

Questions and Answers

Executive
Thursday 16 January 2020

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Executive Meeting

16 January 2020

Questions and Answers



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

There were no public questions for this meeting.

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

(a) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Planning by Councillor Tony Vickers:

"Given that it is over 10 years since the current Administration steered Sandleford Park into pole position in the race for 'Strategic' site status in our current Local Plan and that little has been achieved towards that aim, what is the Council doing to secure delivery of the much needed 2000 new dwellings there?"

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Planning answered:

I am involved with the Chief Executive's strategic overview of the current applications. We meet frequently with Officers and with the applicant developers to ensure that progress is made towards an appropriate decision at the appropriate time.

Officers have formed a specific Steering Group, chaired by the Corporate Director, and it is made up of all the relevant specialist professionals within the Council who are involved in considering the many facets of the development.

The Planning Team regularly meet with the applicants in technical meetings in order to assist and encourage the progression of a deliverable, acceptable and mitigated development.

As a whole, we are acting responsibly on behalf of the local community to secure a development which is itself appropriate and which would not fundamentally harm important environmental interests or the future everyday use of the development and the wider area. We are continuing to negotiate and amend the applications that have been submitted, so that a beneficial end result can be successfully delivered as soon as possible.

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

Councillor Tony Vickers asked the following supplementary question:

"I am glad to hear that those meetings are taking place because I think that's the first time it's been put out in the public domain, that there are these meetings that you described.

We are now ten years on, and you and I have both probably had sight of what others in the industry are saying about this site and are suggesting that after this time it would appear to be simply not deliverable and therefore should be removed from the refresh of the Local Plan. So I would like to know what your position is on the possibility of removing the site which after ten years appears to be no nearer to being built than it was at the time it was approved in the Local Plan."

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Planning answered:

As I think I have just said, we do consider it deliverable which is why we are working so closely with the developers both the technical teams and at a high level. When the developers come in it is the Director of Bloor Homes and his team which come in to meet me, the Chief Executive

and Officers, so we are really pushing them very hard to come together for a working solution to deliver the site. So at this stage there is no plan to remove it as a strategic site because I do believe that it will be delivered. However, I do appreciate it has been a long delay and I share your frustration in that Councillor Vickers.

(b) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Planning by Councillor Jeff Brooks (asked on his behalf by Councillor Lee Dillon):

“Can the Executive confirm when the Economic Development Plan will be published?”

The Portfolio Holder for Performance and Communities – Corporate ICT answered:

The answer is a brief one, Councillor Dillon, the Economic Development Strategy is on the Forward Plan for the 30 April Executive meeting and I would say that the Forward Plan is circulated to all Members so that shouldn't come as much of a surprise 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?”*

Councillor Dillon commented:

It wasn't on the Forward Plan at the time of the deadline for questions and it had been delayed so that was the reason for the question.

(c) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Planning by Councillor Alan Macro (asked on his behalf by Councillor Lee Dillon):

“Why has the publication of the Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment (HEELA) been delayed?”

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Planning answered:

In terms of the Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment (HELAA) process, officers have had a continuing and very clear steer from Members that until such time as an initial assessment of suitability of all promoted sites has been completed, they do not wish to publish the location of these sites as they wish to avoid unnecessary conjecture by residents. That's all those Members on the cross party Planning Advisory Group, it was a decision made by this group.

During this period, the National Planning Policy Framework has been revised twice and these changes have needed to be understood in the context of the HELAA and the local plan process, a local election has taken place and the results of this have meant that officers have had to review work to ensure it reflects changing Council priorities.

In addition, given the agreed Berkshire-wide HELAA methodology, which is new for this local plan, the assessment process is more rigorous than would previously have been the case with the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) and therefore it has taken much longer to produce than was originally envisaged.

The HELAA is now nearing completion and is expected to be published on line at the end of this month.

