

Questions and Answers

Executive

Thursday 14 February 2019

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Executive Meeting

14 February 2019

Questions and Answers

(Please note that the order in which the questions were taken at the meeting varied from the order set out on the agenda)



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

- (a) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Transformation and Property by Miss Louise Harriet Coulson:

“Can you tell me precisely how the council has invested their pension’s fund?”

The Portfolio Holder for Finance, Transformation and Property answered:

The Pension Fund is independent and separate to West Berkshire Council.

It is run by the Berkshire Pension Fund which manages its own investment strategy and more detail can be found on their website which is:

<http://www.berkshirerpensions.org.uk>

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?”*

Miss Coulson commented:

“I was going to ask more about where it is invested basically and I will therefore visit the website given.

(d) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste by Mr Joseph Clarke:

“Can you tell me the difference that the MEAM (Making Every Adult Matter) approach has made to the lives of the most vulnerable rough sleepers in West Berkshire, since the MEAM partnership became operational a year ago?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

Adopting the MEAM Approach in West Berkshire has meant that people with multiple complex needs have been proactively supported in accessing the services they need so that their lives are less chaotic.

Those who have been supported by the MEAM Approach in the last year have been able to make positive changes in their lives that will, in time, help them to be less reliant on local services.

By adopting the MEAM Approach local agencies have committed to working together in a coordinated way to focus on helping those who are most vulnerable because they may be sleeping rough, have mental health issues, be misusing substances and have a history of offending.

With the help of the MEAM Coordinator those people who have been referred to MEAM are supported in ‘navigating the system’ so they don’t get shunted from one service to another without any real chance of having a meaningful engagement.

Services have been asked to ‘flex’, when they can, so that a MEAM client can be engaged and supported and this has made a real difference.

During 2018 there were 60 referrals to MEAM and 18 people were accepted onto the MEAM Coordinators caseload. Many of those who were not accepted onto MEAM were helped in other ways by agencies collaborating alongside the MEAM approach.

During the last 12 months, 6 people were helped to access local and national services so that they no longer needed to be on the MEAM cohort and 12 remain on the Coordinators caseload.

10 people who were sleeping rough are now in accommodation and importantly all of those who have been taken onto MEAM have made positive changes and report feeling more positive about their lives.

In addition to being supported in finding suitable accommodation, people on the MEAM cohort have reported having better mental health, they are more meaningfully engaged with substance misuse programmes and are less likely to offend.

Once someone’s life is less chaotic they are more able to focus on making positive decisions such as seeking employment or training, being part of a community, building better relationships and importantly setting themselves realistic goals and ambitions.

That is the difference the MEAM approach is making in West Berkshire and I have to say that I am extremely proud of that achievement.

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 Clarke did not ask a supplementary question.

(e) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Transformation and Property by Mr Peter Carline (asked in his absence by Mr Steve Masters):

“Could you tell me what ‘the benefits of Brexit’ are that the Council and Councillors have referred to in previous correspondence with me?”

The Portfolio Holder for Finance, Transformation and Property answered:

Brexit, in whatever form it takes, is being managed at a National and European Level, and depending on the form it will take will determine the level of impact it will have on the District and the Council. Personally, I trust that the current negotiations will provide a managed exit that will progress to a satisfactory conclusion.

With regards to the specifics of the question, the quote may be taking a line out of a letter from myself which responded to a previous question.

The line was:

‘The Council will continue to work tirelessly with businesses, Government and other partners, as it always has done, to ensure West Berkshire reaps the rewards that Brexit brings and that we are very hopeful about the future.’

However, this needs to be read in context with the main content of the letter and that was as follows:

‘West Berkshire will not be complacent. There is a huge amount to be positive about in West Berkshire and we are confident that the District will continue to thrive in years to come, whatever the shape of Brexit. The diversity of company size across the District means that our economy is dynamic and resilient, employing people across a very large variety of sectors and enterprise sizes. Indeed, our economy continued to grow through the recent recession and did not falter where others did.’

I stand by that summary – Brexit will be a challenge, but I, like many residents and business owners, will do my best to ensure West Berkshire remains a strong and vibrant community to live and work.

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 Masters asked the following supplementary question:

“On Tuesday, the Prime Minister made a statement and in that statement she stated that there have been regular contacts with local authorities. What contact has been made with West Berkshire from the Government?”

The Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transport, Environment and Countryside answered:

I have been involved through South East England Councils who have provided events and training. The LGA has taken a lead and is supporting local authorities in responding positively to this. We have had a briefing from Kent Council who have probably been most affected and information is coming in through officers. I attended an event with one of our senior officers two weeks ago and I understand our emergency planners were also involved.

