

Questions and Answers

Executive
Thursday 28 March 2019

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Executive Meeting

28 March 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 Leader by Miss Louise Harriet Coulson:

“Can you please tell me how much money does the Council pension pot hold and how much is made through its investment?”

As Miss Coulson was unable to attend the meeting she received the following written response from the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Transformation and Property:

The Berkshire Pension Fund holds the Council's pension investments and liabilities. For more detail please use their website <http://www.berkshirerpensions.org.uk/>

In previous answers to questions you have asked about pensions we have advised that the Pension Fund is totally separate to West Berkshire, however it appears you are trying to frame questions regarding the pensions that we are unable to answer, rather than unwilling. However, it may be something outside of this forum that we can assist in guiding you to the correct forum, and could I suggest a discussion in the near future where we can look at how we can give you the benefit of our experience.

(b) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Communications by Mr Peter Norman:

“Does the Council consider itself ‘The Council of Business’ supporting enterprises of all sizes in the area?”

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Communications answered:

Thank you Mr Norman for your question. The answer to your question certainly is yes. The Council aspires to be a Council of business and considers itself open for business.

Through our new Economic Development Strategy, of which you will hear more about later, we will implement initiatives to boost businesses and give them the best environment in which to work.

We will look to future-proof digital connectivity, create a new Apprenticeship Levy Fund and deliver co-working and incubator sites to boost our start-ups and give entrepreneurs a creative place in which to work.

The Strategy will also outline how we can build on some of our successes so far and the 9000 businesses that we have in the area.

You mention business of all sizes. So, we are doing our very best to work with Vodafone, to take advantage of their innovation and technology and you will see later some of the work we are doing about 5G and addressing social isolation.

Turning to some of the smaller businesses, we can look at The Snooty Fox and some of the redevelopment that is going on there.

We are in no doubt, we certainly want to be a Council that supports business and is open for business, and we certainly have that in our heart when we look to things like how we can address planning, making that easier for businesses and I am encouraged to see progress in the lines of the nomination for an award in regards to our Planning Department enabling economic growth due to its Local Development Order.

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 Norman asked:

“I am pleased to hear what you have to say. However, I would like to understand why not a single Councillor or Council Officer has been to see individual companies in the London Road Industrial Estate to find out what problems they would have in the relocation of that development and issues that they may face.”

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Communications answered:

I know that Councillors and Officers have been to some of the businesses on the London Road Industrial Estate, but as you will see later on today the next scheme of work in regards to the London Road Industrial Estate will involve more public consultation and we will certainly go and engage those businesses when we are opening that consultation.

(e) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transport, Environment and Countryside by Mrs Martha Vickers:

“How often are resident’s parking schemes reviewed, with particular reference to central Newbury areas where electric charging points are about to be installed?”

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

Thank you for your question Mrs Vickers.

The well-established residential parking schemes in central Newbury, where the electric vehicle charging points are being installed, were introduced after extensive public consultation, and as they are working well, there is no reason to review them.

To be clear, the installation of these charge points does not affect the parking schemes. It does not change the number or the designation of the parking spaces. No spaces will be lost. No places will be reserved for a particular type of vehicle.

We are delighted, and I am sure you are too, that the installation of these electric car charging points is underway. This is an important project for West Berkshire and we have an ambition to learn from it and continue to roll them out across the District.

Electric vehicles are very popular in West Berkshire. We have more per head of population than almost anywhere else in the country. Most people think the take-up will increase and National Grid were forecasting last week that there might be as many as 36 million of them on the road by 2040 so we need to start working on the infrastructure now.

We want that option of ‘choosing electric’ to be available to residents who don’t have off-street parking, for example residents who live in the lovely Victorian and Edwardian streets in the centre of our town, which is why we successfully sought funding from the Office of Low Emission Vehicles for this project, but we don’t see it having an impact on parking.

The Chairman asked: *“Do you have a supplementary question arising directly out of the answer to your original question. A supplementary should be relevant to the original question and not introduce any new material?”*

Mrs Vickers asked:

“Thank you for that reassurance. Obviously I welcome this scheme, great innovation. I would just like to know did the Officers, before the installation was agreed, did they actually go and visit all the sites, particularly in the town centre, in the Westfields Estate, because there are some complications there and as a result I understand it has been put on hold in some streets which is a shame, a shame to hold up such an important scheme?”

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

We see this project as essentially a trial, we need to learn how we are going to deliver this service in the town centre. Yes we did visit the sites and we have feedback from residents, we have had comments from residents in Gloucester Road, there was a letter in the newspaper last week, and what we have decided to do is put those on hold as you say, but the charge points won't be wasted, they will be put elsewhere until we find a different approach, but we have invited any resident who is considering buying an electric car to get in touch and we will see what we can do on an individual basis. People are not losing their opportunity, but we are not forcing this on people, we are trialling it because we want to take it forward across the District.

