

Questions and Answers

Executive
Thursday 23 November 2017

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Executive Meeting

23 November 2017

Questions and Answers



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

(a) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services by Mr Peter Logan:

“How many families in West Berkshire could be affected by the roll-out of Universal Credit next month?”

The Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services answered:

I regret the Council does not have this information. The Universal Credit programme covers six benefits and I can detail them to you should you so wish.

Universal Credit is fully administered by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), apart from Housing Benefits for which the Council is responsible. The current number of claimants in West Berkshire for this benefit is 6670.

It is possible, however, that the DWP may be able to assist with the numbers for the other five benefits.

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 Logan did not ask a supplementary question.

(b) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Community Resilience and Partnerships by Mrs Martha Vickers:

“In recent years this Council has cut its Grant to the CAB. In view of the forthcoming introduction of Universal Credit in West Berkshire can the Council reassure me that they are not planning further cuts to this very necessary service?”

The Portfolio Holder for Community Resilience and Partnerships answered:

The Council has to find £10m in savings in 2018/19 so unfortunately I cannot give any guarantees about not reducing any of the areas of Council spend particularly where this is discretionary. However, the Council is working closely with the CAB on the implications of the further introduction of Universal Credit in December of this year.

As you will be aware the CAB is not alone in offering advice to residents who will be moved onto Universal Credit, there is a DWP free phone helpline and also their landlords can assist where appropriate. The changes to Universal Credit implementation announced yesterday will also help.

We have had to make a reduction in grant to a number of voluntary bodies, many of whom have managed to transition to a new way of working, including accessing other funding. To help CAB do this, we have provided transition funding to them, £25k in 2016/17 and £30k in 2017/18

which has reduced the initial proposed reduction in funding. To further help them transition and reduce their nearly £50k in rental costs we have offered Market Street as an office base and a place to meet residents. National Citizen's Advice Bureaus have also put forward for adoption a federation of local CABs as a transformation option.

We will continue to work with the CAB and one initiative I can announce is that shortly they will be offering a one day a week presence here in Market Street as a "one stop shop" alongside our Housing and Revenues and Benefits services.

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?"*

Mrs Vickers asked the following supplementary question:

"I believe that Universal Credit is only accessible online, but many claimants are going to need assistance with budgeting skills as well as IT skills. Would you agree that this service would actually be very appropriately given by the CAB? They are actually trained to do this and obviously if claimants can access their benefits then they can pay their Council Tax. Would you agree that the CAB is well placed to provide this training?"

The Portfolio Holder for Community Resilience and Partnerships answered:

I would agree the CAB is well placed along with many others to provide budgeting training. In terms of IT training they are not so well placed and I would suggest using the local libraries and many community centres that are set up with free access to IT to any residents who need support with IT. Newbury College also provide introductory courses to IT, but I agree that both of these will be important for residents moving onto Universal Credit.

(c) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services by Mr Andy Moore:

"It is being widely reported that there are delays in receipt of Universal Credit where it has been rolled out in other parts of England. What allowances are the Council preparing to make if UC recipients are unable to make payments (e.g. of council tax) on time?"

The Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services answered:

If the delays are causing financial hardship and customers need help to pay bills or cover other costs while they wait for their first payment they can now apply to the Department for Work and Pensions for an advance as detailed by the Chancellor in the Budget yesterday.

Specifically, if payment of Universal Credit is delayed then the Council will always aim to negotiate any payment of Council Tax that is overdue.

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 Moore asked the following supplementary question:

“Thank you for your answer, I am interested in your term ‘negotiate’. As this is an online benefit that you claim, I looked at the Council’s online advice about problems in paying Council Tax more generally, notwithstanding Universal Credit, and I wondered if the Council will undertake to review that guidance which seems to me to be fairly thin and not very helpful?”

The Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services answered:

Thank you very much for raising that point, I will take it up with the Officers to see what can be done to improve it.

