

Questions and Answers

Executive
Thursday, 25th July, 2013

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Executive Meeting

25 July 2013

Questions and Answers



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

There were no public questions submitted to the Executive.

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

- (a) **Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Strategy & Performance, Housing, ICT & Corporate Support, Legal and Strategic Support by Councillor Royce Longton:**

“With over £100m worth of work needing to be done to bring the District's homes up to a decent standard of insulation, what is the Council doing about the Green Deal, especially for those living in ‘fuel poverty’ and in hard to heat homes?”

The Portfolio Holder for Strategy & Performance, Housing, ICT & Corporate Support, Legal and Strategic Support answered:

The Energy Act 2011 sets out the Green Deal, which is a new legal and financial framework whereby households and businesses can obtain energy saving measures at no up-front cost. The works are financed by a long term loan system which is attached to the property's electricity bill. The underlying principle is the Golden Rule - this states that the cost of the loan must be less than or equal to the financial savings experienced by the property owner.

West Berkshire Council has signed up to a company known as Green Deal Together Limited. This is a consortium of the Milton Keynes based charity known as the National Energy Foundation and 14 Local Authorities in the South and South East. It is actually a Community Interest Company. West Berkshire Council is an equal shareholder with voting rights and has a seat on the Board of Directors of Green Deal Together.

Green Deal Together is a Green Deal provider which will administer Green Deal plans and energy efficiency measures to local residents. Included in this will be measures to deliver energy company obligation services to those living in fuel poverty and hard to treat homes such as those needing solid wall insulation.

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 Royce Longton asked the following supplementary question:

“Is the Member opposite aware that we Liberal Democrats would urge the administration to capitalise on the opportunities offered by the Green Deal to the maximum extent feasible to the benefit of the people of West Berkshire including, as you mention, those most disadvantaged residents who are in fuel poverty, and indeed for other works”.

The Portfolio Holder for Strategy & Performance, Housing, ICT & Corporate Support, Legal and Strategic Support answered:

No. We chose to do this within the Council. It is actually a joint activity of Housing and Environmental Health. A matter of choice because we thought it was a good thing to do.

(b) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Highways, Transport (Operations), Emergency Planning, Newbury Vision by Councillor Keith Woodhams:

“The Executive Member for Highways & Transport recently announced that £50,000 is being made available to repair potholes permanently across the district. I am advised that this equates to approximately 950 repairs.

Can the Executive Member tell me therefore, why her department has been repairing potholes on a temporary basis, that fail very quickly, cause damage to vehicles and then need to be repaired again?”

The Portfolio Holder for Highways, Transport (Operations), Emergency Planning, Newbury Vision answered:

Firstly, with regard to the point about the £50,000 - I need to explain, as I thought we had done before, that that's been provided to permanently repair those potholes that were temporarily filled following the extreme winter weather which badly affected road surfaces.

I am pleased to confirm that since the winter we have only been carrying out temporary repairs where an emergency response is required and these are relatively few in number. In fact out of a total of 249 highway emergencies attended to within two hours in the first quarter of this year, just 53, or 21%, related to potholes. Furthermore we have received no reports of failing repairs or resulting vehicle damage in that period.

I would also like to add that we aim to permanently fix all emergency repairs within 28 days. It's certainly my experience in driving around our roads that many of the temporarily safety filled potholes in the winter have now been permanently patch repaired. I think that's the experience of most of us.

With regard to the second part of your question, I have no evidence of this, but I am certain there is no information that we haven't been repairing since the start of this year, potholes other than the emergency ones.

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:

“Can you tell me why you have repeatedly ignored Government guidance to do it right first time because, with a reasonably small amount of funding, you could have achieved the same instead of costing the motorists hundreds of pounds in repairs and loss of vehicle hubcaps?”

The Portfolio Holder for Highways, Transport (Operations), Emergency Planning, Newbury Vision answered:

Where we have to carry out an emergency repair within two hours, it is impracticable to do what you call a temporary repair, and then come back on a scheduled basis, within 28 days to permanently repair that. We would not be a position to get round all of the emergency repairs on a full repair basis within the time period that we have to work to.