(i) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Highways, Transport, Environment and Countryside by Dr Tony Vickers:

“Why doesn't this Council adopt a policy of 20mph speed limits outside all schools which have flashing lights at drop-off and pick-up times?”

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

Thank you for your question Dr Vickers.

School warning signs with flashing lights are installed outside most schools in West Berkshire as you know and are working well.

However, to answer your question, we evaluated '20mph when flashing' signs in 2013 in five locations and found they made no difference to traffic speed and so, at that time in 2013, we did not extend the scheme.

However, six years on, I feel the time is right for further appraisal. Some months ago we committed to installing '20mph when flashing' signs at the approaches to the new school in Theale and are in the process of assessing further locations for trials.

I have seen the Liberal Democrat campaign to introduce 20mph zones outside all schools and understand entirely why you have done this. We all want the best for the children and young people in West Berkshire.

But one thing I have learned in this role is that decisions should always be made in context and should focus on what works. We are absolutely committed to finding out what works to improve safety.

Now it may be, as the result of the new appraisal, that what we do adopt is the policy you describe in your question. But, quite properly, we will be making decisions after full evaluation and on a site-by-site basis.

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?”*

Dr Vickers asked:

“Very much welcome what you have said, but are you aware that the Welsh Government has already decided, after research, that 20 mph limits are most appropriate for roads where average speeds are already low, and the guidance suggests below 24 mph? However, in a letter that you wrote to the local paper you basically dismissed the need for a 20 mph sign at the Andover Road schools flashing lights but, as people already know, the evidence shows that reinforces the flashing lights and adds to safety, which of course is what we all want.”

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

I am aware of the Welsh study and that is one of the reasons that we might be considering an appraisal. Things change and nothing is clear cut. You make it sound as though it was a casual decision that I was referring to in the newspaper, it certainly wasn't, it was after a long process of evaluation and I know you are familiar with the arguments.

I take your point, we were aware of this, we decided to install it in Theale and we want to take it forward, but it will be on a site by site basis, it won't be done as a blanket imposition at this stage, but perhaps that will be the outcome.

(k) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste by Mr Andy Moore:

“With the winter sleeping arrangements for the homeless nearing an end, what plans does the Council have for next winter’s provision?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

Thank you for your question Mr Moore.

The winter plan for 2018/2019 was approved by the Homelessness Strategy Group and will be reviewed by the group with a view to identifying the winter plan for 2019/2020. The work has yet to be completed as the winter provision is still in place.

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 Moore asked his second question on the agenda (Question l):

(l) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste by Mr Andy Moore:

“How will the interaction over next year’s winter provision with West Berkshire Homeless be managed?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

The answer is quite short Mr Moore. As in the question you have just asked, West Berkshire Homeless are a member of the Homelessness Strategy Group where the winter plan will be agreed.

(m) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care by Dr Julie Wintrup (asked on her behalf by Dr Bob Chapman):

“How confident is the Executive that its mistake in managing its social care budget has not led to individuals being refused care or receiving a lower amount of care because the Council’s own financial projections were incorrect?”

The Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care answered:

Dr Chapman, thank you. Since Dr Wintrup’s question was addressed to me as Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care, I am answering in the context of Adult Social Care.

I am confident that no individual has been refused care, or has received a lower amount of care than required, as a result of the budget pressures that have been faced in the 2018/19 budget cycle. Moreover, and this is a fundamental point, when an individual is assessed as having an eligible care need, this Council, as with all councils, has a statutory duty to ensure that the need is met. We cannot refuse to meet an assessed need for financial reasons.

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?”*

Dr Chapman asked:

“So given that this money has hopefully now been found, will it feed into a review of the proposed budget and any cuts that were then reversed or will it just be seen as an opportunistic windfall for a further investment in out of area development?”

The Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care answered:

I have to say that supplementary sounds to me like you or perhaps Dr Wintrup just haven’t read our budget papers. The under budgeting/overspend, depending on how one looks at it, in 2018/19 was the subject of a very detailed review by the Chief Executive and the Head of Internal Audit. That was presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission at their last meeting and those papers are public. They could be read by you or by Dr Wintrup to understand what the Council’s position was. So the position is that roughly £2m of a £2.9m figure was found to be under budgeting. The actual budget difference between this current year’s financial position and next year’s financial position is £4.9m. So the Adult Social Care budget is being increased, budget to budget, by nearly £5m and under budgeting to budgeting by something like £3m. So I reject the premise that we aren’t spending the amount of money we need to spend on Adult Social Care entirely.

