

Questions and Answers

Executive
Thursday 19 December 2019

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Questions and Answers



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

(a) **Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Transport and Countryside by Mr Alan Pearce:**

"In the design and construction of the A339 road junction for the new access into the London Road Industrial Estate, what percentage of the urban runoff, if any, does the drainage system allow to flow into the Thames Water surface water sewer?"

The Portfolio Holder for Transport and Countryside answered:

It has always been the case that all of the urban run-off flows into the Thames Water sewer, as this is the only drainage outlet available in this location.

This was the case before the A339 junction was created and is the case after its completion.

I would however like to stress a point, which has been stressed by Transport and Countryside officers on several occasions previously, that the design of the new junction includes underground attenuation to limit the run-off from the additional hard areas created by the junction, to that of a green field site.

The increased area is therefore fully attenuated and causes no additional strain on the drainage network.

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 Alan Pearce did not ask a supplementary question.

(b) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Planning by Mr Neil Taylor:

“What positive steps is West Berkshire Council taking to alleviate the housing crisis?”

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Planning answered:

Thank you for your question, as it gives me the opportunity to talk about all of the positive steps we have been taking in West Berkshire to deliver housing for everyone.

One of our manifesto commitments was to make sure there are homes available in West Berkshire for all stages of our residents’ lives. The focus would continue to be on the delivery of affordable housing in the district.

This commitment was carried through to the new Council Strategy 2019 – 2023 ‘Building on Our Strengths’. One of the six priorities in the Strategy relates to housing, this is to ‘Develop local infrastructure, including housing, to support and grow the local economy’

Additionally, the West Berkshire Vision 2036 specifically commits to delivering a West Berkshire housing mix with something for everyone.

So, Mr Taylor, I’ll tell you some of the things we have already achieved and the positive steps we are taking, to ensure we continue to deliver on these commitments:

- There is a key regeneration scheme in Market Street which is currently under development for completion by 2021. This will deliver 232 homes, 219 of which will be available for private rent, and 13 for shared ownership.
- Our Local Plan to 2026 sets out the Council’s planning policies based on the completion 551 dwellings per annum. We are delivering 109% of our target according to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.
- We currently have a 7 year housing land supply which has been accepted by planning inspectors at appeal.
- Our development programme currently has over 800 affordable homes approved with additional units on the horizon.
- Our Equity Loan Scheme, First Steps Next Steps has enabled 35 homes to be purchased by local residents.
- We have launched the Housing Service Improvement Plan that will secure more private rented accommodation through a rent incentive scheme. It will develop a Landlord Forum and a Registered Provider Forum to increase opportunities for growth in housing.
- The Council is nearing completion on a Joint Venture with Sovereign Housing that will increase the number of affordable homes in the district.
- We are investigating setting up a local housing company similar to the one in Bristol, which is one of the initiatives you mentioned in the preamble to your question.
- Our housing team has also done some outstanding work with both families and rough sleepers.
- We have purchased 18 units of temporary accommodation and there are a further 2 under offer. As a result we have reduced the number of families in bed and breakfast from 10 to 0.
- Turning to rough sleepers, 35 have been supported to move on from sleeping rough. Our Housing First has accommodated 10 rough sleepers and secured a further 10 units for 2021. Currently the number of rough sleepers in the district has reduced to 10 from 28.

Finally, the new local plan will look forward to the period 2036 and will include new policies on housing land, self-build, affordable housing and zero carbon development.

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 Neil Taylor asked the following supplementary question:

“I am gratified to know that you have taken a point from the information that I gave you and that is the Bristol scheme. Will you be any taking other advice from that article (which was published in The Guardian (29.10.19))? This lists lots of things that local councils have done, particularly with reference to affordable housing”

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Planning answered:

I think I have given you a very comprehensive answer to what we are doing with regard to affordable housing and in actual fact our planning policies are at the forefront of affordable housing. We are probably the only local authority in the country which demands 40% of affordable housing to be delivered on new developments on green fields, and 30% on brown field sites.

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

(a) **Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Environment by Councillor Adrian Abbs:**

“Given the importance of the climate emergency, will the council commit to the EAG being changed to a committee status?”

The Portfolio Holder for Environment answered:

The purpose of the Environment Advisory Group (EAG) is to provide a forum by which the Portfolio Holder for the Environment can consult with both officers and Members of the opposition regarding proposals when they are at an early stage of development. The intention is to enable ideas to be developed in a constructive and informative manner from the earliest opportunity.

