

Questions and Answers

Council
Thursday 1 March 2018

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West Berkshire
COUNCIL

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Council Meeting

1 March 2018

Questions and Answers



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

(a) Question submitted to the Leader of the Council by Mr Peter Norman:

Question:

"In light of the recent Local Government Boundary Commission's recommendations to create a number of super boroughs with 3 councillors, can the Council confirm its commitment to the democratic principles of "one person, one vote" for local elections and not create a distorted local democracy where some constituents get three votes whilst others get one depending on where they live?"

The Leader of the Council Answered:

Thank you Chairman. Thank you Mr Norman for your question.

As you recognise, the proposed ward patterns have been recommended by the Local Government Boundary Commission. The Council's cross-party submission to the recent review reflected our preference for a mixture of one and two member wards, but the Commission decided to include more three member wards in its proposals. The majority of these new three member wards are in the more urban, densely populated wards where creating very small one member wards might be impractical; although some of them are in the more rural areas, I particularly site Kintbury and Hungerford as an example.

To be clear, each of the members in these new wards will have an equal responsibility for the whole ward. To make this work effectively, ward members will work together in a collaborative way, sharing duties, information and knowledge. I also understand, as is the case in other areas where three member wards are common, that members within a ward may agree to appoint amongst themselves responsibility for town, village or community representation. These decisions must be taken by members in the interests of their constituents. I think it would be a mistake to be too prescriptive on this point as to the arrangements which might work between different members and in different communities.

I strongly believe that in spite of these changes, the people of West Berkshire will continue to be equally represented, as they are currently. Of course, if they choose to, members in three member wards may work together on local projects in the benefit of their shared constituents but that isn't to say that those in one member wards can't work with their neighbours in a similar way. West Berkshire is a very strong community with elected members who recognise commonality of interest where it exists. I certainly don't perceive this shared purpose diminishing simply because of warding pattern changes.

Although it might be foolish for us to attempt to pre-judge the results of the upcoming election, I am sure that elected members in 2019 will act and make decisions in the spirit of democracy as West Berkshire's Members have always done.

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 Peter Norman: *Thank you for that answer, which was a full answer, but I don't think you actually answered the question which was "Are we going to have one person, one vote in three Member wards or are people going to have three votes as is the current situation where we have dual representation?"*

Leader of the Council: In a single member ward you will be entitled to vote for one person, in a two member ward for two people, and in a three member ward for three people. That is the situation. It is not one of our particular design and as I said in my answer we would prefer one or two member wards. Although there is a commonality of number of electors per councillor, which is about 2500, it's a little bit more than that now, but there is that commonality of number of people that elect a councillor. So nobody voting in any particular ward has extra influence.

Mr Peter Norman: *Just to be absolutely clear. You're saying that myself, living in Wash Common, would have three votes at the next local election whilst somebody who perhaps lives in central Newbury would only get one vote, is that correct?*

Leader of the Council: I've answered that Chairman and that situation exists in a number of wards at the moment and will be existing in future in a few of the wards.

(b) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Culture and Environment by Mr Simon Bowes:

Question:

"Why can't we recycle plastic food tubs, flora tubs etc? In W Berks we can only recycle plastic bottles which is a fraction of household plastics?"

Mr Simon Bowes was not present at the meeting and will receive the following written response from the Portfolio Holder for Culture and Environment:

We are continually working with Veolia to be able to collect more materials for recycling.

The type of recyclable materials that any local authority can collect is determined by the demand from within the reprocessing industry. Currently within the UK there is very little demand from reprocessors for plastic tubs and trays, as such we are not able to guarantee that if collected we would be able to send such items for recycling.

The lack of demand from reprocessors has recently been intensified by China increasing quality controls for the recycling that it accepts, as China has traditionally been the biggest single market for secondary plastic exported from the UK. The impact of the change in quality controls has put the UK recycling industry under huge pressure and the impact of this change is still being assessed but ultimately could see local authorities reducing collections because they are not economically viable.

West Berkshire Council and Veolia will not collect materials for recycling unless we can guarantee that it will be recycled. As such we advise that all non bottle shaped plastic is disposed of with the general rubbish. Any plastic disposed of in the black bins will be sent to an Energy from Waste Facility where it will be turned into power for the National Grid, so it isn't completely wasted.