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

“For how long has West Berkshire Council been without a trained senior ecologist?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

West Berkshire is not without a trained senior ecologist as we buy the service in when needed.

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 Culver asked:

“When the Theale nets were put up, Bennetts Tree Care put a Facebook message up saying it was a nice easy job and as you will be aware from pictures that I have sent to Councillor Clifford they were full of holes and were not staked to the ground properly. Did you check the qualifications of the ecologist who was recruited to do that job?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

Yes.

(p) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Highways, Transport, Environment and Countryside by Mr Stephen Masters:

“Is the Council seriously considering a western relief road as posited by Nick Carter in a recent interview?”

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

Thank you for your question Mr Masters. If you are asking if there is a detailed blue print or even much of a line on a map somewhere then there is not. But any effective organisation needs to:

- plan in detail for the short term – we do that;
- prepare for a range of scenarios in the medium term – we do that; and
- let its collective imagination run free when it comes to putting all options on the table for the long term – and yes, we do that.

Our Chief Executive explored the option of a Western Relief Road at a Breakfast event recently – the sort of event where ideas are floated and debated, healthily and without restraint.

It’s an interesting idea. I am sure it appeals to some residents. Instinctively, I have major reservations and can see several reasons that count against it.

I tend to think technological developments will overtake it, that it’s an answer to the problems of yesterday rather than the challenges of tomorrow, but I know instinct can be another word for prejudice.

I have an open mind, great respect for the Chief Executive, and I am very happy to see it and anything else discussed. There’s nothing wrong with blue sky thinking – but only the best ideas get through the process, and as I’ve said before the best ideas have to meet challenging and all-encompassing economic, social and environmental criteria. Time will tell if this is one of them.

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:

“Do you find that road building reduces congestion as much or does it increase car use?”

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

That is a big question and a big debate. What we do in this Council is make a proper assessment of any scheme.

(q) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste by Ms Alison May:

“Does West Berkshire Council have a Rural Strategy for the defined rural areas of West Berkshire?”

As Ms May was unable to attend the meeting she received the following written response from the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste:

Yes we do, it's called the Local Plan which can be found at

<https://info.westberks.gov.uk/localplan>.

In addition we also have the North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan which covers 74% of the District which can be found at <http://www.northwessexdowns.org.uk/publications-resources/aonb-management-plan.html>”

(r) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Communications by Mr Paul Morgan (asked on his behalf by Mr Jack Harkness):

“Can the Council please share the business case and the associated up front and ongoing running costs for next 3 years, associated with its latest proposal for the Faraday Football ground? (that was announced last week)”

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Communications answered:

Thank you Mr Harkness. We are more than happy to provide that information, we'll have to have a final check with Legal to make sure we can, but I am very happy to provide that.

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 Harkness asked:

“On that basis, that implies that you have a plan to keep the ground in some usable state for three years, can you answer why the multi-use games area is more preferable to using it as it currently is, effectively at no cost to the Council?”

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Communications answered:

I have to just go back on a point there, happy to share the business case details as I've said, that's in your original question. But in regards to the wider ambitions of the Council and that site, I think we've discussed those many times before, but only the business case/three year point was in your original question.

(s) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste by Mr Lee McDougall:

“Why does the Council’s Positioning Statement on LRIE, not disclose the fact that to meet the Government’s National Policy Framework (NPPF) it must replace the football ground”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

Thank you for your question Mr McDougall. The registration of the football ground as an asset of community value does not preclude it from being incorporated within potential redevelopment proposals. The Council is entirely aware of current national planning guidance which allows Councils, subject to replacement and / or wider community benefit arguments at planning submission stage, for such facilities to be lost.

The football club does not have its own Core Strategy policy as it is covered by policy CS 18 Green Infrastructure. It is however mentioned by name in paragraph 5.129 of the Core Strategy.

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 McDougall asked:

“The question wasn’t about the asset of community value. The point is that Sport England have said that, as part of the NPPF, to remove that ground it would need to be replaced by an equivalent or better facility and is such a substantial costly activity. The question is why that wasn’t highlighted in your Positioning Statement?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

As I have just answered, the Council is entirely aware of current national planning policy guidance which allows Councils, subject to replacement and/or wider community benefit arguments at planning submission stage, for such facilities to be lost.

(u) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Communications by Mr John Stewart:

“Will the new football facility that forms part of the investment in Northcroft Leisure be of better or equivalent quality of Faraday Road as per Sport Englands' mandatory requirements, should the Faraday Road Football Ground be given Planning Permission for a change of use?”

