

Questions and Answers

Executive

Thursday, 28th November, 2013

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West Berkshire
COUNCIL

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Executive Meeting

28 November 2013

Questions and Answers



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

There were no public questions submitted pertaining to items not included on the agenda for this meeting.

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

(a) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Community Care and Insurance by Councillor Adrian Edwards:

"Would you please give an update on the Extra Care Home, Redwood House, in Hungerford."

The Portfolio Holder for Community Care and Insurance answered:

"Thank you Councillor Edwards for the question. I have to say that Redwood House, I believe from what I've seen is a wonderful development. People who reside there will have many happy years. Redwood House opened for the first residents on Monday 04 November, well ahead of schedule, great to see it coming fruition so quickly. At the end of next week there will be 15 residents insitu of the 46 flats that are available. It is intended that all flats will be allocated by January 2014. Mears who are the onsite care provider and Sovereign are the landlord. The scheme has a restaurant, shop and a hair salon which are all open to all members of the local community. A media call to celebrate the first residents having moved in has been scheduled for an official opening in the Spring of 2014."

The Leader 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 Adrian Edwards asked the following supplementary question:

"How confident are you that all the flats will be occupied?"

The Portfolio Holder for Community Care and Insurance answered:

"I have no doubt that they will be over subscribed. We have four more people who are going in on week commencing 09 December, two more are already booked to go in for the week commencing 06 December and we have an interest from 15 other people who are interviewing at the present time. I would recommend to any of you here in the chamber this evening to go along and visit this and see what it is all about because you may need a bed there sometime yourself."

(b) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Highways, Transport (Operations), Emergency Planning and Newbury Vision by Councillor Roger Hunneman:

"Can the Portfolio Holder for Highways tell me what is being done to reduce the incidence of irresponsible cycle riding in the Pedestrianised areas of Newbury which causes alarm and danger to users of the area during the hours of pedestrianisation."

The Portfolio Holder for Highways, Transport (Operations), Emergency Planning and Newbury Vision answered:

"I am sure you are well aware that it is only motor vehicles which are prohibited from the Pedestrian Zone between 10.00am and 5.00pm and cyclists, along with mobility scooters for the disabled, are able to use the Zone and for the majority of users this does not present a significant road safety concern in this shared space.

The accident data has been checked and in the last five years there has only been one incident involving a cyclist. This resulted in a 'slight' personal injury being recorded. However it is important to point out that cyclists are not exempt from traffic law, that a cyclist riding

aggressively or dangerously can be prosecuted under existing traffic legislation. The Council could consider changing the traffic law and taking cyclists out. It certainly at present has no plans, no thoughts of doing that. The issue is to try and enable cyclists and pedestrians to share a space in a more equitable manner. I understand that it is sometimes equally difficult for a cyclist who has to weave their way round pedestrians. I have been in contact with Sergeant Andy Bone who is the inspector responsible for the Town Centre and he said and his Officers do on occasion actually stop a cyclist and have a few words with them, obviously he is well aware of the issues and will certainly continue to do that. I have also spoken to Russell Dowding the BID Manager to see if his Street Wardens are also able to speak to inconsiderate cyclists. I am speaking for myself but I think they are in the minority and I think the difficulty is no different from cycling on the pavement as it is difficult to police and I think we just have to privately encourage all cyclists perhaps via Spokes, I don't know, to take a more considerate view and it may be helpful if cyclists had a bell on the front of their bicycles, but we can't enforce that either, so the answer to your question as to what is being done to reduce the incidents, well as I say I think that at this stage we don't want to take the draconian step of changing the traffic law and therefore we rely on the uniformed police to warn cyclists when they do behave in an inconsiderate manner."

The Leader 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 very much for a comprehensive answer can I ask then for confirmation, are you going to be entering into discussion with the cycling forum perhaps to try and get some education out there with the few cyclists who are completely inconsiderate it could be that they are never going to take any notice."

The Portfolio Holder for Highways, Transport (Operations), Emergency Planning and Newbury Vision answered:

"I know, I'd be happy to do that. I do appreciate that and if you like to give me a contact for the cycle forum I will be happy to take that up."

(c) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Strategy and Performance, Housing, ICT and Corporate Support, Legal and Strategic Support by Councillor Roger Hunneman:

"The Council has a number of major system databases which could connect to each other using property addresses. However, with the exception of UNIFORM, many of the other systems are unable to pass information between each other or only to a very limited extent. Indeed out of 19 systems only 6 are fully integrated with a further 6 very partially so. In the interests of improving efficiency, reducing costs and moving the Council away from Silo thinking can the Portfolio Holder for ICT tell me what is being done to integrate the management of data across its databases thus avoiding duplicate data entry and enhancing searching?"