(f) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Children, Education and Young People by Ms Helen Picken:

“In light of the national coverage regarding increases in demand and spend in Children's Social Care can you tell me what this Council is doing to manage the situation?”

The Portfolio Holder for Children, Education and Young People answered:

When I became Portfolio Holder back in 2015, 48 children per 10,000 of the Population were looked after by this authority, or 174 to be precise. As of December 2018, 48 children per 10,000 of the Population were looked after by this authority, or 173 to be precise.

You are correct the national coverage does say about increases in demand and spend, and the Office of National Statistics reports an 8% increase in the number of Looked After Children nationally in this same period.

While we have experienced demand for support increase as awareness, population and complexity of need have changed, we have been very successful in managing this.

You ask how we have done that and the short answer would be ‘in lots of different ways’. However, there are a few examples that I would like to highlight.

We have done a lot around partnership work - we work hard to develop trusted and skilled partnerships with the existing community services in this area. This has increased the capacity for a skilled and timely response to children and their families in need.

We have done a lot of targeted innovations - West Berkshire has applied for grants, pilot funding and innovation projects that are all relevant to managing this demand. For example, we were successful in securing £2.1 million of innovation funding to develop the Family Safeguarding Model here in West Berkshire. A far more recent example would be our selection to participate in a pilot on Mental Health Assessment support for our Looked After Children.

Another way we have managed this demand is through our people. By investing in well trained staff we work hard to ensure work is targeted effectively, assessments are accurate and plans are achievable. We have worked to secure this workforce with an innovative recruitment and retention package which has been well received and contributes to keeping our use of agency staff (and hence spend) in the Children and Family Services relatively low.

We have also focused our financial expertise on ‘modelling’ this demand to enable us to predict future needs and prioritise as accurately as possible. This enables effective management, budget control and an ability to track.

Finally, I would say our work is subject to independent scrutiny – such as OFSTED and the Local Safeguarding Children’s Board. The feedback we have received from these bodies is that the work delivered here in West Berkshire is efficient, of a high standard and safeguards children effectively. It is something that this Administration is extremely proud of.

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 Picken did not ask a supplementary question.

(g) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Transformation and Property by Mr Frazer Dobson:

“Given that the Council consulted on other funding reductions why did the Council not include the cut in funding to the Corn Exchange in its 2019/20 budget consultation?”

As Mr Dobson was unable to attend the meeting he received the following written response from the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Transformation and Property:

The change in grant funding for the Corn Exchange was a decision made several years ago, and so would not be part of any consultation for the next financial year, 2019-20.

In 2014 the Council agreed a 5-year service level agreement with the Corn Exchange, with each year’s funding being tied to a specific benefit for our residents - for instance, assistance to education, help for disadvantaged and so on. In 2016 the Council informed both the Corn Exchange and the Arts Council that it would not be able to renew the agreement when it expires in March 2019. This three years notice was to enable the Trust to replace the Council funding from other sources.

In 2017, the Council agreed to the Corn Exchange Trust’s request to grant them the freehold of the building and we have completed about £250K of essential maintenance works, including a new lift and air conditioning system, in order to hand over the building in excellent condition.

The Council will have provided a total of £1, 232,000 over the 5 years, including a sum of £174K in this financial year. In all the Council has invested at least £2.5M over the last 10 years in the Corn Exchange.

We understand that the Trust’s annual income is about £3.4M, so the Councils’ contribution has represented only about 5% of their annual turnover, and the Board of Trustees has had more than two and a half years to plan for the consequences of the Council’s funding coming to an end. Having now the freehold of the building enables them to attract the sort of capital and other funding that the Council is not eligible to apply for, so this opens up new opportunities for the Trust.

The Trust should, however, be congratulated for making such positive progress in developing the Corn Exchange as a vibrant, successful and important part of the cultural landscape, and an enjoyable venue for so many people.

They have done so while making themselves independent, at a time now when the rising cost of front line and statutory services continues to stretch local government resources to the limit.

During the three year wind-down, the Council has had several meetings with the Corn Exchange senior management team and the Arts Council of England to discuss this and how we can continue to work with them in the future.

(h) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste by Ms Susan Millington (asked in her absence by Ms Carolyn Culver):

“In the light of the Government's recent Resources and Waste Strategy commitment to recommend that local authorities provide weekly collection of food waste and free garden waste collection (in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from landfill), will West Berkshire Council please reconsider its Green Bin charge?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

The Resource and Waste Strategy was published in December and it is supported by a series of consultations. We need to be absolutely clear on what the new Strategy says and I'm going to quote from that: 'To reduce greenhouse gas emissions from landfill by ensuring that every householder and appropriate businesses have a weekly separate food waste collection and subject to consultation, we will legislate to ensure that this is in place from 2023. The consultation will also explore whether households with gardens should have access to free garden waste collections.'