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Communications answered:

Thank you Mr Stewart that is certainly the ambition. However, I can't be led on any matter that may be related to a planning application and I certainly wouldn't want to pre-empt that.

We continue to work with Sport England, the Football Association, Newbury Community Football Group and Newbury FC, who are here tonight and we thank them for that engagement. We will continue to work with all of those groups as we continue developing those plans.

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 Stewart asked:

“What is the next stage of that development for Northcroft, do you have any dates, what are the next steps?”

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Communications answered:

There was a public announcement, I believe last week, that set out those steps. Further details will come as a planning application is developed. Our officer lead is Paul Anstey, who I think you have met previously and gave an update, and we will continue to engage you as those plans are developed.

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

“Does the Council agree that one of the most effective ways to combat carbon emissions in our area is to ensure that every new home built is a zero carbon home requiring minimal energy requirements and built so as not to be reliant on any fossil fuels?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

Thank you Mr Norman. Yes, I agree with you. Way back in 2012 the Council’s Core Strategy policy CS15 was ground breaking in requiring, by 2016, all new residential developments to be built to the Code for Sustainable Homes Level 6 which was carbon neutral.

However, in 2014 the Government announced that such standards should be part of building regulations and not planning so our policy on residential development was lost.

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 Norman asked:

“Are there any moves to try and reinstate it and if so by when?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

Government policy is that those Codes are now part of building regulations and nothing to do with the planning process. It is a disappointment to us, Mr Norman, because, as I say, in 2012 we were at the forefront of this and it really irritated us that we had to drop that and it is not satisfactory but we are where we are.

(j) Question submitted to the Leader of the Council by Mrs Martha Vickers:

“Will West Berkshire Council follow the lead of other Councils and institute Litter Champions across the District?”

The Leader of the Council answered:

Thank you Mrs Vickers. Yes I think this is something that could be considered, but one thing I'd like to focus on and the important thing is outcomes rather than titles.

West Berkshire Council is rated 'Good' by Keep Britain Tidy. As a Council we support community litter picking groups all year round and information about this is provided on our website <https://info.westberks.gov.uk/article/27747> We have been doing this for many years now. We have 50 adult litter picking kits available and 40 children's litter picking kits. We also recently bought an extra 40 adult litter pickers.

The Great British Spring Clean is an event organised by Keep Britain Tidy in partnership with the Daily Mail. This year it runs from the 22 March 2019 to the 23 April 2019 and more information can be found from Keep Britain Tidy: www.keepbritaintidy.org/gbspringclean

The Chairman asked: *“Do you have a supplementary question arising directly out of the answer to your original question. A supplementary should be relevant to the original question and not introduce any new material?”*

Mrs Vickers asked:

“Would you agree, although you've said that West Berkshire rates highly as a tidy area, that there are pockets which are hidden away from general view, but really spoil the amenity for local people and that with a little bit of training people would be happy to be regular litter pickers? It sounds as though you are agreeing but need a clear way forward?”

The Leader of the Council answered:

I would agree with you and I would encourage anybody to report particular areas of concern so they can be dealt with.

(n) Question submitted to the Leader by Dr Julie Wintrup (asked on her behalf by Dr Bob Chapman):

“How will the Executive seek to rebuild confidence among the public that it is capable of managing large budgets and public services in ways that are open and transparent, and able to be properly scrutinised?”

The Leader of the Council answered:

Having read this question I think it is probably more of a political statement based on opinions and not facts. The Council’s financial management arrangements have been, for a number of years, considered strong and robust by our external auditors, and I quote (this is from KPMG): ‘Based on the findings of our work we have concluded that the authority has adequate arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources. We therefore anticipate issuing an unqualified value for money conclusion for the deadline of 31 July 2018.’

This compares very favourably with our neighbours, and I would highlight our neighbours – Labour controlled Reading, where the auditors have been unable to sign off the Council’s accounts so incurring significant extra costs for Council Tax payers.

As you may be aware the Council’s finances are open to scrutiny and that scrutiny has taken place at the Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission.

The public and importantly the service users can be confident that the Executive takes its fiduciary responsibilities seriously.

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?”*

Dr Chapman asked:

“I was of course referring to the recent press coverage regarding the misplacement of the £2m and that is what the question has to deal with regardless of accounts that were previously signed off as good practice. So in regard to recent times what has changed?”

The Leader of the Council answered:

I think I could refer you to the answer that was given to you earlier by Councillor Bridgman. I think that we have covered that particular issue in great detail and I am afraid your question does not make the points you are making remotely clear. I can’t necessarily take that from the question as it was asked I’m afraid.

