

Questions and Answers

Executive

Thursday, 15th December 2011

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Executive Meeting

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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 Mr Richard Garvie:

“At the last full council meeting, Cllr Virginia Von Celsing asked how many questions I have asked at Council Meetings since December last year. As Cllr Von Celsing has never asked a question before, it was surprising that the number of questions asked by a member of the public was more important than issues that are important to those who elected her to this council. Can the Leader of the council confirm how many other councillors have yet to ask a question at Full Council or Executive relating directly to their own ward in the current council term, and whether he believes these councillors are delivering value for money to the electorate?”

This question was withdrawn.

(b) Question submitted to the Leader of the Council by Mr Richard Garvie:

“At the time of submitting this question, twelve elected members have an attendance record of less than 70% (including Cllr Von Celsing - 69% and three executive members - Keith Chopping, Joe Mooney and Alan Law). Five elected members have missed half or more of meetings they were expected to attend, at what point can the electorate demand that they are replaced by people who actually want to represent those wards?”

This question was withdrawn.

(c) Question submitted to the Leader of the Council by Mr Richard Garvie:

“At present, the council spend well over three quarters of a million pounds on elected members and support staff. The current administration is quick to support cuts to services for the vulnerable, but do we really need 52 elected members in light of the fact that most do not ask any questions relating to their wards on a regular basis anyway?”

This question was withdrawn.

(d) Question submitted to the Leader of the Council by Mr Richard Garvie:

“Due to the current economic climate, spending cuts have to be made in West Berkshire due to decisions taken by the Coalition Government. This council can not afford not to act to make savings as some are suggesting as the council would likely end up insolvent. For the record, can the leader of the council confirm how much debt the council has at this moment in time, as this time last year it was just shy of £50m.”

A written answer was supplied as set out below:

The economic inheritance from the last Labour government is one to which the questioner should hang his head in shame. That drastic action was needed to control the deficit is accepted across the political spectrum.

We have moved from a strategy of renting property to buying it. We are also downsizing the Council's accommodation requirements and we have made an overall annual revenue saving of approximately £100,000 through this policy as well as acquiring a public asset.

Borrowing now stands at £82.5 million. This is in line with the approved Council funded Capital Programme for 2010/11 and 2011/12.

(e) Question submitted to the Leader of the Council by Mr Richard Garvie:

“May I thank the leader of the council for listening to concerns relating to the perceived lack of consultation when producing last years budget, and for delivering on his pledge to ensure that service users would be consulted this time around. Can I raise a concern about the fact that most organisations like the Volunteer Centre learned about their proposed budget cuts via the local media and can he address this in future years?”

A written answer was supplied as set out below:

5% reduction in funding was built into the volunteer bureau SLA signed over a year ago. The media were given the information under an embargo that was intended to give enough time to set up meetings with affected organisations. Regrettably, the Media made contact with one or two organisations before the information was published.

(f) Question submitted to the Leader of the Council by Mr Richard Garvie:

“With regards to the consultations taking place, all of the publicity delivers those who wish to take part in either one of the consultations to the council plan consultation and I certainly have concerns that even if people do go online to take part, they may be responding to the wrong consultation. Can the council deliver consultation forms for relevant consultations to service users who may be affected by changes to the budget next year, and will the council also ensure that any comments on the council plan consultation are also valid for the relevant consultations to ensure that the voice of anybody who may have responded to the council plan consultation by mistake will still have their voice heard?”

A written answer was supplied as set out below:

All of the exercises we have undertaken to elicit feedback on the savings proposals for next year have been posted separately on our Consultation Finder database linked from either www.westberks.gov.uk/research or www.westberks.gov.uk/consultation. These clearly differentiate between the different savings proposals we are seeking comments on the implications of. To date we have no evidence of respondents being confused as to whether information on a particular savings proposal is relevant to them.

Over 2,500 letters were sent out to individual service users prior to the publication of the proposals, informing them of our proposals and the link to the Consultation Finder database where the information can be downloaded. For those without access to the internet, a telephone number has been provided in order to have a hard copy of the material presented on our website posted to them. The views of service users are also being directly elicited through the various user groups and representative organisations as part of the process.

As detailed in our Consultation Policy, the Council adopts the COUNT (Collect Once Use Numerous Times) principles with regard to any evidence or data gathering. This means that any relevant information or comment elicited from a previous exercise is used to inform the development and design of any subsequent exercises. Any comments received on a current exercise, which has resonance to another, will be shared to ensure the implications of any proposals are fully understood.

(g) Question submitted to the Leader of the Council by Mr Richard Garvie:

"In an interview with Newbury Sound, the leader of the council highlighted that there will be four million pounds worth of cuts made next year that are currently not being disclosed as it is "inappropriate" to inform the public at this stage. Can the leader of the council confirm that the people who use those services are currently being consulted and can he explain why it is "inappropriate" to tell the public where these spending cuts will be made?"

A written answer was supplied as set out below:

"Words are being taken out of context. Much work is continuing internally and we are working to ensure the front line is protected as much as possible. We have always announced our budget early so as to allow public consultation. This year we have consulted early so as to understand the impact of funding reductions in certain areas."