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 the following supplementary question:

“I appreciate you saying it took longer than anticipated and we will obviously build that in to the next review. Were any resources considered to be put towards it to get it back on track once it was taking longer than you anticipated and is there any risk to the delay of the document?”

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Planning answered:

Yes, action was taken because I'm very keen to get this moving and to get the local plan out for consultation, examination and adoption. Because we are a plan led authority we now have to review our local plan every five years which is a very tight timescale and therefore we have got extra resource in order to keep the thing on track, because the last thing I want and I'm sure the last thing you as Opposition Members want is for us to be an authority without a current local plan, because that would open us to challenge so there has been a very clear direction to officers that we have to put the resource at it to ensure that we stick to the timetable that we originally published.

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

“Since the climate emergency was declared, how much has WBC’s carbon footprint been reduced by?”

The Portfolio Holder for Environment answered:

As you are aware the carbon audit has been initiated. The work has started but has not completed, and so I am afraid I can’t give an answer to this question at this time. Being slightly more positive though I do look forward to the stage when I can do exactly that and I hope that we would be talking a matter of weeks for the completion of the audit and therefore a reliable baseline and the assessment of new projects after that point.

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 Abbs asked the following supplementary question:

“This is somewhat concerning, given that the recently launched Environmental Strategy public consultation contains the same chart twice (chart 5) and this chart clearly shows that approximately 25 kilo tonnes of carbon should have been saved from energy generation carbon sequestration in 2019. Could the Councillor please explain why the chart shows progress to carbon zero when none may exist?”

The Portfolio Holder for Environment answered:

Chart 5 is a projection of the long term trend we have seen and as the broad narrative to our Strategy goes it’s certainly impossible to predict on a micro level of months how a long term trend is going to pan out in the future. So broadly that is what we would have a reasonably good expectation of from historical data, but of course historical data is not a guide to the future and so we don’t really know. When the carbon audit gives us a benchmark and benchline and we have more detail of reporting particular projects then that would allow, if it’s useful, more thorough analysis of that type of thing. So again the charts are broad level trends rather than accurate month on month measurements.

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

“What has been the actual usage of Electric Vehicle charging points in West Berkshire during 2019 (measured by month, charging type and location, including fast charging points and normal charging points)?”

The Portfolio Holder for Environment answered:

Thank you for your question Councillor Abbs. I do have detailed usage data for the Kennet Centre charging point which I am very happy to share with you offline as it is a long list of rather turgid numbers. I don't currently have data for the more recently established on street charging points but I suspect that in time those will emerge and again I am very happy to share as and when officers are able to assemble this.

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 Abbs asked the following supplementary question:

“You are really saying that other than the numbers we asked for previously there are no numbers for the new stuff. Could you therefore please explain why Newbury Town Council has been able to view the data on the new 28 charge points which actually shows zero use on 22 out of 28 points whereas the Portfolio Holder appears not to have access to this?”

The Portfolio Holder for Environment answered:

I can't comment on what data Newbury Town Council have seen, and maybe you could facilitate a sharing of that information as I would be very interested to see it and I'm sure that at some level in the Council that has been looked at. I don't personally monitor car charging usage data on a minute level and on a slightly broader sense, and I know there have been questions from other Members on usage and uptake, should electric car parking bays be reserved for electric cars I think the proper response is, with due consideration to drivers of the not yet electric vehicle type which is the overwhelming majority right now, over time we will have to give a little more away towards electric cars. So absolutely the allocation of spacing and the usage is something that would hopefully be quick to take off but I think in the matter of a few months it's not realistic to have a lot of useful information.

(f) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Planning by Councillor Steve Masters:

“After hearing that the portfolio holder believes that the targets for social and affordable housing on greenfield and brownfield sites across West Berkshire are something to be proud of can I request a full outline of the actual numbers of both affordable and social units delivered by developers since May 2015?”

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Planning answered:

Although I would be more than happy to give you the information, Members will be pleased to know that I am not going to stand and list all the applications of all new build sites that have delivered affordable housing since 2015.