(t) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Highways, Transport, Environment and Countryside by Ms Alison May:

“What proportion of North Wessex AONB meetings has West Berkshire Council attended during the current administration's four years in office?”

As Ms May was unable to attend the meeting, she received the following written response from the Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transport, Environment and Countryside:

The Council has attended 83% (10 out of 12 meetings) over the last 4 Municipal Years.

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

“Will the newly planned, bookable 5-a-side pitches at Faraday Road re-open and make available the existing toilets, changing room, stands and floodlights when it re-opens the facility to the public?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

The existing clubhouse, changing rooms and toilets were part of a condition survey carried out in July 2018, where surveyors stated buildings could not be immediately reoccupied without the remedial works. Whilst work will then be done to make sure the site can be opened, in regards to those buildings it is not viable to refurbish those buildings given the expected short lifespan of the site. In regards to the stands and floodlights, I note that these points have been discussed many times in the Council Chamber in regards to our interpretation of the ownership of both the stands and floodlights. I won't repeat that again, but happy to provide the most up to date information that we have on that condition survey to you.

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 McDougall asked:

“I guess the question is around the toilets and changing rooms, whether they can be used for children's football? So, if you say you are not going to open them, are you going to open the ground without any toilets or changing rooms?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

We would look to open the ground, but as for refurbishing those particular points the money would be so extensive that it wouldn't justify it. As for what we can do to enable people to effectively utilise it, there are other services nearby.

Mr McDougall commented:

“Children can't play sports on a Council facility without toilets being available.”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

The question is could we refurbish those ones, we can't, as for what else we can do to enable people to utilise it, we will certainly look at that.

(w) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Highways, Transport, Environment and Countryside by Mr Stephen Masters:

“What modelling and assessment does the Council use to analyse the cost benefits of road widening against the respective cost benefit analysis of spending on cycling and walking infrastructure, including impact on pollution and health as well as financial impact etc?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

Thank you for your question. Any road widening the Council undertakes, and it must be said there's not a great deal of road widening going on, even though we are very proud of our road network, any road widening is either funded from Section 106 contributions linked to a specific development or from a specific central Government or Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) Grant.

In the case of S106 funding, any improvements will be subject to a full transport modelling and viability exercise to ensure the impact of the development is mitigated. Those mitigations frequently include investment in cycling and walking.

In the case of grant funding from central Government or the LEP, the Council will adhere to the specific benefit to cost assessment process laid down by whoever is inviting bids and this applies to all schemes, road or not.

For example, in ranking alternative schemes for investment, Thames Valley Berkshire LEP takes into account a range of factors, including the ones you mention.

The implication of your question is that decisions take into account only money. They don't.

The LEP considers:

- alignment to the Strategic Economic Plan of Thames Valley Berkshire, and this is itself a product of a partnership between business, education providers, the third sector and local and central Government;
- deliverability – because we like to do things and get things done rather than just talk about it;
- long term, sustainable economic growth;
- investing in natural capital;
- maximising social value.

The business cases of all the schemes the LEP has backed are publicly available and demonstrate the depth and breadth of analysis that underpins the final Benefit to Cost ratio that allows projects to be prioritised. If you do look at those, you'll see how successful West Berkshire has been in developing projects with strong BCRs.

We have a fair transparent methodology in Berkshire that all the unitaries have confidence in and tellingly, this methodology is the one that delivered our flagship National Cycle Network route 422.

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 did not ask a supplementary question.

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

“Can the Council confirm that in considering new planning applications it will be taking into full account the impact such developments have on pollution levels from the generation of extra traffic and the resultant detriment of air quality in the district, especially in considering the siting of new schools and indeed the impact on existing schools in the proximity of such developments?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

It is a brief answer – yes.

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 Norman asked:

“So is the Councillor aware that the stalled Highwood Copse School and the two new schools proposed for Sandleford are all situated on proposed routes to the Sandleford development and therefore will be subject to high levels of pollution and if so will that be taken into account in the determination of those applications?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

The Council’s adopted Core Strategy Policy on Transport (CS13) requires that development has regard to its impact on the environment and recognises that air quality is strongly linked to transport and it states the Council’s commitment to managing transport situations where air quality becomes a concern.

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

“Approximately what salary is required to purchase an ‘Affordable’ home with a 90% mortgage here in West Berkshire and how does this relate to average household incomes?”

