

Questions and Answers

Council

Thursday 26 September 2024

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

**Council
26 September 2024
Members Questions**

Contents

- (A) Question not related to an item of business submitted to the Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing by Councillor Ross Mackinnon:1
- (B) Question not related to an item of business submitted to the Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing by Councillor Ross Mackinnon:2
- (C) Urgent question not related to an item of business submitted to the Leader by Councillor Owen Jeffery:3

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

Question (A)	Council Meeting on 26 September 2024
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(A) Question not related to an item of business submitted to the Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing by Councillor Ross Mackinnon:

“What assurances can you give residents and campaigners that Pincents Hill will not be developed for housing as part of the Local Plan?”

The Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing answered:

Thank you very much Councillor Mackinnon. The site was not included as a proposed allocation in the Local Plan that was submitted to the Secretary of State for examination in March 2023. However, in July 2024 the Inspector chairing the Local Plan examination process asked the Council to consider how the Plan could be modified to boost the housing supply by identifying additional sites for development. Following a reassessment of the information available to the examination the Council has proposed another four specific sites across the district, and one additional site in North Newbury. One of these additional sites is Pincents Lane. The decision as to whether it is included in the Local Plan as an allocated site is now with the inspector. He is addressing this subject in an additional examination date on the 2 October.

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 Ross Mackinnon asked the following supplementary question:

“Thank you very much Councillor Gains for that answer, can you tell me that if the Local Plan had already been adopted whether you would have had to put these additional sites up for grabs, so to speak, for the inspector”.

The Portfolio Holder for Deputy Leader; Planning and Housing answered:

Even if we had not delayed the Local Plan last year, it would still, because we wanted to withdraw it because we do not believe it is an adequate plan, it would have not been finished and found sound at this point. So, it would not have gone through that process by that time.

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

Question (B)	Council Meeting on 26 September 2024
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(B) Question not related to an item of business submitted to the Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing by Councillor Ross Mackinnon:

“If the Local Plan had completed its examination and adoption process before the Labour Government doubled its housing targets for West Berkshire, what protection would the district have had from these new targets?”

The Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing answered:

A Local Plan is considered up to date for five years from its adoption. However, regardless of when the LPR could have been or is anticipated to be adopted, as the government's proposed revised Local Housing Need (LHN) figure would be more than 200 dwellings per annum higher than the annual housing requirement set out in the LPR, the Council would be required to begin preparation of a new plan, as soon as possible.

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 Ross Mackinnon did not ask a supplementary question.

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

Question (C)	Council Meeting on 26 September 2024
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(C) Urgent question not related to an item of business submitted to the Leader by Councillor Owen Jeffery:

“Could the Leader please provide Council with an update on the review into the Schools’ Clawback process given that the schools affected had to provide their input to the review by 11th September; and I am sure that both those Schools and Council will wish to know the outcome at the earliest opportunity.”

The Leader answered:

Thank you for your question, Councillor Jeffery. The clawback of funds from schools that appear to have an excess of uncommitted reserves has been an area of great anxiety and concern to eight schools who are affected. Five of which face turning over a great deal of money for high needs block, which is nine million pounds in deficit and that deficit is growing fast. In funding that amount of money, the Council loses an estimated £36,000 annually, money we could use to deliver more services. At a review on 25 July where the process, the amounts in question, and the breakdown of reserves were scrutinised, we invited the schools effected to submit their view and position on that methodology and the clawback sums proposed.

Since 25 July, Councillor Heather Codling, Neil Goddard (Service Director Education and SEND), and I have visited the five schools most effected in terms of the amounts proposed to be clawed back. I would like to thank all those schools for receiving us with consideration and courtesy when they would probably like to have given us a piece of their minds. The passion they showed for their schools shone through in everything they said. Their enthusiasm is immense and their ambition boundless. They are a credit to their children and their communities.

As a result of the review, we will be recommending to the Heads Funding Group and the Schools Forum that the clawback is implemented, but with the following changes: One, that no money will be clawed back from Springfield Primary School. You can rebuild your gazebo in full Mrs East and replace the fencing. Furthermore, there is £400,000 allocated in the capital programme to address your severe drainage issues – we know this is an estimate at this time.

