

Questions and Answers

Council
Tuesday, 5th March, 2013

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Council Meeting

5 March 2013

Questions and Answers



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

(a) Question submitted to the Executive Member for Council Strategy & Performance, Housing, ICT, Corporate Support, Strategic Support, Legal by Ms Judith Bunting:

"The Council's own draft Homelessness Strategy highlights severe problems with the provision of affordable housing in this wealthy district with high house prices and recognises that the trend in people presenting as homeless to the Council is increasing.

In the light of this, and the fact housing officers are already dealing with caseloads three times larger than usual, can the Executive Member for Housing explain why he is so confident that "these pressures can be accommodated within existing resources", as stated in the Action Plan accompanying the Strategy?"

The Executive Member for Council Strategy & Performance, Housing, ICT, Corporate Support, Strategic Support, Legal answered:

First of all, may I welcome Ms Bunting to the West Berks Council Chamber. I am sure we will be seeing much more of you over the next two years.

I also hope you have been able to solve your own homeless problem – namely your lack of a home in West Berkshire.

With regards to your question, I don't recognise the picture you paint. I am sure that you will want to be as accurate as possible. The words 'severe problem' are not used anywhere in the Homelessness Strategy or Review. Yes, West Berkshire has a housing challenge. It is the same housing challenge as the rest of the UK. The car crash that was Labour's handling of the economy, and the housing market in particular, has left us all with a lot to do.

Housing Officers are not having to deal with caseloads three times larger than usual. Homelessness applications this year to date are actually 30% lower than they were last year. I am pleased to report that the Housing Officers, who are a very professional and capable group of people, coped very well with last year's number of homelessness applications. In fact, at the OSMC (Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission) scrutiny of homelessness on 28th November last year, Shelter (who were called as an expert witness) gave evidence that "West Berkshire was noted as an area that provided good advice and accepted homeless applications appropriately".

I am confident that the Housing Officers will continue to cope expertly and capably with the load that is put on them.

My opposite number for Housing, Councillor Vickers, spends a lot of time with the Housing Team. Presumably, he doesn't share your fears about additional resources being needed as I note there is no extra money for the Housing Service in the Liberal Democrat budget amendment.

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 Judith Bunting asked the following supplementary question:

“You say that there is no extra money in the Liberal Democrat budget. The reason why is the discretionary housing payment made available by the government, which I understand this year was over £116k, and yet West Berkshire Council has only paid out £43k and a little pounds and is expecting to draw only another £2.5k and a bit on top of that, which will leave nearly £70k of Government money unused when we do have, even you must acknowledge, we do still have housing issues in West Berkshire and the question is what will you do next year? Will you draw on the discretionary housing fund?”

The Executive Member for Council Strategy & Performance, Housing, ICT, Corporate Support, Strategic Support, Legal answered:

The question regards Discretionary Housing Payment next year. I can assure you that next year's discretionary housing payment available to the Housing Officers will be substantially larger than it was this year and it will be used wisely and appropriately if required.

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

(a) Question submitted to the Executive Member for Planning, Property, Highways, Transport by Councillor Keith Woodhams:

"Why is this Council sending Police Officers to carry out speed enforcement on roads in the district that do not have legal speed limits, because they are not covered by a Traffic Regulation Order (TRO) and do not have terminal signs located correctly, which could lead to a speeding fine being challenged in court wasting both Police and Court time?"

The Executive Member for Planning, Property, Highways, Transport answered:

This may come as a surprise to you, or perhaps it's a shock to you, but every single public road in this country has a speed limit attached to it of one form or another.

The Council does not send the Road Safety Constable to locations where there is a known discrepancy with the Traffic Regulation 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?"*

Councillor Keith Woodhams asked the following supplementary question:

"Are you aware that in fact each speed limit does require a Traffic Regulation Order. The fullest extent of the speed limit and, as reported in the paper recently by a resident, he's obviously found out that not all the speed limits in West Berkshire do have a correct Traffic Regulation Order? Are you aware of this? Obviously not."

The Executive Member for Planning, Property, Highways, Transport answered:

Yes, thank you.

