

Questions and Answers

Executive

Thursday 16 February 2017

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Questions and Answers



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

(a) Question submitted to the Leader of the Council by Miss Sarah Lowes:

“Now that the Government’s plans in relation to Brexit are being made public, what safeguards are the Council putting in place to protect the interests of businesses within West Berkshire who rely on trade with the EU?”

The Deputy Leader answered:

It is difficult to answer the question without knowing what the full impact of Article 50 will be on our local businesses as it is not yet invoked and market forces are beyond the control of the Local Authority. However, when working with any business we would encourage them, whether reliant on Europe or not, to widen their customer base in the next few years.

West Berkshire Council works in partnership with Thames Valley Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and was recently involved in shaping a recent survey. The BDO Business Barometer was a survey of Berkshire businesses to find out their concerns post-Referendum and pre-negotiations. This was in light of surveys citing the top issues as:

1. Importance of investing in infrastructure
2. Economic impact of businesses cancelling or delaying projects
3. Need for clarity on rules for trading with EU countries
4. Impact of devaluation of the pound on exports
5. Impact of limiting access to the EU workforce

The purpose of the Berkshire survey was to understand what might be particular to Thames Valley Berkshire and this was the summary:

There was a general agreement that the five key issues outlined above are the main ones concerning businesses in Berkshire, although issue number four: Impact of devaluation of the pound, could be widened out to take into account currency risk exposure for importers and exporters more broadly.

Other matters mentioned by Berkshire businesses were:

- Cuts to EU funding
- Need to retain EU regulation that works, and lose what doesn't
- The main way in which respondents believe Thames Valley businesses could be affected differently to rest of UK relates to the high number of international companies in the area.
- Recruiting and retaining international talent
- International companies relocating out of the area or choosing not to locate here when previously they've done so

Through the LEP this has been fed back directly to the Department for Exiting the EU. Support for all businesses exists though the LEP-funded Berkshire Business Growth Hub, which includes support with international trade. Support is also available through Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses. West Berkshire Council also

provides direct, confidential and impartial guidance and signposts to advice for all businesses in the district through the Economic Growth Service.

(b) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing by Mrs Martha Vickers:

“You will be aware that the Homelessness Reduction Bill has had a safe passage through the House of Commons. This Bill will attempt to ensure that anyone threatened with homelessness receives help and advice from the Local Authority and assistance with finding alternative accommodation. How is this Local Authority preparing to implement these measures assuming the Bill passes the remaining stages and becomes law?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing answered:

The new duties will require an increased level of action planning by the Housing Options Officers and there will be an expectation that applicants are actively assisted to find alternative accommodation, where they are at risk of homelessness. This is very similar to the work the Housing Options team already do on a day to day basis, which once the additional resourcing requirements are properly understood, will allow us to make the transition to meet the requirements of the new duties by building on the skills and expertise that already exist.

In preparation training is being administered to the Housing Service by the National Practitioner Support Service (NPSS) which is funded by DCLG) and the NPSS will be sharing the Homelessness Reduction Bill Toolkit at this training, to include template action plans and letters, and to share best practice.

New duties will bring an increased need for temporary accommodation over and above the stock we already have. The Housing Service has been working hard over recent months to both maintain and increase the supply of accommodation it currently holds to meet current and future demand in line with our recently adopted Temporary Accommodation Housing. A block of 10 flats and four individual units are being purchased and the lease of a large 13 bedroom is being considered for suitability. More suitable properties are being sought as ongoing piece of work supported by the Councils capital programme. Support from Sovereign Housing Association has been secured and they have confirmed that in line with current arrangements for additional units of temporary accommodation they will lease more properties to the Council as and when needed. Work is ongoing to ensure the purchase of further suitable properties.

In a recent statement the Minister for Local Government Marcus Jones confirmed the Government will make available £48m to local authorities to cover the cost of additional burdens arising over the current spending review period. The Government is working with the Local Government Association to develop the distribution formula and we await details of this to determine best use of funding in West Berkshire to deliver on the new duties. Meeting the new requirements is likely to create additional work for the already busy Housing Operations Team and this will be addressed once funding is confirmed and the statutory guidance has been issued, in every other sense we are proactively working towards a good position to respond to the new duties of the Bill once it is enacted.

