

Questions and Answers

Executive
Thursday 3 April 2025

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WestBerkshire
C O U N C I L

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tem (A)	Executive Meeting on 3 April 2025
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(A) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Highways by Paul Morgan:

“Looking at the history of the Solar farm project, it started off at £6 million, then £10 million pounds, and then £12 million, and it's now £18.6 million. I would like to understand if there's an alternative, which there probably was, to actually outsource the capital to a specialist company such as SSE. I am just wondering why the Council didn't take that option, especially with the current financial challenge you have. Looking at maybe postponing or the financial model,”

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Highways answered:

Dear Mr Morgan, thank you for your question. I'm not aware that the Grazeley Solar Farm has ever been estimated at £6m. If you have any evidence to support that figure I would happily have it reviewed.

The construction cost for a 15MegWatt (MW) array was estimated at £10.5m in 2020, this was subject to detailed design which identified a number of issues with the cable route needed. We are actually building a much larger array, which will be 20MW. Combined with inflation since 2020 and additional cable routing required, the scheme cost is now estimated at £18.5m. Energy price rises mean that the scheme is still very much viable.

We have partnered with experts in the delivery of Solar Farms, using a delivery model that ensures our residents receive the full benefit of the carbon and financial savings.

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

Item (B)	Executive Meeting on 3 April 2025
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(B) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Highways by Peter McEwen:

“Road Closure of Ashampstead Road, Bradfield. Has the council estimated the additional transportation costs due to closure of Ashampstead Road for HGVs for nine months (with intermittent closure for cars)? The diversion route is over 20 miles. Will the council be seeking compensation for the additional transportation cost from the applicant?”

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Highways answered:

Thank you for your question, Mr McEwen. The short answer is no, we haven't estimated the additional costs, and it would not be possible for us to do so given that we don't know the usual transportation costs of the existing HGV operations, nor do we know the details of how each individual operator is affected.

There is no mechanism for a local authority to compensate affected parties for the financial impact of temporary road closures associated with works carried on or adjacent to the highway.

I do appreciate the impact of this temporary closure, and we continue to work with Bradfield College to minimise its impact and duration. Unfortunately, however, we are not in a position to financially compensate those affected.

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

Item (C)	Executive Meeting on 3 April 2025
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(C) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Public Safety and Community Engagement, Economic Development and Regeneration by John Gotelee:

“What is your vision for the future of the Lrie?”

The Portfolio Holder for Public Safety and Community Engagement, Economic Development and Regeneration answered:

The vision for Bond Riverside is to promote economic success and resilience for the site through promoting mixed use development while ensuring successful existing and future tenancies. Key Council objectives for the site are: Improvement, regeneration and improved on site amenity at Bond Riverside for employment or mixed-use and community sports and leisure; better connectivity with the town centre; and ensuring that this is an attractive site for businesses to locate and invest.

Having restored sports pitches to Faraday Road, the further vision for the Bond Riverside site is to work to create secure and successful tenancies, while building a sound business case for regeneration work.

The Portfolio Holder 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?”*

John Gotelee asked the following supplementary question:

“Thank you for that quite detailed answer. As you'll appreciate, I'm a next-door neighbour to the site in effect, and there have been a number of visions since I think the Liberals started it in about 2006. What steps you think you need to take to be successful where others have failed?”

The Portfolio Holder for Public Safety and Community Engagement, Economic Development and Regeneration answered:

Clearly, Mr. Gotelee, this is not something that the council can do in isolation. We do need to work with the existing tenants, with potential private investors, and with local residents such as yourself to find a solution that works for everybody. It is a fair question, but it is a difficult question to answer because as you will know yourself from the history of the site, that it takes time to work plans through and those plans are still coming through. When we have sight of those plans and we have a better idea of what is going on, we will pick through it, and we will deal whatever's in front of us in line with the relevant planning rules and whatever else we need to think about at that time.

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

Item (D)	Executive Meeting on 3 April 2025
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(D) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Highways by Peter McEwen:

“Has the Council received an independent report justifying that there is no alternative to closing Ashampstead Road for nine months?”

