

Questions and Answers

Executive

Thursday, 19th December, 2013

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West Berkshire
COUNCIL

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

There were no public questions.

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

(a) **Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Highways, Transport (Operations), Emergency Planning, Newbury Vision by Councillor Keith Woodhams:**

“Can the Executive Member for Highways and Transport update us on the urgency she is giving to the work on diverting heavy lorries via Newtown Straight to the A34 to avoid using Newbury Town Centre?”

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

The issue of reducing HGV traffic on the A339 through Newbury was discussed at the last Transport Policy Task Group meeting, when it was resolved that a paper would be brought to a meeting of the Task Group in the new year, investigating the possible implementation of a weight limit on the A339 through Newbury Town Centre. The paper will have to include the cost of weight limit signage, including installation costs, and a cost benefit analysis will be provided.

Some while ago a proposal was put to Hampshire County Council to sign HGV traffic from the A339 to the A34 via the B4640 at The Swan roundabout. However, at the time, Hampshire County Council was opposed to this proposal. However, we need to pursue this so Mark Edwards and I have arranged to meet with our counterparts at Hampshire County Council in January to see whether we can find a way of improving that situation, and removing at least some of the HGV traffic on the A339.

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 Keith Woodhams asked the following supplementary question:

“Well as the economy picks up we can certainly expect more HGVs moving through Newbury and so I just wondered what the timescale is that you’re working to for a final solution to the issue?”

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

Well, as I've said, there are two things. Firstly to see what the report is that comes back to the Task Group. If it's a question of signage, then that can always be recommended relatively quickly. You understand the situation with weight limits, and that Trading Standards will have to

enforce these, so we need to see what that procedure would be and secondly, until I meet with Hampshire next month I'm really not clear what they will be prepared to do and therefore on what timescale, but I can assure you that we've been able to arrange that meeting at fairly short notice so I hope that means that they might be able to decide proposals.

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

“What was the involvement of the Portfolio Holder in the sudden decision to withdraw the extended SWEP (Severe Weather Emergency Protocol) arrangements for those who find themselves here without shelter in winter?”

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

For the last three years, the Housing Service has offered an extended winter provision which was not solely reliant on temperature activation. This year the extended provision was launched on 1 November 2013 and planned to last three months. Unlike previous years, it became apparent that a number of street homeless, from as far away as Birmingham, had travelled to West Berkshire in order to take advantage of this extended scheme. In addition, some people in West Berkshire who were not homeless were taking advantage of the Extended Provision. These two groups of people were placing a considerable strain on the resources that are available at Two Saints Hostel. There was a real possibility of these two groups of people crowding out the known West Berks street homeless when severe weather does come.

Consequently, a decision was made to withdraw the extended provision in a planned way and revert to the original SWEP scheme. This was not a sudden decision, but a carefully considered one in light of the fact that the extended system was not being used as originally intended and possibly to the detriment of people with a West Berkshire connection. As Portfolio Holder, I was fully briefed, fully involved and supported the decision to withdraw the extended provision, whilst continuing to ensure that the Council meets its best practice obligations under SWEP. My understanding is that you, Councillor Vickers, were also briefed prior to the provision being withdrawn. All users of the service were offered a housing options appointment prior to the service being withdrawn. Sadly not all of them took up that option. I remain committed to ensuring that we continue to offer SWEP during spells of severe weather and also to ensuring that there is appropriate provision in place to meet the needs of the small identified group of street homeless in West Berkshire.

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 Tony Vickers asked the following supplementary question:

“One thing in your answer wasn’t in the briefing I got, and that is that some people who are West Berkshire people but who are not homeless were taking “advantage”, was your word, of SWEP, so my supplementary is have you actually personally inspected the sort of provision that you get under SWEP and have you thought along with that about what happens when you’re turned away from Two Saints, from that pretty limited provision? Why would anyone want to go there when they’re not homeless?”

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

My understanding is that some of the people who were turning up at Two Saints were not homeless – simple as that. Maybe they had alternative provision, such as sleeping on people's sofas, and they were using Two Saints as a method of stay there during the winter. I can't really answer that question in detail about why they turned up, but I can assure you that people did turn up.