If the recommendations are approved either in part or full, then the Government will legislate to put this in place from 2023, which is 5 years from now. Any change to our waste services need to be affordable. The Strategy says that the Government will ensure that local authorities are resourced to meet new net costs arising from the policies in this Strategy and I look forward with interest to see how this is provided.

I would encourage everyone to consider how they can reduce the amount of food they throw away and to compost at home, these are the most sustainable ways of managing our resources. We do provide a fortnightly collection of food waste in the green bin and I would encourage everyone to use that. We have no plans at this stage to change the waste collection services. If we did change the garden waste collection service then I would welcome views as to how we would make other cuts, because what is actually proposed here is that we make cuts to other services, to the tune of the £1.3 million pounds that the garden waste collection service is generating.

The other point I would make is that why should those people with no gardens subsidise those people with gardens with regard to garden 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 Carolyn Culver did not ask a supplementary question.

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

“Bearing in mind the confusion regarding which items can be recycled at the kerbside, would the Council consider providing bin stickers as a constant reminder for residents?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

I assume that you are referring to the plastics that we recycle. We collect plastic bottles only and this hasn't changed since we introduced it ten years ago in 2008. The recycling boxes and bags provided to households already have information on the side saying which materials can go into them, and here is one I prepared early, one that does say on the green bag exactly what should go into it. If you look at the green boxes, the green boxes also say that they can take glass or paper and card.

We have newsletters and other communications which are also provided to remind residents of what can be recycled and this will continue. A leaflet with all the information is available to download, on the Council website; www.westberks.gov.uk/recycle and if you want to you could print that out and put it on your wall at home.

There would be an extra cost associated with putting extra stickers on recycling boxes and bags and they would need to be made from weather resistant materials, so we will not be providing stickers.

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:

“Would it be possible to get a quote please to say how much those stickers will cost? Because when I go around canvassing, which I do every single weekend, there is a lot of stuff that is in the wrong boxes so people obviously don't understand. Would it not be better to invest in the stickers and save time and money at the recycling centre and avoid having to take out items that people have put in incorrectly?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

Thank you for that suggestion, however I have said that we do provide a lot of leaflets, and actually on the back of the council tax envelope there will be information there, pictorial information telling people what can and can't be recycled and where to put it.

We do, as I am sure you are aware, provide bin tags and we also issue householders with newsletters a couple of times a year and again in the newsletters we do reiterate to people what can and can't be recycled.

Perhaps when you are canvassing and it's a subject that is so close to your heart, you could have that conversation on the doorstep with people and advise them what to do, that would be very helpful.

(j) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste by Mr Thomas Tunney (asked on his behalf by Miss Louise Harriet Coulson):

“Why hasn’t any portion of the £210,000 rough sleeper initiative fund gone to any of the voluntary organisations involved in the winter plan?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

The Rough Sleeping Initiative funding secured by the Council was the result of a bid. The Council and some partners met with representatives from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to discuss needs and MHCLG representatives provided advice about the appropriate targeted projects to include in the bid. This advice was followed and resulted in the allocation of funding. The money can however only be allocated to the uses and projects identified and approved in the bid, and it cannot be unilaterally diverted by the Council to other organisations.

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?”*

Miss Louise Harriet Coulson did not ask a supplementary question.

(I) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste by Mr Steve Masters:

“Why did West Berkshire Council ignore feedback and advice from the voluntary sector about rough sleeper numbers and actively block the opening of a shelter in December and ensure that the rough sleepers spent another month on the streets?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

The Council did not block the opening of a shelter in December, or at any time.

The Homelessness Strategy Group’s Winter Plan did not include provision of the night shelter as there was sufficient, suitable accommodation available at Two Saints. The Homelessness Strategy Group, which agreed the Winter Plan, includes representatives from housing providers and voluntary agencies who make valuable contributions to it. It is therefore incorrect to suggest that the Council ignored feedback and advice.

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?”*

Steve Masters asked:

“Does Councillor Cole still hold the view that rough sleeping is a lifestyle choice?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

I think you are taking that out of context Mr Masters.

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

Question:

“With a significant full council next month, what arrangements will executive put in place to ensure the public including people with disabilities is able to engage fully with proceedings?”

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

Thank you. This is a really important question. Indeed, a large proportion of the Council’s time, energy and budget goes towards supporting vulnerable people, including those with a wide range of disabilities, with one of our aims, amongst many others, to ensure that they have the best opportunity to participate in public life – in its broadest sense. We do this mainly through our Adult and Children’s Social Care, Public Health and Public Protection Services.