As there was insufficient time remaining to answer this question, Mr Masters received the following written answer from the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste:

It is assumed that the “Affordable” home referred to in the question is shared ownership which is a “part rent, part buy” product where the purchaser, as leaseholder, buys a share of the property and pays rent on the remainder. Maximum rent levels are set by Homes England and expressed as a percentage of “unsold equity” e.g. 2.5%. The percentage that buyers can purchase can be as low as 25%, but the rent will then be based on 75% of the “unsold equity”. Buyers can purchase additional shares as and when they can afford to do so in tranches of 10% which will then reduce the rent.

The salary required will depend on the percentage purchased and size of property e.g. 1, 2 or 3 bedroom flat or house. Applicants can apply to buy shared ownership if they meet the following criteria:

- Earn less than £80,000 per year
- Do not currently own a property, and
- Can afford all the costs associated with owning a home.

The “Help to Buy South” website advises that a household income of more than £18,000 is required in order to buy a shared ownership property. It is therefore for the applicant to seek financial advice to see what they can afford to borrow as it also depends on amount of deposit available and financial advice provided by recommended advisors.

The average salary in West Berkshire for 2018 was £41,400 compared with £36,600 nationally. (ONS data for 2018 of full time employees).

(f) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste by Ms Lisa Cox (asked on her behalf by Ms Carolyn Culver):

“What action did the planning enforcement team take as a result of the information they were emailed by me on Wednesday 13 March about the poorly installed netting and trapped birds in Theale?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

I understand that you put this matter to the Planning Enforcement Officers following advice from the RSPB that it might be of interest. The Planning Enforcement Officers have looked at the situation and have concluded that the netting wrapped over the hedge is not development, and as it is not directly a specified requirement of the planning approval, it does not raise issues that they need to get involved with. You will have by now received a note from the Enforcement Officer to that effect.

The Ecology report submitted with the now approved application clearly states the developers' recognition of the high potential for birds to nest in this hedge between March and August and acknowledges awareness of their responsibilities under the Wildlife and Countryside Act.

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 Culver asked:

“Councillor Clifford and I exchanged some private messages on Monday 11 March and subsequently I sent them on Wednesday 13 March to draw her attention to the fact that birds had been trapped in the netting. Did Councillor Clifford take the opportunity to go and visit the site after that?”

The Leader of the Council asked Councillor Jeanette Clifford if she could address that, if possible, in her response to question (g).

(g) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Highways, Transport, Environment and Countryside by Ms Paula Crawford (asked on her behalf by Ms Carolyn Culver)

“Who sanctioned the installation of inappropriate hedge netting in Theale that is full of holes and not secured to the ground?”

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

This was not inappropriate netting. This netting was installed properly and for the benefit of wildlife.

Now the debate about netting has gained a high profile over the last few weeks and in some ways, that’s good. Some netting, in my personal view, is an abomination. For example, netting installed to warp data in the run up to a planning application. Again, speaking personally I would like to see that made illegal.

But we have got a need here to look behind the slogans. The netting at Theale is the opposite of an abomination. It was installed because of concern for the welfare of wildlife and from comments I’ve heard this week, I know that the sensible people of West Berkshire accept that this Council is committed to protecting and enhancing biodiversity and are more than capable of understanding the nuance here.

The netting at Theale was installed by a qualified tree surgeon and inspected and regularly monitored by a licensed ecologist employed by Kier Construction, the company responsible for building the new school in Theale.

It was installed to prevent birds nesting in the hedgerows nearest to the school site as there is a risk that they will abandon their nests once building work, and the disruption that comes with even the best managed sites, begins.

But please listen to what I am saying. The aim was not to prevent birds nesting per se, but to encourage them to nest nearby in safer locations and there are many alternative safer locations in and around Theale.

As an example, the land on which the school will stand is currently owned by Englefield Estate, which within a mile or so of Theale has planted over 3 kilometres of new hedgerow as well as improving other hedges for wildlife. With an abundance of choice, why would it not be good to discourage birds from nesting in a place where they would be less likely to hatch and fledge their young?

However, sad to say, and this really does break my heart, all has not gone to plan. The nets were installed properly and secured by cable ties to the base of the hedge, meaning they were safe for wildlife. That’s not me concluding that, that’s the view of the ecologist - the qualified expert.

But since then it appears the nets been vandalised. I don’t know by whom, or for what reason, and, as I prefer to deal in facts, I won’t speculate.

But the nets no longer do what they were designed for and that is sad. These acts of vandalism have done nothing to protect wildlife – in fact they have put birds and mammals in danger.

We now have to make a decision about the way forward at Theale. I only hope the school project is not delayed at what may well be a cost to the council tax payers of West Berkshire. However, in all circumstances, and in this circumstance, deciding what we are going to do next after this vandalism, the welfare of wildlife in Theale will be properly taken into account.