(b) Question submitted to the Executive Member for Countryside, Environmental Protection, "Cleaner Greener", Culture, Customer Services by Councillor Keith Woodhams:

"Can the Executive Member for Culture & Leisure tell me what message she has for the parents who have decided not to use the Park & Stride facility at the Thatcham Discovery Centre, because the car park surface remains muddy and spoils their children's shoes as they walk to school and these parents are continuing to park in the surrounding residential area?"

The Executive Member for Countryside, Environmental Protection, "Cleaner Greener", Culture, Customer Services answered:

The car park remains well used by visitors to Thatcham Lake and the Nature Discovery Centre. Just recently the ground remained frozen after a period of heavy rain and the surface became wet after it thawed. Under these exceptional conditions the 'fines', that's the top surface, remain on the surface until they are drawn into the subsurface. We do not believe that this makes the surface very muddy, and certainly not to the extent that visitors are disinclined to use the facility. We have received no complaints about the surface whatsoever, even during the busy half term week. We note that a number of parents with children at the school are continuing to use the facility without complaint. If some parents refuse to use it then we do not believe this is due to the car park surface.

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 Keith Woodhams asked the following supplementary question:

"I have to tell you that a number of Town Councillors and District Councillors from West Thatcham went down to see the surface of the car park and it was extremely muddy. The money was spent on this car park for the Park & Stride so that kids can get out with their parents and walk to school are getting covered in mud as did the District Councillors and the Town Councillors. When are you going to improve the surface so that it can be used as a Park & Stride?"

The Executive Member for Countryside, Environmental Protection, "Cleaner Greener", Culture, Customer Services answered:

As you are aware, the surface is at the Nature Discovery Centre which is a nature reserve. We are not going to improve the surface any more than it is currently as we believe it is fit for purpose. However, I will say Councillor Woodhams, that I am extremely surprised that in extremely wet conditions, and cold conditions, that parents are allowing children to walk into school in indoor footwear. Surely, parents have heard of wellington boots that children could walk to school in and change when they got there and that would prevent any child from traipsing mud in from the surface of the car park into the classroom.

(c) Question submitted to the Executive Member for Council Strategy & Performance, Housing, ICT, Corporate Support, Strategic Support, Legal by Councillor Gwen Mason:

"I note that the housing allocations policy has recently been reviewed so that children under 10, regardless of sex, are expected to share a bedroom, and children of the same sex under the age of 16 will also be expected to share a bedroom.

I am aware of families that will find this new policy impossible due to the nature of their child's disability. Will you consider making exceptions to this policy on the recommendation of medical professionals where the safety of a sibling is in doubt?"

The Executive Member for Council Strategy & Performance, Housing, ICT, Corporate Support, Strategic Support, Legal answered:

Applicants who consider that they should be awarded an additional bedroom due to their child's disabilities can, under the allocation policy, request a review of their bedroom assessment. Decisions on such requests are complex and the Housing Service has regard to a wide range of matters in making such decisions, including, but not restricted to, medical evidence. For example, the Housing Service must consider ongoing affordability of the home, have regard to whether the award of an additional room will improve or alleviate the medical condition of the child and also give consideration to the prevailing housing market and availability of accommodation to meet identified needs.

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 Gwen Mason asked the following supplementary question:

“Foster Parents will also be disadvantaged by this bedroom tax. How will the Council ensure that both of these groups will be reimbursed from the Discretionary Housing Grant fund from the Government?”

The Executive Member for Council Strategy & Performance, Housing, ICT, Corporate Support, Strategic Support, Legal answered:

There are Discretionary Housing Payments available but I'm not sure I fully understand your question. Perhaps I could get back to you with a written answer.

Roger Croft's written response:

“As you say, the Coalition Government has not, apparently, given exception to the foster carer issue in the housing benefit reforms. I know that a number of charities have taken up the foster carer issue with Coalition Government Ministers.

I totally share your admiration for the foster carers we have in West Berks.

Regarding Discretionary Housing Payment; Officers are currently preparing policies for Discretionary Housing Payments to ensure that the limited sum of money available is used appropriately and equitably.

When this policy is approved, it will go through the normal Council channels but I shall ensure that you get a copy as soon as possible.”