You are right that next month’s Council meeting is important, (although I might argue that they are all important), and I can confirm that, at West Berkshire Council, meetings of full Council and other public committee meetings are open and accessible to all members of the public, including those with disabilities.

Agendas and reports are published five clear working days in advance of the meetings, and these are available in a variety of formats, on request prior to the meetings. This includes a recorded format, for those with sight impairment. In addition, if any member of the public with specific needs wishes to contact our Democratic Services team in advance of any public meeting, we will always do our best to accommodate their needs in whatever ways we can.

This specific meeting will be held in the Council Chamber, which is completely accessible for those with mobility issues, and it is also equipped with a hearing loop, to assist anyone wearing a hearing aid. Time is also set aside at the beginning of each public meeting for members of the public to engage with those proceedings by asking questions – and the questions, as well as following agenda items, are projected clearly so that members of the public attending can follow what is going on. Copies of the agenda are also sent to public questioners in advance of the meeting. Where we are notified that a public questioner is not able to read the projected questions provisions can also be made to accommodate them.

In view of all that, I am convinced that the Council does all it reasonably can to ensure that all members of the public can engage fully with the proceedings.

(p) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Communications by Mr Lee McDougall:

“As Councillor Fredrickson committed publicly in June 2018 that West Berks Council would re-open the Community Football Ground in Faraday Road in September 2018 can the Council explain why this vital community asset is still closed to the public and when it intends to make it available”

Answered by the Portfolio Holder for Health and Wellbeing, Leisure and Culture on behalf of the Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Communications:

In August 2018 the Council received a condition report on the old football ground and its associated buildings and structures. The report highlighted a number of issues, the result of which was that the premises could not be immediately reoccupied for health and safety reasons. As a result before the ground can be used again, remedial works need to be carried out to improve the security generally and specifically make the buildings on site secure and inaccessible. As previously stated the ground will reopen for general public access as a multi-use games area based on the existing grassed pitch. The aim is to complete by the Spring all works required prior to reopening again in the Spring.

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 Lee McDougall asked:

“So given that there was a fully functioning ground with a tenant that was paying rent that was used by the community, including children’s football, and the ground was only closed as part of the unlawful property deal with St Modwen, do you now regret the decision to evict the tenant and block the community from using the ground?”

The Leader of the Council commented:

I have just received professional advice from the Deputy Monitoring Officer that the supplementary question bares no relation to the original question and therefore will not be answered.

(r) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Transformation and Property by Mr Nassar Kessell:

Question:

“In light of the recent LGA press release regarding the £8billion local council funding ‘black hole’, is West Berkshire Council anticipating further reductions to local services over the next 4-8 years?”

The Portfolio Holder for Finance, Transformation and Property answered:

Ultimately, funding for local government will need to change within the next three to four years, therefore the situation in the four to eight year period you are asking about is difficult to predict. Currently we focus on a Medium Term Financial Strategy, which covers the next three year period. Therefore 2023, the start of that four year period, will start to be assessed in 2020.

I would note that Government has committed to address the growing needs of Adult Social Care and we at West Berkshire will continue to lobby, both directly and via our MPs, the need for adequate funding and going by our track record I am hopeful that we can build on previous successes.

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 Nassar Kessell asked:

“Do you anticipate that you will have to make further cuts, yes or no?”

The Portfolio Holder for Finance, Transformation and Property answered:

I thought I made it clear that the funding that far ahead isn't certain and the answer is that it depends what happens with government funding in the meantime.

(b) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Transformation and Property by Miss Louise Harriet Coulson:

“Does the Council have shares in any companies that are in any way connected to weapons manufacturers or tobacco companies?”

The Portfolio Holder for Finance, Transformation and Property answered:

The answer is the Council has no shares in any companies.

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?”*

Miss Louise Harriet Coulson did not ask a supplementary question.

(k) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste by Mr Thomas Tunney (asked on his behalf by Miss Louise Harriet Coulson)

“What shortfall of beds have you asked West Berkshire homeless to cover?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

West Berkshire Homeless Charity have not been asked by the Council to provide any beds. The Council has not done so because there is no shortfall of beds and there is adequate and suitable capacity at Two Saints.

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?”*

Miss Louise Harriet Coulson did not ask a supplementary question.

(n) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services by Dr Julie Wintrup:

“Can Executive please describe how confident it is that it is fully compliant in its legal and ethical duties to members of the public and vulnerable groups, when commissioning, conducting or collaborating in research in its broadest sense, including consultations and ‘customer surveys’?”

As Dr Julie Wintrup was unable to attend the meeting she received the following written response from the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services:

At West Berkshire Council our residents are central to the services we provide and the way we go about providing them. It’s important to us that our residents have a voice, and know they have a voice, and are able to help us shape our services and inform the decisions we make about the services they use.

