

# Questions and Answers

**Executive**  
**Thursday 30 June 2016**

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# **Executive Meeting**

## **30 June 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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No public questions were submitted in relation to items not included on the agenda.

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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 Portfolio Holder for Communities and Public Protection by Councillor Richard Somner:**

**Question:**

*"Following the launch of the community energy-switching scheme, can you clarify how the scheme operates and the benefit this has brought to those that have signed up?"*

**The Portfolio Holder for Communities and Public Protection answered:**

Thank you. Firstly some brief background information on what the scheme is about. A collective energy switching scheme is like an oil buying club and involves a group of consumers joining together to collectively negotiate a better deal on their utility bills. This process is facilitated by a third party within West Berkshire's scheme, that is iChoosr, but it is the same scheme used in many Council areas.

Householders sign up on the Big Community Switch website, which is accessed via the West Berkshire specific link, so you tell how many people are using it and saving within West Berkshire. It is possible to insert/record details of usage on the website. A pool of potential customers, along with local authorities, will group together and energy suppliers come up with a price based on the group buying scheme.

Once that bidding process is completed, those that are registered receive an email providing the best offer available. They don't have to take that offer, but they have about four weeks to decide whether they wish to switch. If so, the switching happens and it is done on their behalf.

The acceptance period within West Berkshire is still currently open so I haven't got final figures yet. But what I can tell you is that out of the completed registrations for West Berkshire, 97.7% of those are able to save on their energy bills when compared to their existing deals.

I've also got some average annual savings for fuel type for West Berkshire, with the caveat that these may change after the acceptance period and the final validations are made. The indicative figures for dual fuel online monthly direct debit, provides an average annual saving of £323.94. Electric only paper billing monthly direct debit, averages an annual saving of £160 and dual free prepayment - £100.27 average annual saving. This is the first round we have been through. It is something that was in our Manifesto so I am really pleased that we are being able to deliver this now. This will continue and there will be another round within a few months.

**The Deputy Leader 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 Richard Somner asked a supplementary question:**

*"I haven't looked at the specifications or the requirements, but is this something that we could or would look at opening up to organisations, for example schools, enabling them to be part of the groups and achieve savings"?*

**The Portfolio Holder for Communities and Public Protection answered:**

The schools are able to access our own corporate buying scheme. Without looking at the figures, I'm guessing as we book ahead that may be a better deal, but not available to private residents but I will check.

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**(b) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Communities and Protection by Councillor Alan Macro:**

**Question:**

*“What is the estimated proportion of non West Berkshire residents using the Council’s waste and recycling centres?”*

**The Portfolio Holder for Communities and Protection answered:**

I do have the figures, so non West Berkshire residents, which predominantly are from Hampshire; use at Padworth site is around 41% and Newtown Road 19%, based on the last annual statement.

**The Deputy Leader 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 Alan Macro asked a supplementary question:**

*“Those primarily are from Hampshire, we don’t get people coming in from South Oxfordshire/other areas?”*

**The Portfolio Holder for Communities and Protection answered:**

No, predominantly from Hampshire.

**(c) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Transport and Emergency Planning by Councillor Alan Macro:**

**Question:**

*“What is the Council doing to ensure that traffic signs are clearly visible?”*

**The Deputy Leader answered:**

I will take that in Councillor Simpson’s absence, but if you do raise a technical point, I will have to ask him to give you a more technical answer.

We have got a large number of signs across the district and priority is given to cleaning those on priority routes, but if you have any particular areas of concern of cleanliness or of hedgerows growing over, please let the authority know and it can be dealt with.

**The Deputy Leader 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 Alan Macro asked a supplementary question:**

*“So what I don’t understand is what do we do about them? Do we wait for people to report dirty signs or obscured signs? Or do we actually proactively go out and inspect them and clean them?”*

**The Chief Executive answered:**

I don’t think we go out proactively, I think it’s quite responsive. There are highway inspection teams who go out and look, but mostly that is focused I would say on road safety issues. So if there are particular signs that are obscured that they consider to be significant then they will attend to those, but I would encourage people to report signs that need cleaning, although the budget has been reduced in recent years.

I would just add, the conversations we are having with town and parish councils at the moment around devolution, this is an area that we are starting to have conversations about, around the possibility of local communities potentially doing some of this activity and this is being experimented in other parts of the country. So we are looking at that as well, in terms of what you might term very low level highway maintenance; verge, hedgerow maintenance, sign cleaning etc. There are conversations ongoing regarding the degree to which local communities themselves could take action around some of these things should they so wish. Just to say that these discussions are ongoing, but mindful of our financial restraints.

**The Deputy Leader commented:**

Just to add to that. The Chief Executive and myself have talked many times over the years that it is far better to get people reporting issues in rather than sending people out to try and find them. Invariably, in my experience, the service is generally very responsive to highways issues. I would encourage people to report in issues as they will get dealt with.

**Councillor Macro asked:**

*“Do we not open ourselves out to legal action if we’ve allowed a sign to get obscured?”*



**The Deputy Leader answered:**

I would suggest you pick this one up with Councillor Simpson and possibly with Highways on the legal aspect of it. I have no reason to believe that we are not operating properly, but I'm sure you can look into that in more detail.

**(d) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Planning by Councillor Alan Macro:**

**Question:**

*“As planning enforcement is important to protecting local residents, is the Portfolio Holder confident that the Council has adequate enforcement resources?”*

**The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Planning answered:**

Yes.

**The Deputy Leader 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 Macro asked a supplementary question:**

*“You may be aware that there was a parish council recently that did not appoint a chair or deputy chair because they were so frustrated at trying to get enforcement action done in their parish and also we’ve had an ongoing situation in Hungerford where we are now taking enforcement action, but it seems to have taken an extremely long time before any action was taken at all. So could you assure me that things will improve so that these kind of things do not happen again?”*

**The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Planning answered:**

Thank you Councillor Macro. It should be remembered that Planning enforcement is a discretionary service which means that there is no legal or statutory obligation on the Council to provide it.

However, I can confirm that the Council does take Planning and enforcement of Planning very seriously. I’ll give you an example of that, during the recent budget deliberations and the need for considerable savings, the Council’s Administration unanimously agreed to protect enforcement from further reductions and we didn’t have any further cuts to enforcement.

As Portfolio Holder, every month, I track all levels of enforcement activity and I review the major issues that are ongoing. The current level of two full time officers, which is down from five probably from about four or five years ago, they are stretched, no doubt. However this is just about sufficient for the current level of cases.

Furthermore, the Planning Department is also in the stages of completing a restructure that will increase the management time allocated to enforcement and there will probably be some additional shared technical resource from the appointment of Principal Planners that will also help.