We are also working with industry groups such as Waste and Resources Action Programme, the National Association of Waste Disposal Officers and the Local Authority Recycling Advisory Committee to help increase the amount of waste we can collect as recycling and to encourage manufacturers to make it easier for products to be recycled.

(c) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Culture and Environment by Ms Carolyne Culver:

Question:

"Will the Portfolio holder for Culture and the Environment provide figures to support the claim that a £50 per household annual charge for green waste bin collection may yield a net gain of up to £900,000 to West Berkshire Council?"

The Portfolio Holder for Culture and Environment answered:

Thank you Ms Culver for your question. The Council has recently consulted on the proposal to charge an annual subscription of around £50 per household for the collection of garden waste in 2018. We estimate this proposal will create income of up to £900,000 per year. The council will make a final decision regarding this proposal at this meeting.

The figure of a £900,000 income, is a net income figure after the associated costs have been deducted from the anticipated gross income.

The Council is currently in negotiations with the contractor, Veolia, to make changes to the waste contract. Information about the design of the service and financial modelling is commercially sensitive and is therefore not available.

All information that is available to the public will be put into the meeting agenda pack.

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?"*

Ms Carolyne Culver: Yes, what happens if you don't manage to raise that amount of money; at what point do you review your figures?

The Portfolio Holder for Culture and Environment: We're very confident that we will be raising that amount, we anticipate the take up will deliver that. In fact, looking at other authorities that have introduced similar schemes we find that the initial take-up is usually exceeded in the years following.

(d) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Culture and Environment by Ms Carolyne Culver:

Question:

"Will the Portfolio holder for Culture and the Environment explain how a £50 per household annual charge for green waste bin collection will contribute to West Berkshire Council and national government commitments to increase rates of recycling?"

The Portfolio Holder for Culture and Environment answered:

As part of the public consultation we recognised that one of the impacts of charging for garden waste collection might be a reduction in how much we recycle and an increase in how much we send to landfill or energy from waste facilities.

The current recycling rate is 51.8% which is now the second year it's been at this level. Maintaining our recycling rate is an achievement as many authorities saw a decrease in their recycling rate last year. Our recycling rate exceeds the Government's target rate of 50% which should be achieved by 2020.

Whilst we do expect there to be a decrease in recycling with charges for the garden waste service, experience in other Local Authorities shows that this will steadily plateau and then start to increase again.

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?"*

Ms Carolyn Culver: *So, bearing that in mind, what other things will you do to ensure those recycling rates don't decline, rather than waiting for it to no longer plateau, what will you do?*

The Portfolio Holder for Culture and Environment: Well Ms Culver, of course this is going to be driven by the decisions that residents make. If there's a high level of take up in the service then we'll see less of a decline; if there's a lower level of take up in the service we'll see more of a decline. Whatever happens there will be a change in the amount that we're sending to landfill, there's no doubt about that and what we'll seek to do to reverse any change is to continue our programme of education and encouragement.

- (e) **Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Leisure by Mr David Marsh:**

Question:

"Newbury Community Football Group (NCFG) has lodged a planning application to enhance Newbury football ground in Faraday Road, without use of public funds. Will the council work with NCFG to bring forward this improvement in facilities that will enable hundreds of local children and other players to continue enjoying improved health and wellbeing from playing active sport?"

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Leisure answered:

Thank you for your question Mr Marsh. Any third party is legally entitled to submit an application on land where it is not the owner and the application will be determined on its own merits.

It is public knowledge that the Council intends to redevelop its freehold interest on the London Road Industrial Estate including the football ground, all subject to planning consent of course. The intention remains the same and it is important that NCFG are aware of this before they expend any monies on design information fit for planning submission purposes.

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: *Thank you. So I infer from that the answer to the question is no. In view of that, can you confirm that the ground will at least remain available to the local community to book football related activities whilst the proposed eviction of the current operator by the Council takes place, if it does take place, in June this year?*

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Leisure: Thank you. I think eviction is a slightly emotive term. They've come to the end of their lease, but we are in the middle of negotiations with potential new occupants which include making the pitch available for sporting activities.

(f) **Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Leisure by Mr Stephen Masters:**

Question:

"With the increasing dependency on the voluntary organisations in respect to the care of the rough sleeping and homeless community what is the council doing to ensure the vulnerable are adequately protected? For example how does the council ensure all volunteers are appropriately DBS checked and trained in safeguarding procedures."

