

Questions and Answers

Executive
Thursday 14 June 2018

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Executive Meeting

14 June 2018

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, Housing and Waste by Mr Thomas Tunney:

“How much did the Council spend during the winter of 2016/17 helping the homeless with emergency accommodation in Newbury?”

As Mr Tunney was unable to attend the meeting he has received the following written response from the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste:

Between October 2016 and February 2017, the Council spent £365,135 on commissioning services at Two Saints and £82,407 on Bed and Breakfast costs.

I am pleased to inform you that for this financial year 2018/19, West Berkshire Council has been awarded £210,000 by the Government specifically to tackle rough sleeping and to address rough sleeping nationally with the aim of halving it by 2022 and eliminating it by 2027. We will be working with our partners to make sure that there are sufficient measures in place using this funding to meet this aim. The funding will include measures to remove barriers faced by people who are threatened with homelessness. This may be to pay for something as basic as money for identification documents to providing housing with intensive support for very vulnerable people who struggle to engage with existing services.

(b) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste by Mr Thomas Tunney:

“How much did the Soup Kitchen and West Berkshire Homeless save you in winter 2017/18?”

As Mr Tunney was unable to attend the meeting he has received the following written response from the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste:

It is not possible to quantify the amount saved as the services provided are different to what the Council is obliged to provide. The Council commissions the Two Saints hostel to provide Severe Weather Emergency Provision (SWEP) which was underused as homeless people were using the night shelter. There were sufficient spaces at Two Saints under SWEP to accommodate all homeless people without the night shelter being provided. The service was extended to include day time and food due to the severe daytime cold temperatures.

(c) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste by Mr Thomas Tunney:

“What are the projected costs for the extra fly tipping and landfill charges that will be produced as a by-product of the new garden waste charge?”

As Mr Tunney was unable to attend the meeting he has received the following written response from the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste:

Estimated costs and operational contingencies have been included in the Councils calculations. The Council is currently in negotiations with the contractor, Veolia, to make changes to the waste contract. Information about the financial modelling is commercially sensitive and is therefore, I am afraid, not publicly available.

Concerns about fly-tipping and landfill were raised during the consultation process that was undertaken prior to the decision taken by Council in March and details of that consultation was published with the reports.

Fly-tipping is a criminal offence which can result in prosecution. If convicted, a person could be sentenced to a term of imprisonment, an unlimited fine or both. This Council has in the past and will continue to take appropriate enforcement action. West Berkshire Council also seeks to recover in full the costs of enforcement action wherever possible.

(d) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Health and Wellbeing, Culture and Leisure by Ms Julie Wintrup:

“Did West Berkshire Council, as sponsor of Healthwatch West Berkshire’s research into homelessness, ensure NHS Research Ethics Committee approval was gained to conduct the research, given that people were interviewed because of and in relation to their present or past use of health/social care services?”

As Ms Wintrup was unable to attend the meeting she has received the following written response from the Portfolio Holder for Health and Wellbeing, Culture and Leisure:

The Healthwatch Homeless and Rough Sleepers Report 2018 was produced by Healthwatch to provide evidence for claims they made to the Health and Wellbeing Board regarding the experience of homeless people in accessing local services.

For context we are required in legislation (Health and Social Care Act 2012) to have in place a local Healthwatch to ensure the views and feedback from patients and carers are an integral part of local commissioning across health and social care services. This is funded via Adult Social Care budgets. The Council’s role, as commissioner, is to make the arrangements but to remain at ‘arms length’ to ensure as much as is possible Healthwatch is as independent of the Local Authority as possible. As such, the Council should not sponsor or influence the work of Healthwatch.

In this case, the Council did not sponsor the report and was unaware of the format in which Healthwatch intended to provide evidence for their claims regarding the access of homeless people to health and social care services. The Council neither had the role nor ability to consider whether the NHS Research Ethics Committee had given their approval.

(e) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Health and Wellbeing, Culture and Leisure by Ms Julie Wintrup:

“Does West Berkshire Council, as sponsor of Healthwatch West Berkshire’s research into homelessness, consider itself to have protected adequately the data of the vulnerable adults who participated in the research?”

As Ms Wintrup was unable to attend the meeting she has received the following written response from the Portfolio Holder for Health and Wellbeing, Culture and Leisure:

As per my previous answer, the Council commissions Healthwatch to provide an independent voice for patients and carers and I do not agree that the Council can be considered to have commissioned the report and the Council was unaware of the methodology used in the research until its publication.

However as the commissioner of Healthwatch, the Council does have a role to ensure that any complaints regarding data protection are investigated appropriately by Healthwatch following the agreed complaints process. Healthwatch have stated that they used signed consent forms with interviewees and did not include personal identifiable information in the report which the Council considers is compliant with relevant data protection legislation.

(f) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste by Mr David Marsh asked on his behalf by Ms Carolyn Culver:

“Will West Berkshire residents be charged a reduced amount for their garden waste bin if they receive council tax support as is the case in Reading?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

The decision was made at the Council meeting on the 1st March 2018, not to provide concessions for this service.