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

(a) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services by Councillor Lee Dillon:

“Given the reported 6 week delay in payment has the Council requested to DWP that they delay the roll out of Universal Credit for West Berkshire residents until after Christmas?”

The Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services answered:

Not directly is the answer, but via our membership of the LGA (the Local Government Association) there has been considerable lobbying on this issue on our behalf.

All Members were invited to a briefing about this issue recently.

As you are aware there were many revisions made to this programme in the budget yesterday dealing with and I quote ‘abolishing waiting days, increasing advances, support with housing costs, providing budgeting help, helping claimants progress in work and comprehensive support’. Which I am sure will help those within our District who are making the transition from one or more of the benefits to this generally successful new programme.

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:

“The measures outlined in the Budget yesterday by the Chancellor and then more detail fleshed out in Parliament today around the exact reduction of waiting times are helpful for those residents who are in need. I think what we need to bear in mind with Universal Credit is that although people have had the ‘heads up’ from a time perspective they do not necessarily have the funds to be able to catch up and or to get themselves ahead. So I would have liked to have seen direct representation made from this Council to our MPs, to the DWP and to the Secretary of State, it is disappointing that we have relied on just going through the LGA to raise concerns rather than directly speaking up for our residents ourselves. Would you ensure that for residents who are in financial hardship, that those cases are put to the DWP so they are aware of the impact of this policy?”

The Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services answered:

It is up to the applicant to explain to the Department of Work and Pensions that they are having hardship and the DWP will deal with it.

(b) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Culture and Environment by Councillor Lee Dillon:

“It has been reported that architect plans are being developed to turn Reading Prison into a Theatre. Will West Berkshire Council receive any funds from the disposal of this site as part of the old Berkshire County Council arrangements?”

The Portfolio Holder for Culture and Environment answered:

The short answer is no. The agreement document that related to all of the sites that were transferred under the Category 2 Agreement for land transferred to the Unitary Authorities from Berkshire County Council has been checked and the site for Reading Prison is not listed.

The assumption from that is that it never belonged to Berkshire and I'd consider it most likely belongs now to the Ministry of Justice.

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 did not ask a supplementary question:

(c) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Leisure by Councillor Alan Macro:

“What effect will the recent refusal of the planning applications for the Sandleford site have on the Council's housing land supply targets?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Leisure answered:

The applications relating to the development of Sandleford have not been included in the Council's five year housing land supply calculations so the answer to your question is none.

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 accept that this is unlikely to have any effect in this current year, however I would imagine in future years there could be an issue as the Sandleford development has been delayed. The other thing is of course is that it makes us that much more dependent on other application sites. There is one in my own Ward which as you know has had planning permission for a significant number of years and hasn't been properly built out, so can you assure me that this situation will continue for several more years before the new District Plan is in place and that we still will not need the Sandleford development?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Leisure answered:

Currently we can prove that we have got in excess of a five year land supply, as you are aware we had a call for sites recently for our new Local Plan, Officers are filtering those out and sites will come forward to Members seeking approval to go out to consultation, so I can't comment on

individual sites. However, I will say that the site that you refer to, I do know that permission has been granted and work has not commenced, and I think in the Housing White Paper one of the considerations there is putting pressure on to developers to actually develop land or lose that permission, and I think with the current thrust from Central Government to build houses that we will see probably more pressure being put on to developers not to land bank and to actually build out.

(d) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Culture and Environment by Councillor Alan Macro:

“What is the amount of the compost made from recycled green waste sold to commercial organisations over the last year and how much income was made from this source?”

The Portfolio Holder for Culture and Environment answered:

Last year we fed around 20,500 tonnes of garden and food waste into our in-vessel composting facility and produced around 7,000 tonnes of compost.

We sell the compost to local farmers and landscaping companies. We share the net income from all our recycling material sales with our contractor and the budget for this is about £200,000 per year.

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:

“There is a rumour that large amounts of compost were being actually supplied to farmers gratis. Could you assure me that this is not the case?”

The Portfolio Holder for Culture and Environment answered:

I am not aware of any compost being provided free of charge.

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