community wide response to what services the Council should be providing and how services are delivered going forward, including constituency based public meetings? Such a review should in tandem encompass a wide ranging benchmarking of other local authorities as to best practice and innovation.”

The Leader of the Council answered:

Yes you are correct – Councillors are very aware of their obligations to all their constituents. Not just the loud noisy ones but also the quiet ones going who want nothing more than to go about their daily business. It’s not for me to tell Councillors how to conduct their business with their residents but I know most councillors, myself included, are also Parish and Town Councillors and close to their communities and working hard for their communities in that way. The last sentence in your question is a complete non-secqueter so I shall ignore it.

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 David Marsh asked the following supplementary question:

Given that six district councillors, including four Conservatives attended the two public meetings last week, organised by the group West Berkshire Save our Services. Would you agree that the suggestion by Councillor Frederickson and others that these public meetings were a very useful way to not just hear what people were thinking but actually get constructive suggestions from the way Council to save money and make money in the future, are a good way forward?

The Leader of the Council answered:

I would actually say that every way in which Councillors communicated and listen to their residents; public meetings, Twitter, physically shaking their hands, being at parish council meetings. Every way in which Councillors can listen to their residents, is a good way of listening to them and appreciating their comments and views.

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

There were no questions submitted by members relating to items not included on the agenda.