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?”*

Mrs Vickers asked the following supplementary question:

“Can you reassure me that the money and will be ring fenced for this particular project and then it will go towards increased staffing because they are already under an awful a lot of pressure.

And is it possible, considering that we already have such homelessness problem in the area that you could possibly take some money out of these others in the view of getting this money, I don't know the time scale before you receive this money from Government, but can we really wait much longer before we actually try address this serious problem?”.

The Portfolio Holder for Holder for Planning and Housing answered:

I think I have already explained to you we are looking at emergency properties to accommodate homeless people. I think the funding will be specifically directed at the team and we will once the Bill has been enacted, we will be in a better position to work out how this money will be spent.

But yes, I have already mentioned that resource will be an issue and I think staffing resource will be a major issue to us. But if you think the Government is making £48million available national, I am not really holding my breath too much as to how much of that money, that £48million, will come to West Berkshire. We will just have to make a very strong case in common with all other local authorities who are in a similar position to us.

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

(a) **Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing by Councillor Lee Dillon:**

"What impact does the Council believe that either the passing or the refusal of the Sandleford application will have on the local plan?"

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing answered:

The Sandleford Park site is an allocated housing site in the West Berkshire Core Strategy and would remain an allocated housing site regardless of passing or refusal of the current applications.

I am sure, Councillor Dillon, you will be aware that the Council has agreed an extension of time with the applicant for the current live Sandleford site planning applications. This is normal practice and will allow further discussions to take place on this very complex site.

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 Dillon asked the following supplementary question:

"Given that we are facing some difficulties with the Sandleford site and needing to work with the developers and have the extension, and that potentially it won't be able to deliver the 2,000 homes needed but maybe more like 1,500 homes, do you consider that to have a big impact on our Local Plan?"

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing answered:

I think the impact is probably more around our five year land supply and I think the Housing Sites Allocation DPD which the final consultation has gone to the inspector for his determination. I am confident that we will have sufficient five year land supply irrespective of the length of time that it's taking for Sandleford and the possibility of it delivering 1,500 homes.

(b) Question submitted to the Leader of the Council by Councillor Lee Dillon:

“Can we have an update on the progress being made between West Berkshire Council and Greenham Common Trust with regards to property investments to generate income?”

The Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services and External Affairs answered:

This extra source of income that will be generated by this joint venture is progressing well, for both West Berkshire Council and Greenham Common Trust fully engaged.

However, we have to be sure that there is strict controls and governance around how we invest taxpayers' money, as I imagine you will support.

Furthermore, regulation around both capital allocation and procurement will take time to make sure we are fully compliant.

However, we remain confident that the project will be operating in the coming financial year.

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 Dillon asked the following supplementary question:

“I just think that the announcement of this, which was welcomed in the way of in generating income, it was welcomed on this side: I think probably disappointed from the initial announcement, that we were going into this, that the Portfolio Holder for Finance made some while ago, we haven't heard any more public progress apart from the £50million allocated in the document approved tonight.

In terms of the governance side of those arrangements, will they go through select committees before coming to Executive and Council for approval?”

The Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services and External Affairs answered:

The full details of what they are still yet to be agreed with Greenham Common Trust in that respect so I can't speak for them, but the process is they will be full scrutiny in regards to what they are and both sides of the Council will be able to comment.

(c) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Culture and Environment by Councillor Mollie Lock:

“Can the Council confirm when it will be able to re-submit an application for the Padworth waste site?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing answered:

The planning applications to extend the opening hours and introduce residual waste at the Padworth Household Waste Recycling Centre will be submitted by our waste contractor, Veolia. Before re-submitting the applications additional survey work will be completed so an exact date can't be provided at this stage, but they anticipate that they will be submitted in April. Once submitted and validated, the Planning Authority should make a decision within 16 weeks, so, if approved we could make the service changes in August or September.

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 Lock asked the following supplementary question:

“I was as disappointed as they were that it didn't go through.

Is it possible, for the sake of our residents who live in the East, but some of our residents in Calcot and Tilehurst they are driving miles to get to a site. Is it possible in your mind to issue permits even if it's with a small cost to residents in the East, because we were able to issue ones for Hampshire very quickly?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing answered:

I think its the RE3 that were reluctant to issue permits, Councillor Lock, rather than us being unwilling to negotiate that, I think we were willing to do that but there was reluctance on the part of that authority.