

# **Questions and Answers**

**Council**  
**Tuesday, 4th July, 2017**

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**WestBerkshire**  
C O U N C I L

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# **Council Meeting**

## **4<sup>th</sup> July 2017**

Questions and Answers



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# Public questions submitted in relation to items not included on the agenda

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- (a) **Question submitted to the Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Leisure by Ms Judith Bunting:**

**Question:**

*“Can members of the Council please reassure residents of Newbury and West Berkshire that sufficient sprinklers are provided, or will be required, to protect families, staff and children in the case of serious fire, such as the recent blaze at Grenfell Tower, in local schools and in social and affordable housing developments such as the multi-storey blocks at the Racecourse development, the urban village planned for the Market Street area, and the high rise blocks currently being considered for the Sterling Cables site?”*

**The Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Leisure answered: (Written answer)**

Thank you, Mrs Bunting, for raising what is a very important issue, as it does give me the opportunity to reassure the residents of West Berkshire and give a detailed response to the question.

Everyone at West Berkshire Council has been shocked and saddened by the terrible fire at Grenfell tower. Our thoughts are with those who died in the fire and this evening we send our condolences to their families. We must also remember that a great many residents have been injured and left homeless and we wish them well as they recover from this terrible ordeal.

I also want to pay tribute to all the agencies and individuals who responded to the incident at the time and in the days and weeks since. It has been a real community effort and I commend those communities for the compassion, selflessness and generosity they have shown.

These events have, understandably, caused concern across the country that a similar tragedy could occur elsewhere. Here in West Berkshire we have plans in place to reduce the likelihood of a similar incident happening in our district.

West Berkshire Council has always, and will continue, to take its responsibilities around fire safety very seriously. This includes both the occupants of, and visitors to, its own buildings and those of partner organisations and privately owned properties. We are not complacent however and as a result of the fire we have begun some very specific activities which I will outline shortly.

Before I do, I think it will be helpful if I outline the current position in West Berkshire.

West Berkshire Council currently has no high rise residential blocks – which are defined as being 18 metres or taller, which equates to blocks of 6 storeys or more. The Council has, however, been in conversation with a wide range of local organisations to ensure that processes are already in place, and to consider whether any new activities can be introduced. We want to ensure that all sensible precautions have been put in place to minimise the risk to the public.

This has included dialogue with the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service and I am delighted to welcome Dave Sharp from the Fire Service here this evening, which clearly demonstrates the partnership that we enjoy with them, Sovereign Housing Association, the Education & Skills Funding Agency, the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Local Government Association.

With regard to its own buildings, the Council has an ongoing rolling programme of reviewing and renewing its fire risk assessments which covers both its school and non-school buildings. In addition, the Council's Health & Safety Team undertake health and safety audits of all properties. This covers fire risk and ensuring properties are managing this effectively.

The Council has a fire safety improvement programme in which we've invested more than £1.5m over the past four years. This includes £400,000 allocated to be spent this financial year. The work programme has seen fire detection systems, emergency lighting systems and building fabric work undertaken on the majority of its properties ranging from schools, care homes, administrative buildings and libraries.

Turning to schools, the Council's school estate officers are responding to the Education & Skills Funding Agency queries related to school buildings which will confirm no high rise school buildings and only a single circumstance where a residential property is located within a school building. This is a single caretaker property.

With specific regard to sprinklers, the Council has a Fire Suppression System policy for its own buildings which requires that all new buildings and major refurbishments which meet the policy criteria will have a risk assessment undertaken. Where this risk assessment recommends it, sprinklers will be installed. For both Council-owned buildings and privately owned properties where a Building Control application is submitted for construction, alteration or extension and come within the control of the Council's Building Control service, the regulations applicable at the time will be applied, including with regard to fire suppression systems (such as sprinklers).

In addition, the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service have said that whilst Building Regulations do not require the fitting of sprinklers in all new buildings, they are recognised as a very effective means of protecting life and of limiting fire damage to the property and the environment. They actively promote the fitting of sprinklers and consistently recommend their installation and I am pleased to tell you that the new primary school, Highwood Copse, which received planning permission only last Wednesday at the Western Area Planning Committee Meeting, will have sprinklers installed.

With regard to the provision of housing stock, West Berkshire Council has a small amount of directly owned housing stock all of which is low rise low occupancy.

Sovereign Housing Association is the largest provider in West Berkshire and I'm pleased to report that Sovereign has written to us confirming that it:

- i. has no high rise blocks in West Berkshire
- ii. holds up to date fire risk assessments
- iii. has increased inspections and visits by its housing teams to reassure tenants.