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 Culver asked

“Can you say please how much of the netted hedge is due to be taken out?”

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

There are two hedges which have been netted. The hedge that is immediately adjacent to the school site has been defined by the ecologist as of low quality. That will be removed and replanted to allow for the construction of a wider footway. There is going to be a school and we need a proper footway so people, for example with buggies, can use it. That hedge will be removed and replaced with a better quality hedge.

The other hedge, the hedge that is adjacent to the cricket pitch, is a better quality hedge and will be retained.

(h) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste by Mrs Sharon Cox (asked on her behalf by Ms Carolyn Culver):

“Can West Berkshire Council confirm they commissioned and implemented the recommendations of an independent Arboricultural Impact Assessment and Arboricultural Method Statement prior to the commencement of construction works in Theale?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

The consented development to build a new school at Theale was subject to a full ecological survey of all flora and fauna, including land and water features beyond the development site itself. All recommendations in that survey will be implemented as required.

As is generally the case, as part of the consideration of the submitted planning application, the Council’s Tree Officer was consulted and did not raise any objection to the application. The Tree Officer considered the submitted arboricultural impact assessment and a proposed schedule of works to existing trees, submitted as part of the original application.

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 Culver asked

“Who undertook the independent assessment?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

It was external consultants, I can’t confirm exactly who at this moment but I will get that information to you should you require it.

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

(a) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Children, Education and Young People by Councillor Mollie Lock:

“Given that 20 local schools are heading towards being in deficit, what sum of money is needed to get them out of deficit without further spending cuts?”

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

We do not yet have the final figures for 2018/19 as accounts have not closed. I think Councillor Lock's reference to 20 schools is because in the current schools funding formula 20 schools will see a reduction in funding, but that does not mean that they are heading towards being in deficit.

When the accounts have closed we will have an exact picture which will include a school by school figure and should schools then be predicting a deficit we will look at what sum of money would be required to get them out of deficit.

However, that being said, initial indications, as set out in the recent deficit report at the Schools' Forum, which both Councillor Lock and myself attended, show really good progress with most deficits being reduced by more than was predicted. A deficit clawback of nearly a quarter of a million was reported and this is really good news.

We have got dedicated deficit recovery work ongoing with schools who find themselves in difficulty and this includes looking at the future possibility of going into deficit. So the hard work by both schools and officers is really paying dividends.

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 Mollie Lock asked the following supplementary question:

“I value the financial help and advice to schools who are in deficit or are approaching a possible deficit and I think that has been valuable and more valuable than the actual figures of money but my question is:

You went to London and met the Minister for Education or one of his team to ask for a more favourable and equal settlement for West Berkshire. Did you get any indication if they plan to even out how the money was allocated across the country, because if they did this would avoid the stress that West Berkshire schools are facing because, as you know, they had the 2% increase in staff salaries and the 8% pension contribution. We hope that has not led to too much reducing of staff, reducing of teaching assistants and so on, and what can you as

Portfolio Member offer schools, especially small schools, I don't know what the current government is offering or what you can do?"

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

I'm sorry there is some confusion as I haven't been to meet with the Minister. I have been quite clear on the fact that West Berkshire is an averagely funded authority, and there are schools around the country that have more funding than us and schools that have less funding than us. I welcome the national funding formula here in West Berkshire and I think it is a good thing to move to a place where all pupils command the same amount of money.

What I have been lobbying Central Government on, and I have written to our local MPs and they have written to the Minister and I have had responses from, is around the High Needs Block of funding, which I have consistently said and I have been really clear on that there is a shortfall in High Needs Block funding, because we do not get the placement funding for the amount of children that we are supporting. All of our MPs have taken that on board and have contacted the Minister direct.

We have had responses to say that is being looked at, we did get £350,000 additional funding back in December, but this is not enough and I will continue to push for that.

But as far as the Central Schools Block funding is concerned, the national funding formula is certainly leading us in the right direction.

(b) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care by Councillor Lee Dillon:

“Given Councillor Bridgman’s comments reported in the Newbury Weekly News regarding the missing £2m from the Adult Social Care budget, does the Portfolio Holder now intend to get into the detail of the budget?”

The Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care answered:

The Newbury Weekly News report concerned the meeting of the Overview and Management Scrutiny Commission on 26 February and at that meeting I said that because of everything that was having to be done to respond to the financial position reported at the end of Quarter One, we had not been able to sit back and take a strategic view.

I am satisfied however that, going forward, that is going to change because, as was acknowledged in the Chief Executive and the Head of Internal Audit report following the review, both the budget modelling and just as important the inputs to the model itself are improving and will allow that strategic oversight that circumstances prevented in this current financial year with the under-budgeting/overspend.

