

Questions and Answers

Executive
Thursday 21 December 2017

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Executive Meeting

21 December 2017

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 Mrs Moz Bulbeck Reynolds:

“What is the Council's response to the Social Mobility Commission's findings that this district is one of the worst performing council areas for Social Mobility ie. It's a terrible place to grow up poor?”

Mrs Bulbeck Reynolds was unable to attend the meeting and received the following written response:

Written response from the Leader of the Council:

Thank you for your question submitted for the Executive meeting on 21 December 2017. As you were unable to attend the meeting, I am writing to provide you with a written response to your question. You asked:

“What is the Council's response to the Social Mobility Commission's findings that this district is one of the worst performing council areas for Social Mobility, i.e. it's a terrible place to grow up poor?”

I would like to again thank you both for your question and for this opportunity to publically respond to the social mobility report.

Achieving potential is a matter which should unite all. I am sure everyone wants to work for the best life chances for all our citizens.

Representing and working in the socially diverse and relatively isolated Lambourn Valley makes me particularly aware of the challenges of social mobility.

Whilst the number of West Berkshire Children living in deprivation is relatively low we want to ensure they are not disadvantaged. We and our educational partners have done a great deal of work focusing attention around the pupil premium spend, but recognise there is no magic answer and in some cases our very small numbers make it more difficult to implement solutions.

The report draws on information relating to educational performance, and to a lesser degree labour force data such as salary levels, occupations and home ownership. West Berkshire scores very well on the economic or so called “adulthood” indicators other than house prices where, along with the rest of the South East, West Berkshire is seen as being a ‘cold spot’. On the other hand West Berkshire has one of the lowest number of people who are paid less than the living wage. Chapter 5 is about working lives and social mobility and it is pleasing therefore to see West Berkshire identified as a Hotspot, sixteenth best in the country.

West Berkshire's performance is less strong when it comes to education, most notably in the early years and youth. We do however find that the report is confusing as it uses data from different years.

For example, it defines West Berkshire as a ‘cold spot’ for the percentage of early years' children from deprived backgrounds achieving a good level of development (GLD). In 2016 however our performance ranked in the second quartile nationally (38th) and in the 2017 Department for Education report ‘Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Results in England’, published on 19 October, West Berkshire is shown as having the smallest ‘inequality gap’ for GLD nationally. Early Years does however remain an area of significant focus for us.

West Berkshire is not identified as a 'cold spot' in either 'school' or 'youth' tables and our percentage of good or outstanding schools has risen from 72% in 2015 to 95% today due to the Council's extra investment in school improvement and a lot of hard work in schools. West Berkshire children from deprived backgrounds are therefore highly likely to be attending a good or better school. At post 16 our indicators are good, with West Berkshire sitting in the top 20% of authorities for low NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) figures, some 2.4% against a national figure of 6.0%.

That said we are not complacent. The report highlights real issues which we are seeking to address. In the Council Strategy 2015-19 one of our six priorities is focussed very explicitly on removing inequality in educational achievement. Whilst most residents benefit from an enviable quality of life, challenges remain in health, housing and education which we seek to address alongside partners.

Mindful that this remains a major issue to address I am going to suggest to the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission that this latest report from the Social Mobility Commission is the subject of further scrutiny by them. It would then seem appropriate to consider these issues at a meeting of the Full Council.

(b) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Leisure by Mr Thomas Tunney:

"With the rise in homelessness and need for volunteer lead services in Newbury such as the foodbank, the soup kitchen and west berkshire homeless, what is West Berkshire Council doing to reduce the number of homeless and offer them shelter especially in times of extreme weather?"

Mr Tunney was unable to attend the meeting and received the following written response:

Written response from the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Leisure:

Thank you for your question submitted for the Executive meeting on 21 December 2017. As you were unable to attend the meeting, I am writing to provide you with a written response to your question. You asked:

"With the rise in homelessness and need for volunteer lead services in Newbury such as the foodbank, the soup kitchen and west berkshire homeless, what is West Berkshire Council doing to reduce the number of homeless and offer them shelter especially in times of extreme weather?"

There are a number of actions the Council has been taking over the past few years, working with partner agencies to first of all identify the problems and tackling homelessness in the short and longer terms. It is assumed that the person asking the question is referring to rough sleeping rather than anyone approaching the Council as homeless in general terms. There is no reason for any person to sleep on the streets, and the following actions are taken to address rough sleeping in West Berkshire.