I would however, since Councillor Masters has framed the question “since May 2015”, remind Members that it was this Authority that challenged the Government on sites of less than 10 units providing no affordable housing. This challenge went all the way to the Court of Appeal and the Government was forced to concede that Ministerial Statements did not overrule local plan policies which had been subject to viability assessments and examination through the local plan.

This is a stance that I am proud to say we still stand by and have successfully defended at appeal ever since. However, as Members do love numbers here are some headline affordable housing numbers taken from the Annual Monitoring Report for Housing published on the Council website:

- As at March last year, 862 outstanding affordable housing commitments including 200 at the Racecourse.
- The Housing Site Allocations DPD will deliver approximately 653 affordable units, 240 of which are already permitted.
- Since 2014/15 only 3 applications for more than 15 units have not provided an affordable housing contribution.
- No planning applications for between 10 and 14 units have been approved with no affordable housing contributions.
- 18 applications have been approved for between 5 and 9 units during this period, 10 of which provided no affordable housing contributions. It must be remembered that National Policy allows for non-provision of affordable housing if it renders the scheme unviable, no matter what the local planning authority wishes to see happen.

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 Masters asked the following supplementary question:

“It would have been nice to have some percentages of the successful ratio of 30-40%. However, what other measures is the Council going to do to make sure those targets are met, not just merely aspirations, can you promise the public that these targets will be achieved and you don't give way to developers?”

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Planning answered:

They are not aspirations Councillor Masters, it is in our policy: 40% affordable homes on greenfield sites and 30% on brownfield sites. There are some occasions where this hasn't been met for sites in the more recent past, particularly when developers play the viability card, but that is happening less and less at the moment so we are getting affordable housing delivered.

There are occasionally sites when the developer doesn't want to deliver affordable housing on the sites, but gives us a sum of money that we use to provide affordable housing elsewhere.

Councillor Masters asked the following question:

"What percentage have achieved the target?"

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Planning answered:

I haven't got that figure in front of me Councillor Masters. We could find that out for you.

The Deputy Leader of the Council added:

As a matter of information, I strenuously argued before an Eastern Area Planning Committee on a site in Mortimer for affordable housing. I persuaded the Committee to go against officer's recommendation and put affordable housing on the site. That was then challenged at appeal and we lost the viability argument. So it's not for want of trying.

(g) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Planning by Councillor Steve Masters:

“Prior to releasing the Market street site to the developer Grainger, did the council explore setting up a company such as the one in Bristol in order to ensure that the council’s aspirations for maximising social and affordable units are met?”

The Portfolio Holder for Finance answered:

At the time, this was not considered. The Bristol option and similar ones were not well developed across the sector at the time the terms of the Market Street development were agreed for procurement purposes in order to secure a development partner and which was prior to 2011 when many Council housing companies first appeared. It has been in the past three years that there has been a significant increase in the number of housing companies being set up by councils and delivering housing. Going forward, the Council is aware of present opportunities and will ensure these are fully considered in respect of future West Berkshire Council schemes in order to deliver affordable housing according to policy.

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 Masters asked the following supplementary question:

“Bearing in mind the Market Street development, how has the financial viability changed that has precipitated such a low number of shared ownership on the Market Street development? Is that acceptable as a return for the Council Tax payers of West Berkshire, bearing in mind how little the land cost the developer in the first place? So if a company can’t make a financial go of something and then get it at a song surely they shouldn’t be in that business?”

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Planning answered:

The reason why there is a lower number of affordable homes on the Market Street development is because we have gained a new bus station and a new approach to the station as well from the developer. So we felt at the time that it was important for us to have that new bus station and an improved entrance from the station so we accepted that a lower number of affordable homes on that site would be acceptable to us, and you must bear in mind that the whole of the Market Street development is for rented accommodation. Now it’s at market rent, but it does give those people who can afford to pay a market rent, but can’t afford to find money for a mortgage, the opportunity to rent in a very very attractive area in central Newbury.

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