

Executive Questions & Answers

Thursday, 17th February 2011



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Executive Meeting

17 February 2011

Questions and Answers



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

(a) Question submitted to the Leader of the Council by Mr Richard Garvie:

“After the problems experienced with regards to CCTV in West Berkshire, can Cllr Jones explain why these problems occurred and why Executive Member Anthony Stansfeld and certain council officers had told the local business community and the wider public repeatedly that all of the cameras were working, or the transfer was "95% there", when in fact it was known that half of the cameras were not operational?”

The Leader of the Council answered:

The CCTV Project is highly complex and involves the upgrading of the cameras from analogue to digital and establishing a new interface with the control room in Windsor to enable 24/7 monitoring. Many contractors are working on the project.

Detailed planning between both West Berkshire Council and Windsor and Maidenhead took place over several months prior to the transfer and testing period. There has, and continues to be, close collaboration between the various contractors involved.

Contrary to what has been reported there wasn't a complete break in service as a number of cameras were already linked to the Windsor Control Room before the Newbury CCTV Control Room closed. However, the severe weather conditions in December did hamper and delay some site works and this has had a knock on effect on the timescales for the whole project. It was always anticipated that the transfer and testing period would cover several weeks as it was appreciated that a complex sequence of site and technical work like this would inevitably have some difficulties.

It is not true to say that the local business community and wider public have been misinformed by Cllr Stansfeld or Council officers as the information they have presented at forums such as the Town Centre Partnership, Newbury Neighbourhood Action Group and Newbury Town Council throughout the preparation and transfer periods has been factual and accurate.

Perhaps you could enlighten us as to when, where and to whom Cllr Stansfeld said the transfer was “95% there”.

There was a series of briefings to key stakeholder groups and individuals to ensure that essential and confidential information about the transfer could be provided and, importantly, support given to groups such as Shop Safe and Pub Watch Radio users. I am pleased to report that the Shop Safe and Pub Watch Radios in both Newbury and Thatcham are now successfully linked to the Windsor CCTV Control Room.

West Berkshire Council has sought to be as open as possible about the transfer without compromising security. Regrettably inaccurate stories fed to the local media has potentially compromised that security by making public that the CCTV was being upgraded and not all systems were fully operational.

Interestingly, some weeks ago, you published all of your correspondence on this subject on-line on the Newbury Today forum. It is interesting to actually read the comments that followed this:

“Not exactly the compendium of lies that was advertised is it. A real let down . . .”

*“Nowhere does it state how many cameras are working. In fact it says in **future** tense “In all 40 cameras will be taken over in the move to Windsor”.”*

“I’m not on West Berkshire Council’s side here, not at all. But seeing the way Richard conducts his campaign and then presents ‘facts’ from the mish-mash of information and opinions etc. makes it difficult to ascertain if he is the Great Leader or a rabble-rouser. Thus far I see him as someone much more interested in his electioneering as anything, and who conducts his campaign in a way that leaves him able to claim success when 98% of his case is subsequently proven defective.” NWN Reader

I’ve no connection with any of those Bloggers.

You would have seen recently that the local Police Commander has praised the new CCTV system and feels that the new digital images that are now being produced will help considerably in assisting with the detection of crime in the area. In addition, he has added:

“The greatly increased quality of picture captured will and is assisting crime investigations and the standard of evidence is considerably enhanced with the new system. Good quality CCTV is a vital tool when trying to trace people, such as people who have been reported missing. When there is a need to manage large numbers of people in public areas, CCTV plays a critical role that allows managers to assess crowd numbers, movement and dynamics that assists in maintaining public safety.”

I would draw your attention to the fact that this Council has protected a non statutory service for at least five years with the contract it has in place with Windsor and Maidenhead. Furthermore, this contract has saved the Council Tax payers approximately £5,000 a week as well as improving the service.

I would also remind you that this is at a time when Wokingham has closed down their CCTV function and Reading has reduced the amount of live monitoring it does overnight.

In conclusion, you will know that we have 20 out of 21 cameras fully operational in the Newbury Town Centre. We are also making good progress with the remaining cameras, but are not prepared to divulge these details on the grounds that we do not want to undermine security and safety in those areas.

