

Questions and Answers

Executive

Thursday 12 February 2026

West Berkshire Council is committed to equality of opportunity. We will treat everyone with respect, regardless of race, disability, gender, age, religion or sexual orientation.

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

Item (B)

Executive Meeting on 12 February 2026

(B) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement, Economic Development and Regeneration and Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation by Paula Saunderson:

“Please may we have an update on the current thinking around West Berks Council and Newbury Town Council 2027 ELECTIONS. N.B., I do not expect this to take up more than one minute of the precious time.”

The Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement, Economic Development and Regeneration and Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation answered:

The answer to that question is, pending the government-led reorganisation, which may alter the timetable, full elections are scheduled for both West Berkshire Council and Newbury Town Council in May 2027.

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?”*

Paula Saunderson asked the following supplementary question:

“So that's in accordance with the current time scale for local government reorganisation that we are currently open to consultation on, is it?”

The Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement, Economic Development and Regeneration and Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation answered:

It is subject to the usual electoral cycle, which here we hold local elections every four years. There is no set timetable subject to the ongoing LGR exercise because that is dependent upon central government making a decision on the three proposals that have been submitted for Oxfordshire, of which West Berkshire Council is joined to two of them. Given that, there's a number of unknowns there. But for example, there's no reason why we might not, pending that decision, be electing for shadow local authorities to a new unitary in May 2027 in anticipation of that council coming into existence the following year. But again, that is heavily caveated.

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

Item (A)	Executive Meeting on 12 February 2026
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(A) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources by Councillor Ross Mackinnon:

“At the Executive meeting on 18th December, you and the Leader of the Council refused to accept the findings of CIPFA that :

- West Berkshire Council is in a perilous financial position and has no clear plan for resolving the issue”,*
- There is a perception within the Council that the successful application for EFS in January 2025 obviates the need to address the structural gap,*
- Roles and responsibilities between members and officers are blurred, which contributes to a lack of focus and undermines accountability.*

Can you reassure residents, members and the Government that you are now willing to accept the findings of the independent CIPFA report in full and have a clear plan in place to address them?”

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources answered:

In answering it, I firstly would like to give a bit of context. The Council commissioned the CIPFA report, which is the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, to undertake an external independent assurance review of the Council's financial resilience. An abbreviated report was presented to the Council on the 18 February.

In fact, the report itself is 26 pages and its main themes are, first of all, the historic low level of reserves, that was this administration's inheritance. Secondly, the structural fiscal gap where costs are greater than income and funding requirements requiring difficult decisions, i.e. we have two options to close that gap. One, being the agents of austerity by cutting headcount and non-social care services such as libraries, sports, culture, or ‘keep calm and carry on’ and have the funding to fund the structural gap through EFS. Personally, I did not enter public service to be the architect of cutting services to the bone. And I would also, not putting words into Councillor Mackinnon's mouth, I would not expect he entered public service with that in mind as well.

Thirdly, the low level of commercialisation fees and charges, i.e. to ‘sweat our property portfolio’, which we have kicked off a couple of projects to address this recommendation.

And lastly, to dispose of our property portfolio, i.e. ‘sell the family silver’. There's quite an interesting article about the financial challenge which Birmingham City Council have faced, how they've sold over a billion pounds worth of assets and the impact which it has had on services in Birmingham.

So addressing the sub points of your question, West Berkshire Council has a strategic plan to address the financial challenge; FRP on a weekly basis, Spend committee and Financial Improvement Group, which will be meeting next month. We are working on delivering the actions detailed in the delivery plan which are underway.

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The first meeting, as I said, of the Finance Improvement Group is on the 2 March, which includes external representatives, which will support the enhanced oversight and challenge of the Council's financial approach.

And lastly, I think one of the most interesting ones, which you and the MP for West Reading have been picking up, is it states that there is a suggestion the Executive might be getting too involved in operational issues. But the kicker on this is it says, 'but this is difficult to evidence'. So it's somewhat disappointing that this finding is based upon opinion and hearsay, without any documentary evidence. It is hearsay from an interview.

So, in conclusion, the report has provided very useful advice. However, we cannot accept the entire recommendations of its findings, namely to 'sell the family silver', to cut non-social care services to the bone, and that the Executive is too involved in operational matters.

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 Ross Mackinnon asked the following supplementary question:

"In your answer, you mentioned that given the choice between being agents of austerity, cutting headcount and services, that you took a different approach. I just wonder how that would square with the paper that was presented to the special Executive not too long ago, which detailed rather several high profile and numerous redundancies which are actually going through. Is that not being an 'agent of austerity', to use your own phrase?"