To answer your question directly, I am very confident that we meet our obligations with regards to the consultations, questionnaires and research carried out by us, or by others when they involve our service users.

The council has a clear consultation policy (available on the council’s website) maintained by an experienced and professional Performance, Research and Risk team who are very knowledgeable in this sector and do some excellent work. Indeed, our reputation extends beyond our borders with visitors from local authorities coming to West Berkshire to see how we approach consultation and engagement. The reports that propose consultation and research activities to Corporate Board and elected members or make recommendations based on research and consultation results include as standard equalities impact assessments.

Appropriate methodologies are followed rigorously when conducting surveys required as part of statutory returns to government. These include the offer of alternative format questionnaires to ensure opportunities to participate.

We had a very small number of formal research requests over the last few years. These are scrutinised in terms of ethical and legal compliance, feedback is provided to the applicants and an approval is provided, if appropriate, by a member of the Performance, Research and Risk team in conjunction with a Head of Service.

We consult extensively throughout the year, for example we had over 54 community engagement exercises in 2017/18, of which 32, that were of interest for the general public, were published on the Council’s Consultation Portal on our website. In addition, I can tell you that West Berkshire Council is a Member of the Consultation Institute and regularly keeps its policies under review to ensure we remain abreast of changes to legislation and best practice.

Through our consultations and wider engagement we work hard to make sure as broad a range of voices as possible are heard. This ranges from formal consultations to more informal conversations. Among these varied and different groups are our Community Panel, the Disability External Scrutiny (DES) Board, elected members and Town and Parish Councils, members of the Health and Wellbeing Board, schools and businesses. Individual services also have their own ways of communicating with, and listening to, specific groups of service users.

Each approach is different depending on what we are asking, and who it affects. As well as working with bespoke groups, we also make use of more widespread channels to alert people

to our consultations. Where appropriate we provide details to the local news media, share details on social media and can arrange for posters and videos to be made to make the information as accessible as possible. These activities aim to reach as many people as possible, and this may also include interest or support groups who can help us spread the message further still.

I hope this reassures you that we take our responsibilities, legal and otherwise, very seriously.

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

“What was the cost of collecting fly tipped waste in the third quarter of 2018/19 compared with the third quarter of 2017/18?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

Responsible householders do not fly tip. Everyone has a duty of care to ensure that any person or company employed to remove rubbish from their property is licensed to carry waste and can provide the relevant waste transfer notes. The only exception to this is rubbish collected as part of a Council Service. Unfortunately, if you don't your waste could be fly tipped which is a criminal offence and you could be fined.

The good news is that for quarter 3 this year the number of reported fly tipping incidents and associated clearance costs have gone down from 201 in the same period in 2017/18 to 181 in the same period 2018/19.

We would urge everyone to promote legitimate waste disposal routes which are using the collection services, household waste recycling centres, home composting or using a licensed waste disposal company. If you see fly tip on public land please report it to the Council online via 'Report a Problem' or by contacting Customer Services.

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:

“What is the cost?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

The cost in 2017/18 was £16,005 and in 2018/19 £12,711.

(q) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste by Mr Steve Masters:

“How many additional beds have been provisioned and filled (Nightly average) at Two Saints since 1st November 2018?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

Two Saints can accommodate 20 people in emergency beds so no additional beds have been made available. The occupancy has varied from 5 and 6 per night all over Christmas to 16 to 20 during the cold weather. The numbers vary as some people move from the emergency beds into rooms and new people approach the Council as being threatened with homelessness. The average for November was 14, December 7 and in January 11. Not all of the emergency bed users are rough sleepers as they are used to prevent people sleeping rough. The average figure for November was higher due to the new obligations included in the Homelessness Reduction Act where single people were accommodated at Two Saints under discretionary relief duties.

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 Steve Masters asked:

“Do you believe that the charities led night shelter is surplus to requirements even though it is full most nights at present?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

I didn't say it was surplus to requirements, I said we have got adequate provision.

(c) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste by Miss Louise Harriet Coulson:

“Can you assure me that the Council, when making provisions for SWEP, have taken into account the homeless in West Berkshire with no local connection but valid reasons for not wanting to return to their local area, i.e domestic abuse and other such issues?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

The Council has commissioned a winter cover at Two Saints from 1 November until 31 March 2019 for people with a local connection. In addition to this, the SWEP (Severe Weather Emergency Protocol) is activated in extreme temperatures, both low and high in summer. The Council is flexible in activating SWEP and it has been open for 34 days so far this winter. If someone presents to the Council from another area with valid reasons for not wanting to return, these are investigated and people are accommodated if reasons are justified for example domestic abuse. If reasons are not justified, the Council will direct the individual or family to the area where they have a local connection.