For Private Sector Housing, the Council's Environmental Health Team has evaluated known<sup>1</sup> houses in multiple occupation and no direct risks have been identified. Through existing joint protocols with the fire service it is expected that any fire safety issues will be identified and addressed.

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<sup>1</sup> The Environmental Health team have in recent years conducted comprehensive surveys to confirm HMOs – If there are unknown/illegal HMOs there are unlikely to be many.

For the construction, alteration or extension of a building where this comes within the control of the Council's Building Control service the building regulations and associated legislation applicable at the time will be applied to private developments.

For current construction, the need for fire suppression, cladding compliance and other safety requirements are determined by the Building Regulations 2010 (as amended) and guidance within Approved Document B (fire safety) Volume 2. However, it should be noted that not all building work is controlled by the Council's Building Control Service. Where a notice is served to advise that an Approved Inspector is providing the Building Control Service, at that point the Council has no further jurisdiction. An example of this is the Racecourse development for which an Approved Inspector was used.

With regard to civil contingencies the Council is prepared to respond to a broad range of civil emergencies and have plans in place which are regularly tested internally and also with other agencies. This includes a Major Incident Plan and a number of other plans associated with it including a Rest Centre Plan, Vulnerable People Plan and Major Incident Support Team Plan. These all relate to how people will be supported if they are involved in an emergency and have to be evacuated from their home. These plans not only involve Council Officers but voluntary agencies, other partner agencies and mutual aid support from other Local Authorities.

Our contingency plans cover a wide range of scenarios ranging from fire and flooding through to emergencies at the district's nuclear sites. We test them regularly, including one recent exercise testing the response to an emergency at AWE. The exercise saw participation by more than 400 people representing 40 agencies which shows the importance we all place on having plans and regularly testing those plans.

These plans have also been used for real incidents in recent times including for a Thames Water outage in June 2017 and the flooding in 2014. As a result of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, these plans will be reviewed and amended as necessary along with the Emergency Planning Training Programme.

In addition, the Council's Civil Contingencies Team has been engaging with other responders across the Thames Valley in particular the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service in relation to any buildings in the area, not just our own buildings, which may pose a risk to the occupants.

I should also add that as part of our Member Development Programme, all Members have had Civil Contingencies training, so that they are aware of the role they should play within their communities, should a major incident occur.

So what are the next steps?

At West Berkshire Council we are in a good place but we don't want to become complacent. You will recall I mentioned earlier that the Council does not own any high rise residential blocks and that Sovereign does not have any high rise blocks in the district. However, the Council has created a working group to examine any risks, look at any lessons that can be learnt and address them. The group, which includes the Housing, Education and Planning Services, are conducting a range of activities including:

- i. Reviewing all Council building fire risk assessments
- ii. Contacting the Responsible Person at each Council property to emphasise the importance of continuing to keep the health and safety reporting systems up-to-date
- iii. Writing to all contracted providers of services where people are placed by West Berkshire Council, seeking assurances that fire safety systems are in place for their building.

- iv. For ALL WBC owned buildings including schools (but excluding Academies), the Responsible Person for each building is to be asked if cladding exists on their building. Where cladding is used, regardless of the type, a precautionary survey by a competent surveyor based on the recommendations of the DCLG & Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors will be undertaken.

I'm very pleased to have had the opportunity to outline the Council's position and to inform our communities of the seriousness with which we take our responsibilities to keeping our communities safe, so once again, I'd like to thank Ms Bunting for her question.

**Councillor Lee Dillon asked:**

*"I just wanted to thank Councillor Cole for the thorough answer that was given and the seriousness of which the Council takes its duties and responsibilities and that of partner agencies obviously subject to my own declarable interest in that regard.*

*I did have a supplementary from that which is a genuine one from the answers given.*

*Councillor Cole spoke about reviewing the plans and I just wondered about a target date and how that gets reported back into this Council once those reviews have been undertaken.*

*And also Councillor Cole mentioned that responsible staff at school premises are being asked to review the cladding and again if there is a target date for that review of the cladding undertaken.*

*Thank you for the leniency there of asking a supplementary based on the question.*

*I am happy for a written response."*

**The Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Leisure answered:**

I will give you a written response Councillor Dillon, but I can assure you that actions are already being taken, although I spoke in the future tense it's actually in the present tense that all these actions are being taken very seriously.

I was at a meeting last week where the responsible people were present and indeed they are fully aware. There are ongoing weekly meetings of the action group. We have an action plan in place and will provide feedback to the Executive.

**(b) Question submitted to the Leader of the Council by Mr Simon Pike:**

**Question:**

*"What methodology and data has the Council used to predict the substantial reductions in the electorate in some polling districts (e.g. Catmore 35% reduction and Falkland 17% reduction) in 2022, that it provided to LGBCE in December 2016 as part of the Boundary Review?"*

**The Leader of the Council answered:**

Thank you, Mr Pike. The methodology used is that which has been prescribed by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England in their publication Electoral Forecasts – A Guide for Practitioners.