Two, that no money will be clawed back from The Downs School, and I do so hope that we can build a strong relationship between the head and the governors with the Executive, Heather, and myself. Let us discuss our issues together and in private before we air them publicly. That is healthy and avoids entrenched and confrontational positions. We are here to talk, and the heads and governors will recall my offer to set up a working party to address the way ahead for the school. Talk to us at any time, we are here to listen.

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

Three, that £1.5 million pounds will be clawed back from Brookfields School, but, Mrs Bernie, we will put your accessibility project, at the cost of over £600,000, into our capital programme as well as over £800,000 for new classrooms that can take 20 more children. You have those sums of money in your uncommitted reserves, you should not have had to find that money yourself. That is what this Council is here to provide. Let me be clear here, the allocation of over £1.5 million in our capital programme for this school means that there is no net effect on the school's balances as a result of the clawback. That capital allocation will have to be approved in our budget setting in the new year, but I know the administration will support these two schemes and we would hope that all members will support them.

Four, there will be no clawback from Victoria Park Nursery School. The leaking roof must be fixed.

Five, there will be a very small clawback from Curridge Primary School but we will be listening to the Head when we visit there next week and seeing what we can do to help the school. The school will still have substantial reserves after the clawback is made.

Six, that no money will be clawed back from Parsons Down, you have a wide range of projects that you can get on with Mrs Bull.

Seven, that no money will be clawed back from John Rankin. You must get on with the refurbishments you need to make Ms Cooper.

Eight, that no money will be clawed back from Chaddleworth St Andrews.

These adjusted numbers reflect our thorough review and are readjusted principally where schools have been able to show that uncommitted reserves were committed or there were clear and acceptable reasons why they had been not able to commit them. So that the schools can prepare going forward, I am making it clear that the clawback process will be undertaken annually. My advice is that you allocate your reserves as soon as you can and to contact Heather Codling if this Council is holding that up in any way – in discussing a capital project for example – and keep any funds provided by parents, Parent Teacher Association (PTA), donations, or other public fund raising events separate from your general reserves, not because you must but because it makes your funds more easy to demarcate and review.

One thing that has become clear to Heather and myself as a result of this review is that we need the ability to hear from all our schools on a regular basis. So, I am announcing this evening that we will hold two meetings per year, a District Schools' Assembly, in January and October where we will invite the headteachers and chair of governors of every one of our maintained schools to meet with us and discuss issues, capital programmes, buyback services, Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) numbers, and more. This will enable us to have regular and healthy conversations that anticipate and respond to the many issues that we face together.

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

My statement of the 25 July 2024 made references to schools working together. My words where, 'I would expect all head teachers in maintained schools across our district to want all schools across West Berkshire to do well and want to support each other'. I know a lot of head teachers were upset by that sentence, but I wanted to say, no school is an island, and I remember how well head teachers supported each other when I was a governor. I feel sure that the same sense of teamwork exists today. I had hoped that would have put my words into context, but I have seen too many politicians hide behind that phrase, 'I was taken out of context', and they seem unable to apologise as if apologising denotes weakness in their position. So, I do apologise. If the heads were offended by these words, I apologise. I know you work well together and support each other and that was emphasised in our visits to schools in recent weeks. I did not mean to cause offense. If that is the headline in the press, then so be it. None of us should be too important to say when they have got something wrong, everyone of us is a mortal not a saint. So, in conclusion, we have undertaken a detailed review and will send our recommendations to the Heads Funding Group and Schools Forum, and I hope they will accept them.

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 Owen Jeffery asked the following supplementary question:

"Chair, may I thank the Leader for that very thorough exposition of what has been taking place. I do have a supplementary question. Leader, do you think that the clawback process went as well as it could have done?"

The Portfolio Holder for Leader answered:

What I can assure all schools and this Council is that there will be a very easy to understand schedule and timetable of how the clawback will take place in future years and we will be, as we have been now, open to discussing with schools any issues within that new clawback process. Thank you very much.