Partnership Working

The Council works with a range of partners to tackle rough sleeping. There are over 20 partnership groups tackling multiple issues. They include:

The homelessness Forum which is a multi-agency forum that oversees the implementation of the Homelessness Strategy and which takes strategic action to prevent and reduce homelessness in West Berkshire.

The Make Every Adult Matter (MEAM) project group. This is a multi-agency group working to identify the reasons for people sleeping rough and West Berkshire has been selected as one of only 25 local areas across England to develop co-ordinated, effective support for people experiencing multiple needs, made possible by new funding from the Big Lottery Fund. West Berkshire Council, in partnership with Thames Valley Police leads on the MEAM project.

The selected local authorities, statutory agencies and the voluntary sector are working together to transform the lives of people experiencing a combination of homelessness, substance misuse, contact with the criminal justice system and mental ill health. They will use the MEAM framework to help shape their work and receive support and advice from MEAM coalition staff based across the country.

West Berkshire has employed a dedicated MEAM Co-Coordinator, who will work with the 24 MEAM Approach areas (rising to 40 by the end of the programme) to make significant changes to the services currently addressing these issues. They will also co-ordinate our response to local individuals and work closely with those who need the joint support of the West Berkshire MEAM partners.

The Council also funds an outreach worker based at Two Saints who engages with the rough sleepers with the aim of encouraging them off the streets.

Rough Sleeper Estimate

West Berkshire Council works with partner agencies to estimate how many people are sleeping rough and undertakes further work to identify the reasons for the rough sleeping i.e. are there multiple reasons why people do not access the services available to them. The estimate for this year carried out in November was 20 (yet to be verified), for 2016/17, 14 and 15 in 2015/16.

Severe Weather Emergency Protocol

A Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) facility for rough sleepers is provided by Two Saints. The Council activates SWEP and Two Saints provide the accommodation. The SWEP aims to:

- Prevent harm or death amongst anyone sleeping rough during severe weather
- Provide shelter for rough sleepers who under normal circumstances would not be eligible for assistance or who would not normally engage with services
- Prevent those accessing SWEP services from having to return to the streets
- Assist people sleeping rough who use the SWEP provision to access other support services to meet their needs

This means that people sleeping on the streets can stay at Two Saints at times of cold weather, rain, wind or extreme heat. The Council activate the SWEP regularly and on a discretionary basis and not in accordance with the strict rules i.e. cold temperature of -2 degrees for 3 nights running. Therefore, in the past it has opened for weeks at a time on occasions. Until the night shelter opened, this facility was used regularly, but the numbers have gone down significantly since the night shelter opened in December e.g. from 9 a night to 2 to 4.

It is important that other agencies and members of the public assist in directing rough sleepers to the available accommodation and assistance as not all of the estimated rough sleepers estimated are accessing shelter.

No Second Night Out

The Council operate a No Second Night Out policy. The principles are:

- New rough sleepers should be identified and helped off the streets so that they do not fall into a dangerous rough sleeping lifestyle.
- Members of the public should be able to play an active role by reporting and referring people sleeping rough.
- Rough sleepers should be helped to access a place of safety where their needs can be quickly assessed and they can receive advice on their options.
- Rough sleepers should be able to access emergency accommodation and other services, such as healthcare, if needed.
- If people have come from another area or country and find themselves sleeping rough, the aim should be to reconnect them back to their local community unless there is a good reason why they cannot return.

The Government is encouraging a “No First Night Out” approach with the aim of no-one spending a night on the streets. West Berkshire adopts this approach.

The Homelessness Reduction Act

This new legislation is due to come into force on 1 April 2018 and will broaden the Council’s statutory responsibility. There will be a new “duty to prevent” homelessness for 56 days and a new “duty of relief” for 56 days for anyone approaching the Council as homeless or threatened with homelessness. The housing team is working towards the implementation of this new legislation and there will be publicity around the new legislation in the New Year. The Government expect a 26% increase in cases and 2 hour interviews instead of 1 hour with applicants while a Personal Housing Plan is devised with actions to be carried out by the individual and actions to be carried out by the Council.

The activities outlined above demonstrates that the Council is doing everything possible to address the issues around rough sleeping as well as meeting existing and future statutory responsibilities to address homelessness. The MEAM project and worker should improve the approach to tackling rough sleeping and will be monitored over time to measure success.

(c) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Leisure by Mr Thomas Tunney:

“Is the Council meeting its goals in terms of preventing homelessness?”