Mr Richard Garvie asked the following supplementary question:

“When Cllr Stansfeld said to the paper that we were “95% there”, or “all the cameras are working” on 6 January, seven days later, I think the 23 January and even on 6 January when he went on Newbury Sound and said “everything’s working bar a couple of cameras”, I also had an email from Nick Carter at tea time saying that 20 cameras were operating and visible in Windsor and none of them could be controlled. What’s the truth? Who’s telling the truth – Cllr Stansfeld or the Chief Executive?”

The Leader of the Council answered:

If you wanted to ask the question of exactly what Cllr Stansfeld meant when he answered a question, you need to ask Cllr Stansfeld that, not myself. From the investigations I’ve had, and I think it’s quite clear from the stuff that has been printed on-line, they don’t corroborate what you are saying, but I challenge you if that is the case please publish everything you’ve got on-line. I don’t think we’ve got anything to hide at this Authority.

(b) Question submitted to the Executive Member for Community Care by Fiona Walker:

“Given that the cuts to the jobs at the Phoenix Centre, and the excellent job done by ROAR for the Countryside Department, what are the plans for:

(a) the clients; and

(b) for the service which ROAR does for that West Berkshire Council department?”

The Executive Member for Community Care answered:

We completely agree that the ROAR group does an excellent job and it is appreciated by everyone who had involvement with that project: the Countryside and Environment Team in WBC, The Ramblers, the Supported Employment Team at The Phoenix Centre, social care professionals within West Berkshire Council and also the service users that take part in the project, their parents and also the carers.

Each Service User that currently takes part in the ROAR project will receive a full review of their current circumstances in line with all service users of West Berkshire Council’s Adult Social Care, under the redesign of Day Services within West Berkshire Council. This review process is currently underway.

Those individuals assessed as meeting the Council’s Critical need criteria will be allocated a personal budget which they can then choose to purchase a range of appropriate services to meet their assessed Adult Social Care needs. Individuals will be able to choose a variety of ways to meet their needs including purchasing services within the community all provided by the private and voluntary sectors. We recognise that there will be some service users whose needs may not appropriately be met by such voluntary and private service providers, for example those with profound and complex support needs, and we feel it is likely that these individuals will choose and need to receive specialist day opportunities run by West Berkshire Council based at one of our four Resource Centres.

We would very much like to see the ROAR project continue and indeed to continue to work in partnership with our Countryside and Environment Department and the Ramblers Association as it does currently. We are exploring how best this may be achieved for the future. Options currently being looked at are:

1. That the ROAR project could develop in its own right along with other projects currently operating at the Phoenix Centre and moving into a “social enterprise” or a “micro industry” or small business and then they would be able to continue to work with current partners and could offer training and work placement opportunities to the service users to purchase their personal budgets. This option could also develop paid, supported employment opportunities for the service users to progress on to.
2. That ROAR could become a project of an existing organisation within the local community; for example, a current care provider/day service provider in the voluntary or private sector and they would continue to run the project and maintain its current partnerships; again offering placements for those in receipt of personal budgets.

(c) Question submitted to the Executive Member for Environment, “Cleaner Greener”, Public Protection and Customer Services by Joan Lawrie:

“How can West Berks District Council base their decision to decline the Village Green status when certain aspects of the report are incorrect? There were not any cattle to be taken into consideration for the time periods of the Village Green Application, so why make such an issue about them or was there a mistake in the number of years; the Inspector’s statement concerning financial interests of the objectors is questionable; that the Area 1’s fencing was and is secure and maintained; and the fact that letters from 100 residents have been totally ignored mostly on the basis that they didn’t refer to Pincents Hill as Golf Club lands and the Inspector said he did not give an indication of the number of witnesses he would prefer at the pre-meeting?”

The Executive Member for Environment, “Cleaner Greener”, Public Protection and Customer Services answered:

Thank you for your question Mrs Lawrie, in which you made several points, which I will address in the course of my reply.

Firstly, the Inspector’s Report is to the Council as Commons Registration Authority. The Inspector is an independent Expert, who is eminently qualified in his field.