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 asked the following supplementary question:

“Bearing in mind it’s been revealed today that Reading Council raised more than twice as much as they had hoped to and bearing in mind that this charge is to cover the costs of green waste recycling, will the Council commit to returning the surplus to the people through a council tax reduction in the future?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

Well as the scheme hasn’t started and the scheme was to make a charge, I cannot guarantee, until we know how the scheme is operating, whether or not we will be in a position to return anything to anybody.

(g) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste by Mr David Marsh asked on his behalf by Ms Carlyne Culver:

“Will West Berkshire residents be offered a 25% reduction for their garden waste bin if they receive single person discount on their council tax?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

The response to this question is in line with the answer to question (f), that the decision was taken at the Council meeting in March 2018 not to offer any concessions on the green waste collection.

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 Carlyne Culver asked the following supplementary question:

“Does the Council still think it’s realistic to introduce this charge on the 1st July?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

The charge will be introduced later this summer.

(h) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste by Ms Carolyne Culver:

“Please can I ask the portfolio holder what financial and operational contingencies she will be putting in place in the likelihood that black bins will be stuffed with garden waste and fly tipping will increase, as a result of the £50 charge for garden waste bins?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

Estimated costs and operational contingences have been included in the Council’s calculations. The Council is currently in negotiation with the contactor, Veolia, to make changes to the waste contract and information about the financial modelling is commercially sensitive and therefore not available.

Concerns about fly tipping and landfill were raised during the consultation process, that was undertaken prior to the decision taken by Council in March 2018, and details of that consultation were published with the reports.

Fly tipping is a criminal offence which can result in prosecution and if convicted, a person could be sentenced to a term of imprisonment, an unlimited fine, or both. This Council has in the past and will continue to take the appropriate enforcement action. West Berkshire Council also seeks to recover in full the costs of enforcement action wherever possible.

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 asked the following supplementary question:

“How will the Council deal with the situation, where the bin men turn up on roads and the black bins are absolutely stuffed full and there are black bags alongside it. How are you going to deal with that situation, what advice are you going to be giving to the bin men?”

I have been out and spoken to about 300 people in the Downs and most of them have been saying to me that they will go and they will fly tip it/stick it into their black bin. What is going to happen, how are you going to pay for that? They could be very heavy if they’ve got grass cuttings in.”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

I am struggling to answer this question because people are entitled to put garden and food waste in their black bin anyway. If it’s a green bin it’s heavy and people can wheel it out.

The alternative of course is that we do have two waste recycling centres, one at Padworth and one at Newtown Road. where people can take any excessive waste whether it’s general waste or green waste. So the facilities are there for people to deal with this quite easily.

(i) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste by Mr Gabriel Stirling:

“Do you agree that it would have been appropriate for representatives from Veolia and the council's waste management team to have attended the recent planning meeting that determined the applications regarding the Padworth recycling centre so that they could have addressed concerns raised by local residents and members of the committee?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

It is regrettable that the applicant wasn't present at the Eastern Area Planning Committee meeting and although we would not respond to questions on individual planning applications, in general terms the Planning Committee consider all the evidence before them, including the extensive documentation on the planning file. When officers make a recommendation to the Planning Committee on whether a planning application should be granted or refused, this is done in the knowledge of sufficient relevant information. During the Committee, if any questions arise from the papers, it is sometimes useful for Members to ask verbal questions of the parties. For this reason, the Council's Constitution affords each party the opportunity to speak for five minutes per application, and answer any questions on their presentation, but there is no obligation on anyone to either attend or speak at these meetings.

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 Gabriel Stirling asked the following supplementary question:

“Thank you Councillor. My supplementary would be that, whilst I agree with you, how can the Council effectively look on behalf of residents, if the applicant for the proposal fails to attend?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

I don't disagree with you, but I cannot be responsible for a third party attending a Planning Committee. I can't make them attend, and we can only strongly advise that they do. It was unfortunate on that occasion that the applicant could not attend.

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

(a) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste by Councillor Alan Macro:

"Will the Council support the target to end homelessness in West Berkshire by 2020?"

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

The Council is working with all its partners to tackle homelessness in West Berkshire and has committed additional resources to addressing the obligations within the Homelessness Reduction Act which was implemented this year. It will take time for the impact of this legislation to be evaluated and to actually make an impact.

The Government target is to halve homelessness by 2020, and to cease it by 2027 and so it would be difficult to sign up to an earlier target unless it is achievable. However, with regards to this Government target we have had some really good news. For this financial year, 2018/19, West Berkshire Council has been awarded £210,000 by the Government, specifically to tackle rough sleeping.

So West Berkshire will be working with our partners, who joined us in making this funding bid to Central Government, to ensure that there are sufficient measures in place, using this funding to meet this aim. The funding will include measures to remove barriers faced by people who are threatened with homelessness and this may be to pay for something as basic as money for identification documents, to providing housing, with intensive support for very vulnerable people who struggle to engage with existing services. So I think it's a really good news story and I am delighted that our housing team and the partners, both the voluntary and statutory partners, have worked together to secure this funding, which will make a real difference to the lives of this very vulnerable cohort of people.