The Portfolio Holder for Strategy and Performance, Housing, ICT and Corporate Support, Legal and Strategic Support answered:

"Thank you Councillor Hunneman. It is not clear from the question which systems you are referring to as the Council operates around 100 different computer applications in order to support its diverse and complex business. Many of these applications support a specialist council function where wider data sharing would not be relevant or would be positively undesirable. However, the Council has long recognised the importance of systems integration work to link data and systems together wherever it makes business, communications or financial sense so to do. As an example, the Council's Land and Property Gazetteer acts as

the master property address source to at least a dozen of the Council's systems including Planning, Building Control Revenues and Benefits, Electoral Registration, Rights of Way and Highways Maintenance. Our General Ledger system Agresso is similarly interfaced to more than a dozen systems including BACS, cash management, adult social care systems, payroll, parking enforcement, debt recovery, revenues and benefits and so forth. Integrating and interfacing systems and data is often technically complicated or financially unviable. Computer system vendors often charge high fees for a connector into their system and invalidate warranties if these are not used. Others refuse for commercial or technical reasons to provide the necessary information. In order to further develop integration of our key systems the Council's database support team is being increased by one full time member of staff from 01 April 2014. This will enable us to further develop our integration work using technologies such as Microsoft Biztalk."

The Leader 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 stated that he did not have a supplementary question to ask.

(d) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Strategy and Performance, Housing, ICT and Corporate Support, Legal and Strategic Support by Councillor Tony Vickers:

"According to Sovereign Housing Association, who are by far the largest social housing provider here, only 17 'downsizing moves' have happened in this District to help their 509 tenants (7.5% of their total) affected by the Spare Room Subsidy ending this April, yet reduction in under-occupation of social housing was one of the aims of this policy. Will the Executive Member comment on this aspect of the Policy and on the effect which he anticipates it having on the District's social housing mix?"

The Portfolio Holder for Strategy and Performance, Housing, ICT and Corporate Support, Legal and Strategic Support answered:

"Thank you Councillor Vickers, the first of four questions from you on the spare room subsidy. I was interested to read your recent press release entitled 'Lib Dems want Bedroom Tax put on hold'. I think you would have been better sending your suggestions to Nick Clegg who is Deputy Prime Minister of the Government which ended the spare room subsidy for social tenants. To answer your question, you will need to address any questions relating to Sovereign's figures direct to Sovereign. However, it is my understanding that the figure of 17 'downsizing moves' that you quote was for the month of April only. In respect of the District's social housing mix the types and sizes of affordable housing delivered through the Council's strategic housing role may well change as a result of the ending of the spare room subsidy and also as a result of demographic and other trends. In the affordable rent area, I anticipate fewer 4 and 5 bedroom homes being sought after and more 1 and 2 bedroom homes being requested. We are planning and acting accordingly."

The Leader 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 Tony Vickers asked the following supplementary question:

"Are you aware that on some of the new sites, like the Racecourse that the design of the sites is now having to be looked at again because of this one factor and that this is, in the short term at least, going to delay the delivery of much needed affordable housing?"

The Portfolio Holder for Strategy and Performance, Housing, ICT and Corporate Support, Legal and Strategic Support answered:

"I am not aware that it is going to affect the delivery; I do know that we are working with the Developers to alter their specification of affordable rent homes to provide more 1 and 2 bedrooms. I am not aware, I will now check whether this will affect delivery, my understanding is that it wouldn't, but if you tell it will then I will go and check."

(e) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Strategy and Performance, Housing, ICT and Corporate Support, Legal and Strategic Support by Councillor Tony Vickers:

"Apart from reducing the cost to national taxpayers of Housing Benefit, and reducing under-occupation of previous social housing stock, one purpose of ending the Spare Room Subsidy in this sector (to bring it in line with the situation claimants have faced for some years in private tenancies) was said by many to be to encourage 'work-shy' claimants into employment. Members have been told that 690 households (occupying social housing units in the District with at least one 'spare bedroom') would from the start (01 April this year) be affected. Can the Executive Member indicate how many of these households had at least one adult in full-time employment?"