As the matters being considered at the EAG relate to Executive functions, this cannot be formed as a Council Committee as the functions in question are reserved by law to the Executive.

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 Adrian Abbs did not ask a supplementary question.

(b) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Environment by Councillor Adrian Abbs:

“Notwithstanding the part 2 status of the meetings, can the executive outline what has been actually achieved so far by the EAG?”

The Portfolio Holder for Environment answered:

As you are well aware, the Environment Advisory Group (EAG) has met on three occasions in this year and the primary focus of conversation has been the development of the Environment Strategy. The Strategy, which has been researched and populated over the last few months, is a fundamental part of the long term plans for this Council and its vision for the future.

Having cross party debate helps myself gauge views and opinions, and ensures that ideas can be shared in a confidential and trusted environment.

As the EAG develops, there will be more opportunity to widen debate and work is underway to build a more comprehensive forward plan to examine topics of interest such as carbon audits, carbon budgets and so forth.

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 Adrian Abbs asked the following supplementary question:

“I asked what has actually been achieved. You spoke about what things are going on in the meetings, but what was actually achieved?”

The Portfolio Holder for Environment answered:

I answered your question. I included in my answer the fact that the debate has helped me to gauge views and opinions, that has delivered value to the Strategy and comments have been incorporated.

Councillor Adrian Abbs asked the following supplementary question:

“Are you not slightly disappointed that by the time that the Strategy eventually comes out, which is the only thing I hear that we are talking about developing within this meeting, that 7.5% of the available time for us to reach our 2030 target will have gone?”

The Portfolio Holder for Environment answered:

There is always an opportunity for those of us on the EAG to be a little more concise in what we say and add to the quality of what we do. We will learn, we will develop and I look forward to high quality discussions with actions coming up in future meetings.

(c) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Transport and Countryside by Councillor Alan Macro:

“How does the council ensure that road traffic signs are kept clean and are not obscured by vegetation?”

The Portfolio Holder for Transport and Countryside answered:

The Council’s Highway Asset Management Team routinely inspects all adopted roads in the district. The frequency of inspections is based upon road hierarchy.

As part of these inspections all assets on the highway are observed and any issues arising from the inspections are prioritised for attention on a risk based approach. This would include signs obstructed by vegetation or obscured by dirt.

We also rely on reports from Parish and Town Councils and from members of the public on roads which are inspected less frequently.

It is worth noting that we are in conversation with a number of parishes about devolving sign cleaning and that has been going on for a little while and we hope to progress it. Should a sign become obscured by dirt and deemed to be a safety hazard then we would clean it. There is not however what you would categorise as a routine cleansing cycle.

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

Councillor Alan Macro asked the following supplementary question:

“I have observed many signs, particularly recently, which have been obscured either by foliage or by dirt. A particular example was a sign near to the Thatcham level crossing. Can I ask you to review/have a schedule to check the signs on a much more regular basis?”

The Portfolio Holder for Transport and Countryside answered:

I am happy to take that back and happy to get somebody to look into the queries that you have raised.

Certainly with regards to the Thatcham level crossing, as you will be aware, we have got a number of things that are currently being looked at. Clear reading of the signs is one of those so I am happy to look into those. If there is anything further that you have particularly been waiting for then give me the details and I will specifically get those looked into as a priority.

(d) Question submitted to the Leader of the Council by Councillor David Marsh:

“Can the Leader of the Council give an assurance that West Berkshire Council staff and members will never again be asked to participate in the distribution of political propaganda, as in the recent fiasco of “Get Ready for Brexit on 31 October?”

The Leader of the Council answered:

The simple answer would be no. There is much I would like to say to this question, but as Leader of this Council I feel that my priority is to the residents of West Berkshire, and actually on uniting those residents after three very difficult years.

So my focus is very much going to be on how we ensure that they have the communications to enable them to move forward as we move forward in leaving the European Union.

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 David Marsh asked the following supplementary question:

“If this was essential information that was being disseminated to the people of West Berkshire, why aren’t you doing it now when I understand from the latest Queen’s Speech that we are due to leave the European Union on 31 January?”

The Leader of the Council answered:

As you are aware, the information that was passed on directed people to a website which gave them all of the information that they might need to consider should we leave the European Union going forward.

We will want to make sure that all of our residents have access to that information going forward, so they can prepare if they need to do so.

(e) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Children, Education and Young People/Finance by Councillor Martha Vickers:

“In view of the engagement young people have shown over the need for action on Climate Change would this Council consider reinstating a fund to send a young person to the Youth Parliament?”