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Highways answered:

No, the Council would not commission an independent report in these circumstances. When the Council receives an application for a temporary road closure, we consider the information provided in light of the appropriate regulations and guidance, to decide whether a closure is necessary. As is the case here, we work with the applicant to find ways to reduce the duration and daily hours of the closure to keep disruption to a minimum. Sometimes, the nature of the work and the space available means that an extended closure is required, but in this case we have at least been able to open the road to traffic outside the working hours of the contractor.

(A) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Children and Family Services by Councillor Dominic Boeck:

“What action is the lead member for Children taking to improve the stability of the lives of children in our care?”

The Portfolio Holder for Children and Family Services answered:

Cllr Boeck, thank you for your question. As lead member I consider this a significant part of my role, we continue to strengthen our Corporate Parenting Panel to ensure we really explore the lived experience of the children we care for. We know one of the issues locally and nationally is having the right homes for children, at the right time. We are engaged in the Regional Fostering Hub, and we continue to work on our recruitment and retention of foster carers. We also focus on Kinship Care, so ensuring wider families are explored as potential carers for children as we know children do best when they are kept within their families, or in foster care homes. We are also engaging in the Regional Care Collaborative which will focus on Residential Care and how this can be strengthened regionally to ensure those children who require Residential have the provision which meets their needs.

Placement stability is reviewed by the team on a regular basis and placement breakdowns happen for many reasons, but a lot of work is undertaken to avoid this, over the last two months this has improved, 9% of children in January and February had 3 or more placement moves. It is an area I know the team review monthly in a Performance Board also, and I am kept up to date on this.

The Portfolio Holder 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 Dominic Boeck asked the following supplementary question:

“I noted in the February report that the figures have improved for three months, so that's welcome. But I really hope that that improvement is sustainable. Longer term, whatever comes about through the local government review, and we touched on this when we last spoke about this in the special executive, I was a little bit disappointed that when I asked my question that you only referred to rural education, when my point was broader than that. So, my question is how will you prepare your services for the significant change that is going to come about to continue making the lives of children in our care even better?”

The Portfolio Holder for Children and Family Services answered:

Well, that would obviously be part of the review process for the whole reorganisation, whichever route we go, and we will have to work very closely with our partners, whether it's foster carers, our team in-house, or social workers. It will just mean a lot of hard work for us all to work together to ensure that schools and children in our care are looked after and not lost in any of the system. Whichever route we go, whether it's across to Reading and Wokingham, for instance, or whether it is with the other rural areas, we will just work very closely with them and make sure no child is lost in that system.

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

Item (B)	Executive Meeting on 3 April 2025
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(B) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Children and Family Services by Councillor Dominic Boeck:

“Why are so many of our children subject to a Child Protection Plan having their plans reviewed?”

The Portfolio Holder for Children and Family Services answered:

Cllr Boeck, thank you for your question. All children subject to a child protection plan, have plans reviewed regular. Following the initial plan being agree the 1st review takes place at 3 months and all review conferences are held then every 6 months, these can be brought forward is there is a significant change which requires it. In between this Child Protection Reviews, Core Groups are held every 4 weeks to review plans and progress. Children on child protection plans are considered at risk of significant harm therefore regular reviews are needed to ensure the plan is being met and children are kept safe.

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

Item (C)	Executive Meeting on 3 April 2025
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(C) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Highways by Councillor Dominic Boeck:

"It is good to see the growth in EV charging points but disappointing to see that this is largely in Newbury. When will this progress be extended to Thatcham, Tilehurst and Calcot and our rural centres?"

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Highways answered:

Cllr Boeck, thank you for your question. There are currently charge points outside of Newbury already. We have charges in Thatcham, Gilbert Court, Lambourn High Street, Hungerford Church Street, Pangbourne Station Road car park. The team are working on delivering charge points in our council owned car parks and Thatcham's Kennet Leisure Car park is part of the next phase. In addition, we are in the process of awarding a contract under the LEVI fund to deliver on-street chargers shortly across West Berkshire, which will include areas, such as Tilehurst and Calcot. The team welcome any suggestions, and these can be assessed for suitability— You can email EV@westberks.gov.uk .