(c) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Transport (Policy), Culture, Customer Services, Countryside by Councillor Jeff Brooks:

"Will West Berkshire Council be following its own policy and be installing a fire suppression - including sprinkler - system in the restored museum?"

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Transport (Policy), Culture, Customer Services, Countryside answered:

No, we won't be installing a sprinkler or other fire suppression system into the redeveloped museum.

The reason, in January 2011 the Council's Executive endorsed a series of recommendations in a report submitted by the Safer Select Committee in relation to the installation of automatic fire suppression systems in Council buildings. One of which was to undertake a risk assessment to establish the basis of need to install a fire suppression system. This was undertaken in respect of the museum and the assessment advised that a sprinkler system was not required.

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 Jeff Brooks asked the following supplementary question:

"Disappointingly I must. We form a policy, you've just said that the Executive agree it, Cabinet agree it, Administration agree it and yet when it suits us we do not implement it. What kind of message is that sending to developers and the construction industry in this district regarding fire suppression? Your own Member, Councillor Bryant, was in the vanguard of this within the Fire Authority and it's very sad to hear. So, what sort of message is that sending to the wider construction industry regarding fire suppression systems?"

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Transport (Policy), Culture, Customer Services, Countryside answered:

The recommendation, Councillor Brooks, from Executive was that we would undertake an assessment. It wasn't that we would install a fire suppression system per se in Council buildings.

In fact Councillor Bryant's Motion was the modernisation agenda put forward by the Fire and Rescue Services Act of 2004: puts in place a national strategy which places an emphasis on preventing, protecting and responding, in particular targets put in place from now to 2010 to seek to save lives and stop unnecessary injuries. This is in line with the Government review of building regulations in terms of fire safety that took place early in 2005 and the Motion was that Council will undertake a risk assessment of the need to install fire sprinklers in all new buildings

it constructs, particularly schools and residential accommodation and will address the need for such fire safety provision in all major refurbishments. Further, the Council will encourage the installation of sprinklers, particularly in new multi-occupancy housing and thus seek to drive down the risk of loss of life and damage through fire.

So my reading of Councillor Bryant's Motion to Council was much more about the saving of life and unnecessary injuries with regard to residential properties and I would agree that our schools undertake a fire risk assessment. So I feel that we have undertaken what we set out to do which is to do an assessment and the message that it sends out to developers is that we ask developers to consider fire suppression. The Fire Authority is consulted on all planning applications and in my experience I've yet to see one from the Fire Authority recommending the installation of sprinklers. So it may be that the Fire Authority needs to look at its recommendations when consulting on fire recommendations.

(d) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Economic Development, Health & Safety, HR, Pensions and Property by Councillor Jeff Brooks:

"In light of the fact that the Council is now going to lose about half of our New Homes Bonus to the LEP, and the lack of smaller affordable homes for those losing out from the so-called Bedroom Tax to move into, what Berkshire-wide initiatives to boost new affordable home-building and restoring empty properties to occupation does the Executive intend to press for?"

The Portfolio Holder for Finance, Economic Development, Health & Safety, HR, Pensions and Property answered:

"Thank you Councillor Brooks. Your question is multi-faceted and I will attempt to answer it but, if necessary, with the help of my colleague Councillor Croft. I must say that when we were thinking of how to construct the answer to this we thought that this is either a very clever question or an ill thought through question and now we know.

I have to say, however, that in the question there is an incorrect inference built in and that implies that monies from the New Homes Bonus are used for affordable housing. This is not the case and in fact it has never been the case. New Homes Bonus has always been used as a source of general funding to the Council and I expect it will also be considered as a source of general funding to and by the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) although they have not yet discussed the issue.

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 Jeff Brooks asked the following supplementary question:

"I'm not sure we're getting much in the way of feedback from the LEP to Members generally. We certainly aren't getting much on this side of the Chamber and I wonder if you could help us with that, because if this money is now going into the LEP and the LEP is meeting regularly, you are our representative on it, it would be nice to see the outcomes that are being discussed and that's a perfectly reasonable clear question in not getting much in the way of feedback from it. Does it produce bulletins, minutes? – I don't know"

The Portfolio Holder for Finance, Economic Development, Health & Safety, HR, Pensions and Property answered:

I'm sorry you feel that way. Obviously communication is a two way thing, there has to be a transmitter and a receiver. I thought I had transmitted a couple of the things that the LEP had done very well recently and given the fact that it's only been up and going for just over 12 months it's fine. It's been instrumental in promoting and getting funding for all of Berkshire fast broadband. That would not have happened without the LEP. It's also been instrumental in getting agreement that there will be a new real access coming off from Reading, Slough to Heathrow which is very important for business in Berkshire and the Thames Valley. So those are the two key things that I think we can stand up and be quite proud of having achieved in 12 months, but I take your point, if you're not getting feedback - I do report back to my Executive colleagues on a regular basis and I'd be quite happy if you want to ask me a question at Executive on the whole thing or at Council to give you a regular update.

Councillor Jeff Brooks asked: *"How often does it meet?"*

The Portfolio Holder for Finance, Economic Development, Health & Safety, HR, Pensions and Property answered:

Quarterly. The Forum itself, you asked the question how often does it meet, what is the 'it' you're referring to? Its structure, it has an Executive on which in fact our Chief Executive sits representing the six Berkshire Unitaries and that meets monthly. It has a small team of four or five people, officers if you like, who are either full-time or part-time, it's got quite a considerable number, I wouldn't dream of even counting, of volunteers that give some of the other companies, the Executive people give some of their time to the whole thing and the Forum on which, as you rightly say, I'm a representative for West Berkshire meets quarterly. In fact we have a meeting at 8.30am tomorrow morning.

Councillor Jeff Brooks asked: I think the LEP is bound to produce its own set of reports, and newsletters, and things that say this is what your LEP is doing for you. I don't see that. Before you say the website, I don't get up in the morning and say "I must look at the LEP website and see what's updated today" in the same way as people don't get up in the morning and say "I must look at the West Berkshire Council website and see what they're consulting on this week". So, I think push rather than pull please.

Councillor Gordon Lundie answered: I do have a level of sympathy with what you're saying Councillor Brooks. I think the LEP has got the potential to be quite significant. Certainly Lord Heseltine and others want it to be significantly doing more and I think it needs to be transparent and accountable so I'm not unsympathetic to that and I think it's something that we should take away and also take it back to the LEP itself and say "what are you doing about it?" and I had a Berkshire Leaders meeting recently where actually a similar discussion was had around the LEP and around are we clear what it's all doing and is it engaging in the right way. So I think that you've raised a really valuable point and I think we need to look at that and go away and think about how we do that.

(e) Question submitted to the Leader of the Council by Councillor Jeff Brooks:

“What plans does the administration have for taking up Secretary of State, Eric Pickles's clearly expressed wish that councils should film and broadcast their meetings to the public?”

The Leader of the Council answered:

First of all, the strict interpretation of the guidance doesn't actually say we should be managing a facility for filming, it actually says that we should be working in a way which allows members of the public to film should they wish to do so, and that's been something that's been very restricted in the past, so it's not a requirement for the Council to film its meetings, it is a requirement for us to think about how we allow members of the public to be involved in that. Now that's not simple and straightforward because if we set up filming of our meetings then we may inadvertently film members of the public that don't actually want to be filmed and may have reasons for not wanting to be involved in that, so I think we need to think about how we would arrange it in such a way that the members of the public aren't inadvertently placed into that frame and that we're actually achieving an objective. So we will be looking to develop a policy which allows public meeting filming and also thinking about what we as a Council can do, within an affordable budget, because there are hair, makeup, wig considerations, other things like that that we need to think about if we're going to do this properly. Undoubtedly it's an important aspect and I'd like to see wider access to our meetings so we'll look into it.

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 Jeff Brooks asked the following supplementary question:

“I will take your word that you think it's important, the flippant bit about wigs and makeup is just silly. Being equally silly is the three people that stagger in and look at a Council meeting shouldn't be too worried about being filmed. So am I right in reading that you are generally positive as an Administration to facilitating the filming of Council meetings?”

The Leader of the Council answered:

Speaking personally, because I've not had a chance to consult with the Executive on this, I think we should allow filming of public meetings, I think we should have a wider engagement so that if people want to do this, and if access to this building or even motivation to travel 15 miles in to see a public Council meeting is an issue then I think we should be doing what we can to remove that.

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