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

It has been excellent to see how engaged the district’s young people have been in the run up to the climate emergency declaration made by this Council and subsequently. The well attended and well received Climate Conference, where there was a very welcome presence from some of our younger citizens, has helped to inform the Environment Strategy that is due for consultation early next year.

We are always looking to seek the best way to engage with all of our residents, including younger people, and as part of the Environment Strategy consultation we are exploring all of the options that we have available to us to encourage greater engagement on this important issue.

However, I don’t think that is likely to lead to a commitment to spend money on sending a young person to the Youth Parliament, I struggle to see quite how that would improve the engagement between young people and West Berkshire Council.

In addition to all that, as we consider the feedback from the recent corporate peer review which highlighted the positive work we do in respect of engagement and that we can continue to improve, the Executive will consider the actions to be taken as a result of the peer review in the new year. Of course, it may be that engagement with young people is something that comes out through that and we may be looking at ways to further engage with young people.

Going back to the specific point about the Youth Parliament, if schools considered that it might be something they would want to support as part of any particular young person’s personal and education development then I as Lead Member would certainly support 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?”*

Councillor Tony Vickers on behalf of Councillor Martha Vickers asked the following supplementary question:

“It sounds to me as though you undervalue parliament. If young people are to respect parliament, they need to be able to take part in it, that was the point of the Youth Parliament. Why do you not consider that this Council should be supporting young people, residents of this Council, in taking part in the Youth Parliament, in a way that was done for many years under a previous council?”

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

As to the value I hold in parliament, I can assure you, as the election agent for the successful Conservative candidate in the recent election, Laura Farris, that I hold parliament in the highest esteem.

This question I understood was about consultation with young people on climate change. Although I would consider participation in the Youth Parliament to be a very valuable undertaking, I don't think it would help us in our consultation on climate change.

(f) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Transport and Countryside by Councillor Tony Vickers

“What does the Executive Member for Highways & Transport propose to do to ensure that the on-street electric charging points can be made use of as soon as possible, in the light of the Council having declared a Climate Emergency?”

The Portfolio Holder for Transport and Countryside answered:

The Council has installed, registered and commissioned 28 on-street electric vehicle charging points across the district so far. These have been connected and are available for use – indeed according to our records they are already being used. Details of how to use the chargers are on the Council’s website should they be required.

We are currently consulting on eight more locations in Hungerford and, subject to the outcome of the consultation, will programme these installations in January 2020. This will take the total of electric vehicle charging points to 36 available and we hope to encourage the take-up of electric vehicles for households in the areas, especially where residents do not have access to off-street parking.

Recent government information shows that West Berkshire Council is one of the best performing authorities in the country (outside of London) for the delivery of public charge points.

As a Council we actively encourage any of our residents who are interested in an electric vehicle but do not have access to off-street parking to get in contact with us to see if an on-street charge point is feasible.

I would point out, there may be other sites that are available, but one that I am aware of is ZapMap.com and this shows live information including two in Craven Road which may be of particular interest to you. When you use the website, it actually shows you whether the charge point is being used at that time. I hope that answers the question sufficiently.

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 Tony Vickers asked the following supplementary question:

“Yes, I am interested in the ones in Craven Road which I have never seen being used. Would you not agree that if you were to follow the government guidance on how to best get value from this investment by the public, it is the public purse that has paid for these, that the following measure should be taken urgently, considering we are in a climate emergency:

Firstly, arrange with Ubitricity to monitor the power usage yourselves of each post, so that we know what the return on investment is.

Secondly, survey or as you say consult residents in the areas where we already have these posts or where you are considering to have them, which wasn’t done very adequately in my own area of West Fields, to find out what the actual and also aspirational ownership of electric and hybrid vehicles is.

Thirdly, and most importantly, do what the government recommends, but does not insist upon unfortunately, which is to make parking adjacent to charging posts exclusively for electric and hybrid vehicles. Because I have yet to see any of those in the West Fields Estate used.

The Portfolio Holder for Transport and Countryside answered:

Currently, we are not planning reserved parking bays. The areas where the charge points will be installed generally have parking pressures which could make creating a designated bay unpopular. Once there is a higher concentration of electric or plug in hybrid vehicles in these areas, reserved bays can be revisited and I am happy to do that as and when it becomes a requirement.

With regards to the other point, I believe we do use Ubitricity to look at usage figures and I am happy to confirm that with officers.

With regards to surveying areas, we have predominantly looked at putting it in areas where there is no off street parking and therefore owners of electric vehicles can't actually utilise their own driveways.