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 Alan Macro commented:

"I quite agree, but it sounds like the question to my question is no?"

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

Correct, the answer is no.

(b) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Communications by Councillor Jeff Brooks:

“How does the Council plan to reach out to businesses nationwide to capitalise on the top tech award?”

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Communications answered:

It is indeed fantastic news, “Tech Nation”, an independent body, has found that Newbury has the most tech specialised local economy in the whole of the United Kingdom, beating even London, due to the high density of the digital tech and employment it has in the area. This comes hot on the heels of the analysis conducted by Think Broadband, another independent body, that found that West Berkshire has the best broadband for a rural local authority in the entirety of the United Kingdom.

Complemented by rail electrification and a strong skills base locally, we have the core components to be generally open for business.

This is testament in the main to the incredible work of Councillor Roger Croft who years ago set this in place and we miss him dearly.

To address your question, we can’t stop there and there is certainly more to do to engage local businesses, and one of the key elements of our strategy is working with the Thames Valley Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and we have worked with them to secure £1.7 million of funding to support digital companies in the early stages of their development locally.

West Berkshire is also engaging DCMS and its partners and the LGA to explore whether it would be possible to implement 5G coverage in West Berkshire, the first rural area to have it. Fingers crossed, work is progressing and that requires a lot of co-ordination with a lot of national companies.

Of course we have an all time high in the number of businesses paying business rates locally, so there are plenty of partners to work with out there and we are starting to engage them, as you alluded to, on the refresh of the Economic Development Strategy. In particular, exploring supporting incubator hubs across the district to complement Thames Valley LEP’s own strategy on that particular point.

You talk about national Councillor Brooks, we can be global. I’m sure you will have seen that we are supporting the bid to extend connectivity to Heathrow so that there can be a connection between Langley and Iver allowing for a much quicker transfer between West Berkshire and Heathrow without the pain of going into Paddington and of course, we only have to look back at the Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce, 70% of international businesses, when they are looking to invest in the UK, are saying they want to be within an hour and two hours of getting into Heathrow. So we are going local, we are going national and we are going global.

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 Jeff Brooks asked the following supplementary question:

There is such an opportunity and you seem to share that, what I don’t see are the actions. I do regret that we lost Bayer, so while we are saying that it’s all wonderful here, we lost a very important client to Green Park.

So I look forward and perhaps you can tell me more, and so the question is on the timetable for the Economic Development Strategy. I think it is very important to understand how we leverage this good news, how West Berkshire becomes ambitious to go out, I've not seen anything yet, to say we are open for hi-tech businesses, look at our infrastructure. I am a bit worried we will outsource it to the LEP and say they do all that. So don't let the LEP be our Brussels please.

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Communications answered:

I refer you to the Newbury Weekly News' excellent coverage of the fantastic broadband that we have in the area, the fantastic digital connectivity, the fantastic electrification work that's going on, these are all fantastic actions and not just words. However, I take your point, we do need that Strategy, we need it in place. Now it would be remiss of me to then jump ahead with what that Strategy is before talking to that record high number of businesses paying business rates in the district. So I will be talking to them first, the timeframe will be dictated by what works with them, but rest assured the passion that I know you have Councillor Brooks is equally shared and rest assured we won't be slipping into 2019 we will be sticking to the timeframe.

(c) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste by Councillor Alan Macro:

“Can the Portfolio Holder for Waste clarify arrangements for the roll out of the new green bin tax which is now only weeks away?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

As you well know, this is a flat rate optional charge for kerbside collection. It is not a tax. Residents can subscribe to the service, which I am sure you will agree is a good service, or they can decline to pay. Should they not wish to pay for kerbside collection, they are welcome to take their garden waste to the recycling centres free of charge.

I have to say Councillor Macro that I think it is a shame that you have chosen to use such misleading and emotive language on this issue. It's clear that you do not understand that leading a local authority means making hard choices, particularly on non-statutory services such as garden waste collection, and we do this in order to protect services for the vulnerable people who see them as a lifeline, particularly in children's and adult social care. Furthermore, Councillor Macro, had you attended the Council meeting in March where we set the budget, you would know that your own party leader supported the principle of charging. So I think it is fair to say that the Liberal Democrat opposition on this topic is shambolic to say the least.

Getting back to the substance of the question, I would like to assure you that a full communications campaign has been drawn up, which will include a press launch and letters being sent to every household. There will then be a period of time during which residents can subscribe to the service using a specially-built online platform, with the new service beginning soon after. Full details will be made available to Members very shortly and will also be announced at the press briefing, which is currently scheduled for later on in the summer.

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 Alan Macro asked the following supplementary question:

“If the launch is scheduled for later on in the summer, presumably this could be as late as September, what effect will that have on the anticipated revenue?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

There will no doubt be an effect on the anticipated revenue, but I can't give you figures at the moment.