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?”*

Miss Louise Harriet Coulson asked:

“I am just wondering how it would be investigated?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

Our housing officers will do a full investigation. Further detail can be provided outside of the meeting.

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 (asked on his behalf by Councillor Lee Dillon):

“Could the portfolio holder outline what the Council’s current position is regarding the potential major development at Grazeley and are any joint bids being considered?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

Grazeley is just one of a number of potential development sites that have been put forward as part of the new local plan and will be considered as part of that process.

But with regard to joint bids, Reading Borough Council, Wokingham Borough Council and West Berkshire submitted a joint Expression of Interest to the Garden Settlement Programme in October 2016 and again in November 2018.

In October 2017, the three councils also submitted a bid to the Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF) to forward fund the necessary infrastructure for a new settlement. This bid was successful and has progressed to a full business case submission which is due at the end of March 2019.

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:

“In applying for that infrastructure funding prior to a development taking place, would that not assume that the development is then going to happen? My concern is how far are we going down the road with potentially big developments like the Grazeley site without full public consultation and involvement around what that looks like going forward?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

With regard to Grazeley particularly, there has been a lot consultation already and, in fact, Councillor Clifford and I, and officers attended a joint workshop with Reading, Wokingham and West Berkshire last year where the relevant parish councils and interested parties were there to develop ideas for this site. So a lot of consultation work has already been done.

The bulk of the Grazeley site I have to say is in Wokingham and a small amount is in West Berkshire, and indeed at a Part II meeting a couple of weeks ago, which Councillor Macro was at, we were also given another in depth briefing about how this progresses. I take your point that it is part of the local development plan, but we have also got to look at this particular project

for Grazeley, almost as a separate entity, and that is the next step that we will be looking at, if the bid is successful, as to how we progress further with the joint working on Grazeley, but I think we all feel that because of the time limits for funding, the Government give us such strict time limits to get bids in, we don't want to miss any opportunity for bidding for significant sums of money, like the £360m we are bidding for in this HIF bid for infrastructure funding and there are time limits to it, we would be foolish not to do that Councillor Dillon, irrespective of the development of the new local plan.

(b) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Highways, Transport, Environment and Countryside by Councillor Jeff Brooks:

“What recompense will the Council be expecting from SSE following the Parkway roadworks shambles?”

The Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transport, Environment and Countryside answered:

I'd like to start by saying that I am sad and disappointed that residents of and visitors to Newbury had such a difficult experience in the traffic on that Saturday. We are doing everything we can to make sure it does not happen again.

Now I am going to do something I have never done before in this role and that is to read verbatim the answer prepared for me by our officers. As you know Councillor Brooks I prefer to speak from the heart, but on this occasion I am advised I must not. I am a very frustrated woman because I have very strong feelings about what happened and I would like to voice them, and I know you yourself Councillor Brooks were directly affected and you have been fully briefed with a good idea of what happened and why I must keep quiet. I won't risk undermining the legal case and therefore read the answer as follows:

Under the Traffic Management Permit Scheme (England) Regulations 2007, it is a criminal offence for a statutory undertaker, which would include a utility company, to breach a permit condition.

Scottish and Southern Energy (SSE) applied to West Berkshire Council for a permit to conduct utility works at the Parkway junction between 19 and 23 January 2019. The Council issued a permit which was subject to the condition that SSE manually control a set of three-way traffic lights between 6.30am and 6.30pm. We set that condition to minimise disruption to Saturday traffic. The highway works that were undertaken appear however to have resulted in significant gridlock, and I know you can confirm that, and to have caused unacceptable delays for shoppers leaving the Parkway car park.

This Council is therefore now investigating the circumstances which led to this incident with a view to taking appropriate enforcement action.

If a person is convicted of the offence of breaching a permit condition, the level of penalty imposed will be a matter for the magistrates' court to determine having regard to all relevant facts. I can however confirm that the maximum penalty that can be imposed by the magistrates' court upon conviction for this offence is £2,500.

As there is an ongoing criminal investigation, I am unable to comment further on any specific details at this time. I can say no more other than to add I look forward to receiving your witness statement which will help us build our case.

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 Brooks asked the following supplementary question:

“You stated that you are taking measures to stop this happening again, what might those measures be?”

The Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transport, Environment and Countryside answered:

As I say, we are investigating what happened with a view to taking criminal action and we have looked at our processes to ensure they are as robust as they can be. I understand that you found it difficult to negotiate our phone system and I am sorry for that because I think systems should work and we are looking at the processes as well.