The Portfolio Holder 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 Dominic Boeck asked the following supplementary question:

"It is good to hear that there is progress, but I want to make it clear that my residents do not consider that on-street charging is a great prospect for people who are not able to charge, and who want to charge on the run, because they really only serve residents and they are very difficult to access. If you compare the publicly available charge points between Newbury and the rest of the district, there is a huge disproportion of availability, and my question is, when are you going to address that part of it?"

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Highways answered:

I think it is a fair point, and it is about having the blend of the infrastructure, the slow charges, the fast charges, the rapid charge and the ability to charge at home. I think it is great that we were pioneering council in introducing Kerbo charge to allow residents to charge from their own homes, blending that with the on-street and expanding our off-street provision in our council-owned car parks. We have got a really ambitious programme of works over the next year, and already outside of Newbury, we have got Theale High Street, Thatcham Station Road Car Park, Thatcham Birdwood Centre, Pangbourne River Meadows, Hungerford Station Car Park, and as I mentioned, Thatcham Kennett Leisure Centre. So, it is not just all about Newbury.



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

Item (D)	Executive Meeting on 3 April 2025
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(D) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Public Safety and Community Engagement, Economic Development and Regeneration by Councillor Dominic Boeck:

"It may surprise some that Aldermaston ward has some of the most deprived communities in West Berkshire. The administration has abandoned their target to develop a plan to tackle social isolation in rural areas in favour of measuring Community Hub activity. How will that help the residents of the ward I represent who are most in need?"

The Portfolio Holder for Public Safety and Community Engagement, Economic Development and Regeneration answered:

The Council will shortly be launching this new community outreach model which will transform the way the Council provides information and advice to residents across the district. Residents will be able to access high-quality information and advice in libraries, village halls, leisure centres and at community group settings. The venues incorporated in the service will become known as Community Hubs. The service will allow residents of West Berkshire improved access to trusted advice and support within their communities. A key focus of this new model will be to reduce social isolation by signposting and referring residents to services and activities, as well as seeking their feedback about what support, advice and activities are most needed in their community. The service will prioritise supporting residents in our more deprived areas across the district. The outcomes and outputs of the service will be measured to ensure that the service is meeting the needs of residents and tackling social isolation in West Berkshire.

Everyone Active the Council's leisure contract operator also delivers a physical activity outreach programme in communities across the district. Everyone Active is building on its existing programme and opportunities and demand for outreach delivery in Aldermaston will be considered.

The Portfolio Holder 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 Dominic Boeck asked the following supplementary question:

"Thank you for your comprehensive reply. I do not think it is going to come as any shock to you that what is behind this question is the continuing instances of antisocial behaviour in Aldermaston. It is clear that the instigators of much of the antisocial behaviour that we see in Aldermaston live in really challenging circumstances. The chances that those people are going to be attending a Community Hub anytime soon is vanishingly small. So, I guess my question is, why are you abandoning these people?"

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

The Portfolio Holder for Public Safety and Community Engagement, Economic Development and Regeneration answered:

Thank you for your further question, Councillor Boeck. We are not abandoning these people. We cannot possibly anticipate how every single resident across the district will access the service. As you rightly point out, people will interact with council services or not interact with council services as they see fit. The question that you asked was about the Community Hub model, and we are confident that the vast majority of residents in our district, including in your ward, will access those services. In relation to the driver behind your question and the anti-social behaviour that you are referring to, you will obviously be aware of ongoing operations that have been taking place across the council, and particularly with our public protection partnership and Thames Valley Police. I can assure you that there is a multi-pronged approach to those issues, including people that live within some of those deprived communities, not just to stigmatise and criminalise them, but to help and support them as well, because everybody can be vulnerable.

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