Mr Tunney was unable to attend the meeting and received the following written response:

Written response from the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Leisure:

Thank you for your question submitted for the Executive meeting on 21 December 2017. As you were unable to attend the meeting, I am writing to provide you with a written response to your question. You asked:

“Is the Council meeting its goals in terms of preventing homelessness?”

Yes, the Council is largely meeting its goals. The raft of policies and actions as outlined in the first question demonstrate what West Berkshire Council is doing to tackle rough sleeping. However, homelessness is not solely about rough sleeping. To summarise, the housing service includes the following duties and activities:

- The administration of the waiting list which contains 1,877 applications. This number constantly changes.
- The administration of the Choice Based Lettings system which advertises approximately 450 social housing properties per year and applicants on the waiting list can bid for these properties. Officers sometimes “direct match” applicants, for example if a property contains adaptations such as level access showers and ramps, as well as directly assisting with rural housing schemes.
- Working with Two Saints and A2 Dominion on homelessness projects such as Two Saints and Bramlings which is a supported housing scheme for young people. There is also a refuge, an outreach service and the provision of safe spaces.
- The prevention of homelessness which includes a host of services e.g. mediation with landlords or family members, assistance with rent deposits, the application of Discretionary Housing Payments for households to top up expensive rents and resolving housing benefit issues to name a few. Prevention is the focus of work by housing options officers who also assist families to find alternative accommodation in the private rented sector if possible. We work with families so that the use of temporary accommodation is avoided if possible. However, this preventative work can take time and involve specialist skills such as negotiation skills and local knowledge.
- To apply statutory duties in accordance with the Housing Act 1996, Part 7. This includes a duty to carry out a review of homelessness within the area and the development of a homelessness strategy. There is a duty to provide housing advice and a duty to provide interim accommodation for eligible homelessness applicants as well as a duty to protect personal property.

In 2016/17, there were 145 homeless approaches made and over 200 households prevented from being made homeless by preventative measures carried out by the housing options team. The Council accepted a duty towards 23 homeless families and provided accommodation to more while cases were investigated.

West Berkshire has a housing strategy (due to be updated), Homelessness strategy and action plan which are reviewed regularly and outline the work we are doing to address homelessness and other issues such as the impact of Universal Credit and partnership working. The Housing Strategy will be reviewed when the Homelessness Reduction Act is in place to make sure that the Council uses every opportunity available to ensure that homelessness when it does occur in the area is addressed.

West Berkshire’s housing team were recently awarded the “Silver” standard by the National Practitioner Support Service which is a Government supported agency. The team is working towards the “gold” standard and in order to do this, the Council is actively purchasing properties to use as temporary accommodation to avoid the use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation for families. For example, a block of 10 self contained flats at Fountain Gardens in Newbury were purchased from Bromford Housing Group and is successfully housing families who had been

placed in Bed and Breakfast in Slough. Further properties are being identified to ensure that good quality temporary accommodation is available for homeless families.

There are challenges ahead with the Homelessness Reduction Act and low level of new burdens funding offered by the Government to assist the Council i.e. £118,000 for a three year period as well as continued budget pressures. The MEAM project should result in successful partnership working to tackle homelessness, recognised by being one of only 25 Council's in the country to benefit from funding.

(d) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder Finance and Transformation, Economic Development by Mr Mark Knight:

“What steps are being taken to ensure that Central and Local Government apply the same criteria to the income streams of West Berkshire's Town and Parish level councils so that the present strict financial constraints imposed on West Berkshire Council also apply evenly across the other tiers of local government in the district?”

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Transformation answered:

This Council has no powers over Parish or Town Councils in relation to the setting of their precept. At the present time the Council Tax “cap” imposed on principal authorities is not relevant to Parish or Town Councils and so Parish and Town Councils are free to set a precept which will help deliver services which are important to the needs of their communities.

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 Knight asked the following supplementary question:

“I would simply ask that the Council contacts the Secretary of State and asks for fair play all councils. There are areas of expenditure that could be cut back, just as there have been in West Berkshire.”

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Transformation answered:

Sajid Javid did make a statement on Tuesday, I don't know if you heard it, where he said “We will also keep the level of increase by town and parish councils under review however, we will defer an extension of referendum principles for town and parish councils for 3 years provided we see clear evidence of restraint.” So I presume they will be keeping an eye of that and will review what is happening.

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

There were no questions submitted by Members.