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Leisure answered:

Thank you for your question Mr Masters. Advice can be provided by the Council about safeguarding and the correct policies and procedures to implement in order to ensure due diligence. However, voluntary organisations registered as charities are regulated by the Charities Commission and not the Council.

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 Stephen Masters: Yes, further to that and the wider question of admission services, the hostel in town is not fully regulated by a corporate body. Do you think that's something that's appropriate?

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Leisure: I don't think your supplementary is relevant to the question you asked.

Mr Stephen Masters: *The safeguarding of vulnerable people for instance.*

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Leisure: I've already answered that, charities are regulated by the Charities Commission and my understanding is that West Berkshire Homeless who run the hostel are a registered charity. Thank you Chairman.

(g) **Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Leisure by Mr Stephen Masters:**

Question:

“Does the council accept that West Berkshire has a rate of rough sleepers that is over 50% worse than the national average and this is something that is unacceptable in a prosperous and economically active area such as West Berkshire?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Leisure answered:

The rate of rough sleepers has risen in West Berkshire from 15 in 2016 to 20 in 2017, a 33% increase, which relates to 0.31% per 1,000 of the population, and yes this is an issue that the Council is addressing with its partners. It should also be noted that this is a national issue, particularly in the south of England, with rough sleeping figures of 31 in Reading, which is 0.4% per 1,000 of the population, 27 in Slough (0.49% per 1,000 population) and 48 in Swindon which is 0.48% per 1,000 population. The Council is proactive in efforts to reduce this figure and has in place a number of initiatives. These include:

- Partnership groups to tackle multi functions including rough sleeping. One of these is the Homelessness Forum, a multi-agency forum that oversees the implementation of the Homelessness Strategy and which takes strategic action to prevent and reduce homelessness in West Berkshire.
- The Council leads on the “Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM) project in partnership with Thames Valley Police. This is a multi-agency group working to identify the reasons for people sleeping rough and West Berkshire has been selected as one of only 25 local authority areas across England to develop co-ordinated, effective support for people experiencing multiple needs. The selected local authorities, statutory agencies and the voluntary sector are working together to transform the lives of rough sleepers experiencing a combination of homelessness, substance misuse, contact with the criminal justice system and mental ill health. They will use the MEAM framework to help shape their work and receive support and advice from MEAM coalition staff based across the country. This project only received funding recently to appoint a project worker to work with the agencies involved to address this issue so we have yet to see the outcome of the work, but I am extremely optimistic that this will produce real results for this vulnerable group of people.
- The Council also funds an outreach worker based at the Two Saints hostel in Newbury which engages with rough sleepers with the aim of helping them off the streets.
- We also have a comprehensive Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) which means that people sleeping on the streets can stay at Two Saints at times of cold weather, rain, wind or extreme heat. The Council activates the SWEP regularly and on a discretionary basis and not in accordance with the strict rules of cold temperature of -2 degrees for 3 nights running. Therefore in the past year this has been activated for weeks at a time and I think West Berkshire deserves credit for ensuring that the SWEP is instigated sooner rather than later.

It is also timely that the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 will be implemented in April 2018 with the aim of preventing homelessness in the first place. The Council concentrates efforts on prevention at the moment, but as a result of this Act, the Council is proposing at the next full Council meeting to approve significant resources to support this Act. It is therefore anticipated that rough sleeping will also be tackled by early intervention.

As a result of these co-ordinated efforts, we anticipate that rough sleeping will be tackled effectively.

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 Stephen Masters: *I do, I congratulate the Councillor for obviously reading the figures in the Healthwatch West Berkshire report which she repeated pretty much verbatim, in relation to percentages and ratios, but she didn’t answer the question as to whether it was actually acceptable. So, with that in mind, I would like to know which parts of the Healthwatch West Berkshire report does the Councillor think will be taken into consideration?*

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Leisure: With regard to the Healthwatch West Berkshire report, I think there were some inaccuracies in that report as we’ve actually mentioned in our press release of today. We work very carefully with all agencies and Healthwatch indeed sit on the MEAM Steering Group, so we do work very closely with all agencies to ensure that the needs of rough sleepers are actually catered for and I think the welfare of rough sleepers is more important than any report that has been published and we are actively working with people to try and ensure this.

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

(There were no questions submitted by Members)

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