As for the data, in essence this was the electoral roll but also overlaid on top of that is the housing land availability as per the annual monitoring returns as published by the Council in April 2016.

**Mr Simon Pike asked:**

*"I did look at that document you referred to from the Boundary Commission for England and it gives general principal but not a detailed methodology.*

*So I'd be particularly interested in the meaning of the phrase "distributed pro-rata WBDC 2022" that was in the spreadsheet that was part of the WBC submission in December 2016.*

*Where the Falkland Ward was shown as having a reduction in voters of 17% in 2022."*

**The Leader of the Council answered:**

Thank you, quite a technical question, I cannot give you a thorough answer. The Officer who would be advising me won't be back until next week.

I know you are in contact with the Electoral Registrations Department on these matters. If you are not happy with the answers you get from them please take that up with myself.

But I think they are probably better able to answer those technical sorts of questions.



**(c) Question submitted to the Leader of the Council by Mr Simon Pike:**

**Question:**

*“How does the Council’s proposed ward pattern that is built out of current polling districts, which are arbitrary subdivisions of the existing ward pattern, meet the objective of the Local Government Boundary Commission that ‘Ward patterns should – as far as possible – reflect community interests and identities?’”*

**The Leader of the Council answered:**

Thank you, in undertaking a “Council Size Review” the Local Government Boundary Commission will expect any submissions, and they don’t just have to come from West Berkshire Council, to have had regard to:

Electoral Equality (making sure that the ward’s representation is as equal as possible)  
Community Identity  
Effective and Convenient Local Government

I believe the proposals we have before the Council tonight reflect all three of those criteria. The proposals have addressed those areas where there is known to be an electoral imbalance. The spreadsheets clearly show that the new proposals only result in three areas where the accepted tolerance level of + or - 10% has not been met and in all those cases they’re at 11%.

The Council took a very practical approach to the “Community Identity” criteria and has assumed that Parish and Town Councils are themselves “communities” and has not sought to divide parishes in any way.

Hopefully the comments will reflect those very different elements. Looking at that geography how those building blocks fit together.

In relation to “Effective and Convenient Local Government” criteria the Council believes that to fulfil the statutory and discretionary obligations a number of 42 + or - 1 Councillors are needed to go forward in 2019/20. In essence that will then mean the Council does have to review its overall governance arrangements.

**Mr Simon Pike asked:**

*“I was thinking more about the sense of community with separate communities within the towns of Newbury and Thatcham. And looking specifically at the new proposed border for Thatcham Kennet and Crookham, which is in two parts that are only connected by the level crossing at Thatcham station.*

*What is the common community interest in identity of Crowfield Drive which is 2 kilometres from the level crossing in the west of Thatcham with Crookham Park which is 2 kilometres to south the level crossing ”*

**The Leader of the Council answered:**

Not quite sure I understand. The issues here are the Wards are collections of not necessarily a community in themselves, but collections of communities. So for example, Councillor Cole, who is sitting next to me, the current ward she represents will be subsumed into a larger group

of communities; but that doesn't mean to say that those communities are necessarily directly related in that sense. You can look at all sorts of different ways communities are made up and defined.

So if I was to look at school catchment areas then overlay that with GP catchment areas I would get different communities. I would get different communities if I looked at where people shop and I think I would expect that probably most people within the ward that you mentioned, Thatcham South and Crookham, will be looking in the same area for retail.

So I think there are many different elements here. What I think we have done with the proposals tonight is come up with a good compromise between all these different elements.

**(d) Question submitted to the Leader of the Council by Mr Tony Vickers:**

**Question:**

*“What impact will the major revision of District wards within the towns of Newbury and Greenham have on town council wards and the way in which town councillors are divided among the new wards?”*

**The Portfolio Holder for Culture and Environment answered:**

Thank you Mr Vickers. Once the Local Government Boundary Commission has agreed new warding patterns for the District they will then be responsible for looking at the impact on Parish and Town Council wards and make appropriate changes at that point in time.

**Mr Tony Vickers asked:**

*“The exercise that’s been done by the district and by the Boundary Commission is based on current town and parish boundaries. What if those were to change in the meantime, as could happen through a community Government review? How does that process then tie-in with what you have just described?”*

**Head of Strategic Support, Andy Day commented:**

Mr Chairman, I can clarify that whilst the current review is going on, there can be no community reviews. This has to be completed and put in place before any community reviews are then considered.

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

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*(There were no questions submitted)*