The Inspector’s Report was very comprehensive and took into account all the witnesses evidence, as well as those produced at the beginning of the application and that is 84 witness statements. The Objectors’ witnesses who farm the land brought into evidence the use of the land for grazing horses and cattle and also for haymaking.

The Inspector took into account the years, which are 20, back from the application date, that is from 2009 to 1989 and I note that your own witness, Mrs Gardner, referred to grazing in Area 3 on the map and Area 1 on the map has a hedge and is sufficiently secure when grazing animals are in situ.

A number of items are subject to interpretation and the Inspector would have determined and balanced all the evidence. This is normal practice to weigh up evidence, and also give opportunity of evidence to be challenged during the course of the inquiry.

Both parties, the Applicant, who was yourself, and the Objectors, were given the same rights by the Inspector to call witnesses. In the pre-inquiry meeting held on 11 December 2009 it was agreed with the parties that quality not quantity was required as this would offer a better opportunity of views being considered. As a result, you called about 15 witnesses and the objectors called 12.

The Inspector has not ignored any evidence, as can be seen from the 91 pages of the report, and the months it took to finalise the report.

Joan Lawrie asked the following supplementary question:

“Under the circumstances, would West Berkshire Council consider, on behalf of the residents of Tilehurst, Calcot and Theale, the idea of possibly obtaining a second Barrister’s opinion in order to dispel any possible misunderstandings, confusion or possible misapprehension on behalf of the Inspector? If not, would they be prepared to ignore my request to hear the Village Green status under Section 4 and just have a stab and decline under Section 2?”

The Executive Member for Environment, “Cleaner Greener”, Public Protection and Customer Services answered:

Thank you. Certainly, you or the Action Group, could ask for a second opinion on the report from an outside Legal Advisor if you wish, but as the Commons Registration Authority we need to formally determine this application now as we have all the information in the Inspector’s report to make that decision. If we didn’t do that, we would open ourselves to criticism and further challenges if we delay.

If Mrs Lawrie would like stay and listen to the presentation and debate on item 6 of the agenda, she’d be more than welcome.

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

(a) Question submitted to the Executive Member for Finance, Economic Development, Property, Health and Safety by Alan Macro:

"In view of the fact that the Jobs Fair has been cancelled, could the Executive Member for Economic Development, tell me what the Council is doing to help young people find work?"

The Executive Member for Finance, Economic Development, Property, Health and Safety answered:

The Jobs Fair has been cancelled in light of the reductions in Council staffing. However the Jobs Fair, or 'Recruitment and Skills Event' to give it its proper title, which has been held in Newbury in 2009 and 2010 is not specifically about helping young people to find work. It is for all age groups.

The Council is still helping young people to find work. 17 young people were employed under the Future Jobs Fund, which unfortunately has now been ended. Seven of the young people are still employed by the Council and several others have remained in employment with other employers.

Human Resources links with Job Centre Plus to provide a training session for young parents wishing to return to work, as well as a general training session for those looking for work.

Human Resources works with the Education Business Partnership and Pathways to Employment (P2E) to help young people obtain work experience with the Council as a pathway to paid employment. This work is currently targeted on young people who are leaving local authority care.

Managers are encouraged to consider posts for recruitment as a possible apprenticeship before going out to advert.

We also undertake joint work with Newbury College on PR for apprenticeships, and we continue to focus our efforts on young people who are NEET (not in education, employment or training) which is about 4.3% of the overall cohort, which compares very well with the national situation.

I would also add that the Skills and Enterprise Sub-Partnership is organising a Jobs Fair for some time in May with Newbury College. So there is still plenty of work going on.

Alan Macro asked the following supplementary question:

"I welcome that last bit you said, because this is the nub of the matter, we do need these kind of events to actually get the prospective employers and employees together and I'm sure you're aware that just recently it has been pointed out that nationally some 20% of young people are unemployed and there's a great deal of concern about what that could mean for the future. So could you assure me please that the Council will do all in its power to get these kind of events going, both for its own recruitment and also for local employers?"

The Executive Member for Finance, Economic Development, Property, Health and Safety answered:

I can certainly assure you that we will work as hard as we can to keep these sort of events alive, but we do have to live within the very tight financial restrictions.