The Portfolio Holder for Strategy and Performance, Housing, ICT and Corporate Support, Legal and Strategic Support answered:

"I am not sure that encouraging what you call the work-shy (incidentally a derogatory and demeaning term that I would never use) into employment was a particular aim of the ending of the spare room subsidy. The central aim of ending the spare room subsidy is to encourage social housing mobility and to make it equitable with the private sector tenants who do not receive a spare room subsidy. In answer to your question, the information about adults in full-time employment within any particular household is not easily available and I don't see any benefit in putting in a lot of work by Council Officers to find out that data. When it comes to employment, what I do know is that West Berkshire has a thriving economy; the unemployment rate in West Berkshire is only 1.3% and unemployment has dropped by a quarter in the last 12 months."

The Leader 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 Tony Vickers asked the following supplementary question:

"Well, it is difficult because you have basically denied the premise of my initial question, but to just cut through the chase to the answer you were saying that you don't think it is worth finding out the answer to my question."

The Portfolio Holder for Strategy and Performance, Housing, ICT and Corporate Support, Legal and Strategic Support answered:

"I don't see any benefit in doing that no."

(f) **Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Strategy and Performance, Housing, ICT and Corporate Support, Legal and Strategic Support by Councillor Tony Vickers***

“Can the Executive Member for Housing tell me how he believes those 690 households affected by the ending of the Spare Room Subsidy in West Berkshire are expected to manage their finances, when there are hardly any smaller homes available and bills for food and domestic fuel are rising faster than earnings?”

The Portfolio Holder for Strategy and Performance, Housing, ICT and Corporate Support, Legal and Strategic Support answered:

“It would be presumptuous of me in any role to provide advice to households on how to manage their personal finances. There are a number of different organisations who offer advice on budgeting and debt and who do a considerably better job than I would. As an example, registered providers such as Sovereign have tenancy support schemes to help tenants who have financial concerns. Another source of such advice is the Citizen’s Advice Bureau. In my role as Executive Member for Housing, I do ensure that households who approach the Housing Service for advice are signposted to such organisations where relevant. Organisations such as the Citizens Advice Bureau do a great job helping people with financial management worries and I am pleased that this Council helps to support them. I am also delighted to have this opportunity to express my thanks to the volunteers of the Citizens Advice Bureau for the excellent work they do.”

The Leader 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 Tony Vickers asked the following supplementary question:

“Well yes actually it is about Citizens Advice as you have included that very much in your answer, can you assure us that the funding for Citizens Advice who do do this excellent work and are indeed the best people to do it will be kept up in line with the great increase in the demand for this very kind of service that they are offering?”

The Portfolio Holder for Strategy and Performance, Housing ICT and Corporate Support, Legal and Strategic Support answered:

“My understanding from the consultation is that there are no plans to change the funding to the Citizens Advice Bureau in the next two years. “

(g) **Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Strategy and Performance, Housing, ICT and Corporate Support, Legal and Strategic Support by Councillor Tony Vickers:**

“Unlike last year (according to information I was given by Revenues & Benefits in March) this year the Council is match-funding the Government’s allocation of Discretionary Housing Payment money, which is more than twice last year’s allocation of some £116k, of which over half went unspent. That makes the total sum available this year to assist social housing tenants facing difficulties with their housing costs now there is no Spare Room Subsidy at least £483k (Councils can allocate 1.5 times the Government money from their own sources but must – I’m told – match at least ‘pound for pound’). Processing this money must involve considerable administration costs. So can the Executive Member say how this is affecting the Council and its clients?”

The Portfolio Holder for Strategy and Performance, Housing, ICT and Corporate Support, Legal and Strategic Support answered:

“The Council has to fund Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) up to a cap determined by Government and this was applicable to last year and every previous year just as it is to this year. The payment of Discretionary Housing Payments is relatively straightforward and it is paid through the Northgate computer system alongside Housing Benefit payments. This is common sense as DHP can only be paid to applicants in receipt of Housing Benefit. The number of applications for DHP has significantly increased and this is being managed through a dedicated member of staff from within the existing Housing Resources. Whilst the DHP workload for the Housing Service has increased, DHP has been a mainstream part of their work for a number of years and the professional members of the Housing Service are coping admirable with the workload.

As far as clients are concerned the timescales for assessing applications, whilst relevant information is being received, is 28 days as it was last year and this timescale is comfortably being met.”

The Leader 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 Tony Vickers asked the following supplementary question:

“Do we know whether applicants are coming back for a second bite? I understand that normally the payment is only for three months.”

The Portfolio Holder for Strategy and Performance, Housing, ICT and Corporate Support, Legal and Strategic Support answered:

“Yes, some applicants are coming back for another go and will often receive the DHP providing they can demonstrate a serious attempt to address their housing issues.”