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources answered:

The rationale for those proposed redundancies was reorganising the Council to be fit for purpose. It was an operational matter. It wasn't a case of cutting costs for the sake of cutting costs. It was actually getting us into a leaner, more strategic authority in relation to the increase in different demands which we face. And also, as I say, the property portfolio, which CIPFA have recommended that we have an increased focus on.

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Item (B)

Executive Meeting on 12 February 2026

(B) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing by Councillor Dominic Boeck:

“The unauthorised development of land to the site of Reading Road in Tadley has caused considerable anxiety among residents. When do you anticipate seeing the satisfactory conclusion of Council’s legal action aimed at preventing further development of the land?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing answered:

The Council is fully aware of the concern and anxiety that the unauthorised development has caused within the local community.

We have taken and continue to take firm action to address the situation. We have successfully secured an interim injunction, and legal proceedings are continuing to secure a final injunction. The defendants have the right to defend their position through the courts. As with all legal processes, this takes time and is not fully within the Council's control.

We are at present awaiting a date for the court hearing, which will be at the next available date after the 2nd of March. A planning application has also been received but is currently invalid due to missing information. Should the required information be received by the Council, then we would need to follow due process in determining the application, and if the application is refused, the applicants would have the option of appealing that refusal to the planning inspectorate, as would any applicant.

It is therefore not possible to provide a precise timeline at this stage. However, I want to reassure residents that we are progressing this matter as swiftly as possible, and you will note we addressed the situation very quickly in the first instance and remain committed to achieving the satisfactory and lawful resolution.

We will endeavour to provide updates as soon as there is substantive progress, and there is also a web page available where court documents can be viewed. We appreciate the residents' patience while the legal process runs its course.

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:

“You haven't really answered the question. You won't tell me how long you anticipate this process to take. Would you agree that on the basis of other cases currently running, such as the Brimpton Common incursion, which initially started two years ago, cases in other authorities, Tewkesbury, and other cases in West Berkshire that



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this is going to be a minimum cycle of two years before we see the end of this particular problem. Would you agree with that?

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing answered:

I would not like to speculate as to how long this process will take. I think I have answered the question because I have told you that because it is going through the courts, there is no way that we can ascertain how long this process is going to take.

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Item (C)

Executive Meeting on 12 February 2026

(C) Question submitted to the Leader of the Council by Councillor Ross Mackinnon:

“At the Budget Council meeting in March 2021, how many members of the Liberal Democrat group failed to cast a vote on the Revenue Budget?”

The Leader of the Council answered:

Sixteen.

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 Ross Mackinnon asked the following supplementary question:

“Do you think that Councillor Colston would characterise those sixteen Members as being sixteen tubs of lard?”

The Leader of the Council answered:

You would have to ask him.



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Item (D)

Executive Meeting on 12 February 2026

(D) Question submitted to the Leader of the Council by Councillor Dominic Boeck:

“How many letters has the Leader sent to government ministers without permission from the council since taking office?”

The Leader of the Council answered:

I don't need permission. What I prefer to do is have the Council behind me rather than being a sort of unilateral leader who just decides to write letters on behalf of the Council.

But in that respect:

- On the 7 November 2023, the previous Leader, Lee Dillon, wrote to MHCLG on local government finance.
- On the 11 July 2024, I wrote to MHCLG on local government finance.
- On the 23 January 2025, I wrote to Secretary of State for Culture, Media on sporting licensing fees.
- On the 11 July 2024, I wrote about the local government finance.
- On the 2 February I wrote on the review of the proposed funding model.
- On 26 March 2023 Councillor Dillon wrote to DEFRA about pets as prizes.
- On 18 July 2024 I wrote to centra government about proportional representation.
- 26 September 2024, about winter fuel payment.
- 28 November 2024, about statutory licensing fees.
- I also wrote to MHCLG about the commitment to eastern communities in West Berkshire.

That is when I've written to MHCLG or DEFRA or other examples. So no, I don't tend to write on my own. I wait for the Council to support me.



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Item (E)	Executive Meeting on 12 February 2026
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(E) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Highways by Councillor Ross Mackinnon:

“Since the introduction of three-weekly bin collections, how many applications from households for larger or extra bins have been refused?”

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Highways answered:

Since the 22 September 2025, we have approved 317 applications for larger or additional bins, ensuring support for households with unavoidable, non-recyclable waste. Over this four-month period this is more approvals than during the whole of 2024/25.

Over the same period a total of 787 applications were received. Of these, 470 applications were refused, meaning that 40% of applicants received additional capacity.

For the whole year from 1 January 2025 until 12 Feb 2026 we have approved 872 extra capacity requests, compared to the 295 for same period in the previous year.

These decisions reflect our commitment to helping residents who can demonstrate a clear, evidenced need, and encouraging responsible waste behaviours.



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