(c) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Highways, Transport, Environment and Countryside by Councillor Alan Macro (asked on his behalf by Councillor Jeff Brooks):

“What does the Council do to monitor traffic flow at roadworks at weekends?”

The Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transport, Environment and Countryside answered:

Weekends are busy times for works on the roads in West Berkshire. As you would expect in a successful district there is always plenty of work for us, the utility companies, builders and developers to do and weekends, despite what happened at the end of January (reference Question b), are the most convenient and least disruptive times to do it and as you know we do our best to co-ordinate and condition work so we can keep traffic moving safely as well as we can, and for our own Council promoted works in traffic sensitive locations, arrangements are made for our Officers to visit the site to ensure the work is being undertaken as agreed with the contractor and rules are being followed.

For work promoted by statutory undertakers, utilities for example, the Council would expect the responsible utility to provide appropriate supervision. It is a condition of the street-works permit that the undertaker will provide the right supervision and monitor traffic flow as we would expect. Given that it is a criminal offence to breach the conditions of such a permit, we expect them to comply. If they do not, we take appropriate action and I have just referred to an example where we are hoping to take that action. These are big companies that should be capable of operating a site well and usually they are, and I am sure you are not suggesting that we should supervise the supervisors. However, if anything significant does go wrong we always have a professional available to intervene and we have an excellent partnership with the Police who can be called upon when required.

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 Brooks asked the following supplementary question:

“I would ask you to look at your processes again because in a spot like that which is so critical to the traffic flow of Newbury, you should look again and say we do need to attend where traffic flow is so critical and critical to the economy of the shopping centre, we should be able to monitor them during the weekend, a Saturday, and that I would ask you to look at. It is not happening every week but when it does, as explained in Question b, it has a very severe impact. In fact, on the day, people’s safety could have been at risk. So not every one Councillor Clifford, but look at those that would have the maximum impact.”

The Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transport, Environment and Countryside answered:

I agree, that is precisely what we must do and we are looking at it.

(d) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Children, Education and Young People by Councillor Jeff Brooks:

“When will the Council commit to reopening the important youth facility at Waterside?”

The Portfolio Holder for Children, Education and Young People answered:

I am delighted to be able to report this evening that we have reached a conditional agreement, subject to Planning approval, with Bradfield College, the Bradfield Club and Berkshire Youth which will now enable this important project to proceed.

The Bradfield Club will purchase a 50% share in the Centre from the Council. Berkshire Youth will now make a planning application for a £0.75m refurbishment of the Centre. The refurbishment will be paid in part by the Bradfield Club but also by a number of other donors.

Once complete the Centre will be operated by Berkshire Youth under a peppercorn rent from the Council and the Bradfield Club.

This is a major commitment to the young people of Newbury and West Berkshire and I am delighted that over the next 12 months or so this long held ambition will at last become a reality.

A joint press release will be issued by the College, the Bradfield Club, Berkshire Youth and the Council over the coming weeks providing more details of what is planned and what will be provided.

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:

“Without wishing to reduce the capital receipt severely, did the Council consider any relief on that money received for the building, for the facility itself?”

“Because there is a healthy capital receipt coming our way, and as I say, given that we don’t really provide much in the way of Youth Service, did we consider some relief on that capital receipt?”

The Portfolio Holder for Children, Education and Young People answered:

If you are talking about the value of the building, it has been valued as a community asset and I would suggest that that was a potential relief that comes onto that building and therefore that was taken into consideration as opposed to going to a full market value.

(e) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste by Councillor Lee Dillon:

“Given that the LRIE project was last marked as being red on the last quarterly performance report, what is the Council doing to get it back on track?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

The process has already started. Officers and Members have already met with consultants to discuss how existing development information should be reviewed and refreshed in terms of market conditions and planning policy which in turn will inform the Council of how best to proceed as quickly and securely as possible. Consultants are drawing up a list of actions and an associated programme of review work. Once received this information will trigger a procurement exercise to acquire consultants to complete all the review and update work and then take the Council to the next step in bringing forward the regeneration of the LRIE.

You may recall Councillor Dillon, although I don't know whether you were on the Council at the time, but the original decision to work with St Modwen was taken as a result of a recommendation from a small cross party working group to Executive and Council and we will of course be extending the same courtesy to you with regard to the procurement process once we have reached that stage, so there will again be a small cross party working group looking at it.

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 Lee Dillon asked:

“It sounds to me that you are going to look at what can be salvaged and push ahead to deliver the current London Road Industrial plan, which I think we have seen over the last year here presents some challenges in terms of what other community facilities might be lost if the current plan is delivered, so will the Council commit to a full public engagement process, before over committing the Council's resources and signing contracts this time round?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

I think I would take issue with you in that I think this is an opportunity for us to look at the LRIE and to revisit what we want to do, and of course during that revisiting process there will be public engagement and consultation, as we do for everything in this authority.