(b) Question submitted to the Executive Member for Strategy and Performance (responsible for Procurement) by Royce Longton:

“I recently asked for a quotation from the Council’s Print Room to print 1000 copies of a flyer advertising the Greening Burghfield campaign, as this is a Council-related project. The price quoted was £180. I subsequently received a quotation of £88 for the same work from a commercial printer. This I accepted and the printer subsequently did an excellent job. Is the Council regularly paying more than double the commercial rate for work done by its own Print Room?”

The Executive Member for Strategy and Performance (responsible for Procurement) answered:

The nub of the question is the Council really paying more than double the commercial rate for work done in its own Print Room and the answer, I believe, is no. I think it’s an excellent question as, in these days of financial strain we want to make certain we are doing the job properly and economically and I totally agree with the credit of the question.

The cost of running the Print Room operations like the Council’s or private sector involve a high degree of fixed costs such as machine rental and salaries.

Many commercial organisations will quote low prices in periods of low demand in order to keep machines running and employees busy, or as loss-leaders to attract new business. Our internal costs are regularly benchmarked against outside companies and indeed we sometimes outsource certain jobs either because of insufficient internal capacity, or to deal with specialist requirements we cannot service in-house, or sometimes because it is more cost effective for an external company to fulfil. An example of where an external printer can undercut our prices is by printing multiple images on large paper stock size such as A0 then guillotining to A3, A4, A5 etc. The largest stock size our Print Room can handle is A3. We don’t have the equipment.

The other area where we see variations in prices is that some of our customers compare the Print Room’s design and print price with an external company’s print only price.

Indicative costs for flyers printed in our Print Room at today’s prices are as follows:

1,000 copies single-sided A4, full colour	£ 63.50
1,000 copies double-sided A4, full colour	£101.00
1,000 copies single-sided A5, full colour	£ 39.45
1,000 copies double-sided A5, full colour	£ 66.00

So, the price quoted of £180 I think we need to look into more carefully. I don’t know whether you required design work or it was general leaflets or what it was, but I cannot square those two figures up so we will look at this quotation when I have the specification of what you asked for in detail, then I will give you an answer to this, but I cannot square it up actually without those specifications.

(c) Question submitted to the Executive Member for Highways, Transport (Operational), ICT by Keith Woodhams:

“Can the Executive Member for Highways and Transport tell me why the waiting room at Newbury bus station remains closed, leaving the elderly and mothers with small children waiting for a bus in the freezing cold weather?”

The Executive Member for Highways, Transport (Operational), ICT answered:

I share your frustration Councillor Woodhams. The waiting room at Newbury Bus Station was regrettably closed by Reading Transport, the parent company of Newbury Buses in October 2009. This was a commercial decision made by the company and included closing their offices in the bus station as well as the waiting room, with their staff relocating to Reading.

(d) Question submitted to the Executive Member for Highways, Transport (Operational), ICT by Keith Woodhams:

“Can the Executive Member for Highways and Transport explain why Newbury Town Council would have been charged £185 for a grit bin which they have now been able to purchase elsewhere for £70?”

The Executive Member for Highways, Transport (Operational), ICT answered:

The price of £185 is for the supply, delivery, siting and filling of a 170 litre salt bin. The actual cost element of the model of bin used by the Council is £87.12 excluding VAT.

The additional cost can be attributed to labour and vehicle costs associated with the siting of the bin within a particular parish and the first filling of salt. It should be noted that this price is for supplying and delivering one bin. If two or more are delivered then the cost of delivery is reduced and this saving is passed on to the Parish Council requesting the bins.

West Berkshire Council have not stipulated that the salt bins have to be sourced through them and have actively encouraged Parish and Town Councils to source the bins themselves if they feel they can purchase them elsewhere at a reduced cost. I understand that Newbury Town Council were able to purchase 12 bins for £78 each which they would then have had to deliver to the various locations themselves and we then filled up for free.

I understand that a number of other local Councils have also purchased their own bins and I can't comment on the specification or the size or whether they are directly comparable to this Council's salt bins, they have obviously saved money on the overall cost which is excellent news.

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