(h) Question submitted to the Executive Member for Strategy Performance and Community Safety by Mr Richard Garvie:

"Can the council advise what actions they have taken to try and prevent the removal of the Heavy Rescue Unit from Newbury Fire Station?"

A written answer was supplied as set out below:

I would draw your attention to the RBFRS Five Year Integrated Risk Management Plan, Action Plan 2012/13, Consultation Document, which gives a brief reason for the move of the Unit. Further details can be obtained from RBFRS. The Council has no expertise in the operation of a fire service, has received no representations to oppose the move and thus has no reason to disagree with the RBFRS's operational decisions. In addition, your question gives no reason to oppose the move of the Unit.

I understand and am somewhat surprised that you have not responded to the RBFRS's Consultation Document and have not brought your concerns to one of the four West Berkshire Council members of the Fire Authority who are in a better position to influence the Fire Service as I assume that for some reason you do not favour the relocation of the unit.

(i) Question submitted to the Executive Member for Highways, Transport (Operational), ICT and Customer Services by Mr Richard Garvie:

"Can the council advise how much it spends in total when it comes to funding local bus services?"

A written answer was supplied as set out below:

Our budget for supporting local bus services this year is £1,648,620.

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

(a) Question submitted to the Executive Member for Finance by Councillor David Rendel:

"What is the total cost of relaying the paving around the Council's Market Street Offices, and which budget did this come from?"

The Executive Member for Finance answered:

The cost of the paving is £18,987 and the cost of the sub-base for the paving around the flag pole is £6,000. The capital budget which this work is being paid for from is the Disabled Access Works capital budget.

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 David Rendel asked the following supplementary question:

"The question was not answered in a very clear manner, Chairman. I'm trying to clarify whether he was talking about the cost just of the paving itself or the laying of the paving?"

The Executive Member for Finance answered:

The question asked what's the cost of relaying the paving around the Council's Market Street offices and that's what I told you.

(b) Question submitted to the Executive Member for Strategy, Performance and Community Safety by Councillor Roger Hunneman:

"In view of the costs to this Council and the Community in general of the consequences of a major flood affecting Newbury Town Centre and given the almost complete failure of the local businesses to contribute to the balance of funds needed to ensure the implementation of the Newbury Flood Alleviation Scheme can the Portfolio Holder tell me how the necessary £111,000 will be found to enable this vital scheme to go ahead on schedule?"

The Executive Member for Strategy, Performance and Community Safety answered:

You say in your question "the almost complete failure of the local businesses to contribute to the balance of funds needed to ensure the implementation of the Newbury Flood Alleviation" and where are we going to find the other £111,000. Well I have to say it is not a complete failure but on the other hand it is not entirely a roaring success either.

We have about £20,000 coming in we believe from Sovereign Housing and a bit more from elsewhere, and the Greenham Common Trust offering to match up £30,000. So we're round about halfway there at the moment.

I do find it depressing, I have to say, that our big companies that sit in the middle of this flood area: Tesco's, Sainsburys, Marks & Spencer, Boots, WH Smith and the Newbury Weekly News, have all singularly failed to contribute and I do find that extraordinary. I think, it's to an extent, that our local Managers are not able to do it under their existing budgets, but I do think they should all make a contribution and I hope they're going to make a contribution.

It leads us onto the second part of the question of how do we find the remaining amount of 50K or so. Well, there are a number of ways we could do it and I'm not saying that the Council is going to immediately underwrite this because I think that would be a foolish thing to do. We could take it off some other Newbury capital programme over the next few years is one school of thinking. The Town Council could make a larger contribution to cover this shortfall. I mean, what would be absolutely delightful is if the two Ward Councillors, David Allen and, I believe yourself for the Victoria Ward that is basically involved in this particular one, could follow up personally and do something yourselves to chase up the businesses and we have the support. You are the Ward Councillors for the area that is most involved, so we would be delighted for you to do this.

I do think it is wrong, however, for the Council Tax payers from all over Berkshire to pay for what is essentially Newbury businesses. We've already contributed £150,000 from across the area and really why should Council Tax payers of Thatcham and places pay for this particular one? I really don't think they should. What I can assure you though, is that Central Government willing, this scheme will go ahead and immediately intervening period the funding will be found.

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 Roger Hunneman asked the following supplementary question:

“Thank you for saying that we're all in this together across the district and, this is the Council of the district, and therefore this very important scheme mustn't be allowed to stall, but my actual supplementary question is: given that the Council has duty of care to residents in the area and because of the huge values this Council will get from the Flood Alleviation Scheme in place by virtue of the underwritten value of the Council's landholdings in the area, which of course is of benefit to everybody in West Berkshire, can you give an undertaking that this Council will fund any remaining shortfall, you may have done that and I appreciate that, to allow the Scheme to go ahead, if necessary by using funds from reserves or getting contributions from business ?”

The Executive Member for Strategy, Performance and Community Safety answered:

Councillor Hunneman, I think you accuse me rather publicly of being very unbusiness-like. I can think of nothing more unbusiness-like than promising to underwrite this when we're trying to collect money from businesses, so the answer is no.