So, in answer to the question, yes absolutely I intend and more to the point I think I am going to have the opportunity to get into the budget detail in a way that doesn’t second guess officers, but does ensure proper challenge. I think that is where the Portfolio Holder should sit in the process and to that end I have agreed with officers a new budget report that will be part of the budget monitoring process and will enable me, as Portfolio Holder, to identify particular issues that we need to address, get into discussion about and as necessary, and it will be a case by case basis, drill down into the granular detail in order to get to the context of the difference between a spend and a budget line.

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:

“I welcome that, it is pleasing that you have put in place mechanisms to be able to monitor the budgets more closely in the future. With that budget report, will that be able to be shared with the relevant Shadow Portfolio Holder?”

The Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care answered:

I would want to discuss that with officers first, but I am happy to come back to you on that, I don’t want to make a commitment at this stage on behalf of the Portfolio that I can’t keep. I don’t think there will be a difficulty but I don’t want to make a promise I can’t keep.

(c) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services by Councillor Lee Dillon:

“We welcome the fact that you will consult and that there will be cross party working on the new LRIE plan, but can you confirm that there is no outstanding contract with St Modwen?”

The Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services answered:

The outcome of court proceedings means the contract between West Berkshire Council and St Modwen is ineffective and cannot be acted upon. Any new development partnership will require a new contract.

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:

“Are we in any contracted relationship with St Modwen at the moment?”

The Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services answered:

No.

(d) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste by Councillor Gordon Lundie:

“Under what circumstances can a CIL charge be cancelled or set aside?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

The Government, by changing the S106 process for developments requiring planning permission, forced Councils to introduce the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) which is more complicated and governed by regulations which give Councils very little room for manoeuvre.

The CIL Regulations 2010 (as amended) provide for a number of stages at which a development that is CIL liable or potentially liable can be challenged. A challenge must be submitted within the statutory time limits and the correct procedures must be followed. The detail is set out in Chapter 10 ‘Appeals’ of the Regulations.

A CIL charge can be revised or exemptions/reliefs lost if the correct procedures are not followed.

The complexities of the CIL was the subject of a presentation by the Team at the recent District Parish Conference.

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 Gordon Lundie asked:

“Has the CIL charge ever been cancelled, reduced or set aside since the introduction by West Berkshire?”

Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

The CIL Charging Authority has been challenged on a number of occasions using the correct procedures as set out in the regulations and has been successful in the majority of cases. Other challenges include one made in the High Court after the applicant did not follow CIL procedures and which was conceded by the applicant prior to a hearing.

Additionally, the CIL Charging Authority has also revised a CIL charge where the applicant had conformed to the regulations and where there was either: -

1. an administrative error;
2. lack of information at the time the CIL charge was issued; or
3. the original planning permission was superseded.

(e) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Children, Education and Young People by Councillor Mollie Lock:

“Can you provide an update on the Highwood Copse project, given that the contractor has gone into administration?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

Hopefully you will have seen the press release that the Council put out providing an update on Highwood Copse yesterday.

But it is very apparent, that after the collapse of Dawnus we are going to have to postpone the opening of the new school, which is unfortunate and disappointing but there is very little we can do about it.

Our priority has been around contacting the parents who were looking to start children there in September of this year. That contact has all been done and we have put a joint press release out only yesterday with the College to talk about how we are going to progress going forward – where we will be going out, we will be looking for a new contractor, but we recognise that that process will delay the opening of the school.

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 Mollie Lock asked:

“Will there have to be retendering, will the costs increase, and what about the implications of the new road access?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Waste answered:

With regards to the procurement process that is currently being evaluated and we are going through a legal process and a commercially sensitive process with that, so I am quite happy to have a conversation with you about that but not at this moment in time. So the procurement process is underway.

With regards to the road, that was within the Dawnus contractual agreement and we foresee that going into whatever new agreement we reach so that will be done as well.

At this stage, while we are going through the procurement process, we can't identify if costs will increase, it will all depend on what we are doing. I know of other councils who have taken a 'knee jerk' action and have not gone into a competitive process, they may well be subject to cost implications and that is why we want to make sure we get the procurement process right. Therefore, the decision was sensible to say actually we are not going to rush into anything we are going to make sure we get this right even though it is disappointing for those children.

However, what it does mean, is that the children will have the opportunity to go around and look at a completed school, which I think is really reassuring for parents that they will actually see where their child will be starting in September, which as you know it is an anxious time for any parent so having the opportunity to see a completed build, rather than what is currently there, I think will give reassurance to parents going forward.