(f) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Highways, Transport, Environment and Countryside by Councillor Alan Macro (asked on his behalf by Councillor Jeff Brooks):

“Will the Council consider adding priority footpaths to the gritting schedule given the recent weather conditions?”

The Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transport, Environment and Countryside answered:

I would like to thank Councillor Macro for this question because it gives me the opportunity to thank the crews from Volker and Veolia who literally hit the streets in Newbury, Hungerford, Thatcham, Pangbourne and Theale and did a great job of clearing the priority footpaths in our busy town and village centres when the snow fell at the beginning of the month.

I was at Chieveley depot a few days before to see the winter preparations: 1500 tonnes of grit, a newly maintained fleet of gritters, and most importantly to meet the team. They aren't quite having the epic year they had last year when they found themselves sneaking in the office between shifts so they could get out to do the next run, but they are still pretty busy and I am sure we all appreciate what they do to keep our roads safe.

As you know we produce a winter plan each year, which we believe works well and we know more than stands comparison with that provided by any other authority. Next September or October, when we finalise the next plan, we will review this year in depth and apply what we've learned for circulating for comment and Councillor Macro gets a special version as the opposition lead on this as well as the eventual signed off plan. From memory, I believe Councillor Macro was supportive of last year's plan as drafted, and didn't ask for any changes for which I thank him, but he will have the opportunity to make suggestions for the next and he may want to put this forward. However, when he does so, and I have learnt a lot about gritting in the last few years, gritting of footways is not the same as the gritting of roads - we need the traffic running over it for the grit to work, clearing the snow is the answer and that was an answer that was provided at the beginning of this month when the snow fell.

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:

“Councillor Macro was concerned about the underpass at the Sainsbury's roundabout, but also he drew our attention in discussion to a footpath that actually gets people across the motorway to the Sainsbury's Sava-Centre and that isn't gritted, so we would be suggesting this year it is looked at again, given that if the roads are hard to traverse, it would be possible to get over to Sainsbury's Sava-Centre to get some food?”

The Portfolio Holder for Highways, Transport, Environment and Countryside answered:

That's really useful information, just the sort of feedback that we look for from local Ward Members to feed into the scheme, and of course we want people to walk and to cycle where they can so anything that helps this is good, so thank you that is great.

(g) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Transformation and Property by Councillor Lee Dillon:

“When did the Council last carry out a full review of the £14.3 million it has in reserves?”

The Portfolio Holder for Finance, Transformation and Property answered:

The total usable reserves covering both general and earmarked reserves are estimated to total £17m by year end as detailed in the Revenue Budget paper on this evening’s agenda. These reserves are monitored closely during the year to ensure that sums held are sufficient to cover budget risks for an organisation of our size. They are reviewed in detail when budget proposals are being put forward at this time of year along with an annual scrutiny from our external auditors at financial year end.

There has currently been a more detailed review, which I believe you were informed about when the list of reserves was issued to you at the end of last year, as I wanted to test the relevance of some of the earmarked reserves. I would stress that there are no concerns over the level of reserves, just the ability of the Council to use them as and when the need arose.

The level of West Berkshire’s reserves are relatively low compared to many similar local authorities and whilst only a few are at the 5% or below critical level, there are some also in the uncomfortable position of being at 10% or below.

I hope to have a report on the full reserve position ready for the Full Council on 5 March 2019, and would be happy to share these findings with you as soon as they are available.

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 Lee Dillon asked:

“When we are looking at what we’ve got to spend, we have got our revenue position, then we’ve got these earmarked reserves. So we have the general reserve, the earmarked reserves, then we have other specific reserves under that, and then we also have a potential liability pot as well. This is all money that is being put to one side to potentially deal with something or not, and given the financial constraints we are operating in, we are keen to understand when was the last time that a particular fund was activated, when was it needed, what is the likelihood that it will be needed in the next 5 years? So could we relieve some of it now and then build it back up, about being a bit more innovative with how we are using those reserves.

In particular around the potential liabilities pot, around the old Berkshire County Council liabilities, about saying how that was 20 odd years ago now, how much of that can we start releasing back so that residents can benefit from increased services?”

The Portfolio Holder for Finance, Transformation and Property answered:

It is crucial that our finances in the current climate are secure and we need to be prudent with what we do with our reserves, they are not a fund that we can empty and then have to increase Council Tax or make ridiculous savings in the future to replenish.

However, what I am proposing is a lot more transparency over the reserves, so we can scrutinise them. I have got the figures of what has been used, the frequency, and that's the key information to inform the decision making process as to what we potentially relabel them as and if there are surpluses what we can use them for.

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