

Wera Hobhouse MP - FOBRA meeting notes - 12 Feb 18

Intro/CV: Wera is Bath's first female Member of Parliament. Born in Hanover, she has been involved with politics since she was at school. She studied a masters in History and Fine Art, worked as a teacher, a radio journalist, and ran a commercial modern art gallery in Liverpool. Wera was elected as a councillor in Rochdale in 2004 and served until 2014. Her biggest accomplishment there was successfully blocking the proposed development of 650 homes on contaminated land of a former asbestos factory. Fittingly, she also was the cabinet member for the environment. Wera and her husband William moved to Bath in 2014, and Wera immediately got involved in local politics. Wera co-founded 'Bath for Europe' which has become one of the most active grassroots pro-EU groups in the UK. She was selected at the last minute to stand in the 2017 snap election, in which she convincingly beat Ben Howlett with a majority of 5,694. Given her experience as a councillor and community activist, she was assigned the role of Spokesperson for Communities, Local Government and Refugees for the Liberal Democrats. In Parliament, she has asked difficult questions to the government on the Grenfell Tower tragedy, their housing policy, and the irresponsible cuts to local councils. Locally she has been outspoken on issues such as the proposed Park and Ride, the cuts to Bath Library, and the University of Bath Vice Chancellor's pay package. She has worked as a mediator between the Foxhill Residents' Association and Curo, working towards a positive outcome for the residents of the estate. She holds regular surgeries, is an active supporter of the arts in Bath, and is working to implement change on Bath's major issues of transport and social housing.

Intro/General: She explained that she tried to concentrate on big issues, as one couldn't cover everything. Some people don't understand the role and (lack of) power of a back-bench MP (and from a small opposition party), and hence a few may possibly be disappointed (in particular the lady who said she thought the WECA Mayor had been elected to sort out our Transport problems and wondered why no action had occurred yet!). She currently has the Housing, Communities & Local Govt portfolio for the LibDems in the Commons. She criticized the Govt for outsourcing services to large organizations such as Carillion. Another bête noire was 'academization' of schooling, thus passing control (if there is any) to distant Whitehall. Social Housing has been drained away by 'right to buy' and not replaced sufficiently (12,700 social homes were replaced by only 5,000 last year). She has been active in facilitating resolution in the Foxhill example, where certainly there was planned to be a net loss of social homes. Last, but not least, she recognized traffic/pollution/congestion/parking to be very big issues in Bath.

Questions:

Traffic:

- a. Patrick Rotheram and Charles Draper: "We all know that Bath needs a comprehensive transport plan to reduce congestion and air pollution. Much of what is required is within B&NES' control, such as parking and traffic management. However one of the city's main problems is through traffic on the A36-A46 trunk route, particularly HGVs. There is heavy congestion and pollution on that route, but it also causes traffic to back up into the very centre of the city. A study some years back showed that removal of this traffic

would be very beneficial for Bath. WECA is now planning feasibility studies into an alternative route, which would of course require central government funding. Will you support feasibility studies into an alternative route?" (Vineyards & Bathwick Estate)

Wera said that a feasibility study into some kind of bypass had been requested by the Council's LibDem Group. This she supports, provided it is evidence-based. There needed to be proper measurement of air quality; known hot spots being London Road and Dorchester Street. Interestingly, she claimed, the biggest polluters were diesel cars [Ed - This is the case in parts of central Bath where cars predominate, but HGVs are in fact the biggest source of pollution on London Road; and coaches and buses are the biggest sources in Dorchester Street – see 'Source allocation' from B&NES AQMA below.]. She added that the school run is a significant contributor. Her [bypass] preference is 'dualling' the A350, though it would affect many villages. She mentioned the two Transport Conferences to be held in Bath to establish people's views and preferences, one on 3rd March in Larkhall, and the other in central Bath in May. Prior to that will be an agenda-setting and information-gathering seminar at BRLSI on 23rd Feb. She also mentioned pollution-reduction policies such as taxing high polluters and pedestrianisation, both of which would have their opponents.

- b. Richard Wales: "In your opinion, what are the most important steps that should be taken to relieve traffic congestion and resulting air pollution in the City of Bath. What actions would you propose to take to achieve these steps?" (Bathwick and Widcombe Associations)

Already covered.

Social Housing:

- a. Nola Edwards and Jake Hoskins (teenager): "Thank you for the work you have done facilitating meetings between Foxhill residents and Curo. I am aware you have been looking at ways of trying to secure more funding for social housing in Bath. Can you tell us if there has been any progress in your endeavours? How will you tackle the shortage of social housing in Bath & NES?" (Foxhill RA)

Wera spoke about the route some decades ago by which social homes were transferred from Councils to Housing Associations as a mechanism to eliminate 'Historical Debt'. She abhorred the current shortage of social homes (see her intro above) and hoped that some mechanism could be found by which fewer could be lost at Foxhill. In answer to a supplementary from Nick Tobin, asking her if she might persuade the Council to use some of the recently announced £12.5m Housing Infrastructure Funding to build affordable homes in the North Quays Development (the application deploys the 'viability' argument against the building of any affordable homes on this site), she reminded us that the £12.5m was primarily to benefit Western Riverside Development, including the building of a primary school.

- b. David Beaven: "You have chaired meetings with Foxhill Residents' Association and Curo regarding the demolition of social and private homes at Foxhill. Would you give your thoughts on the current actions of Curo, pressing ahead with Reserved Matters for the first phase of their plans?" (Foxhill RA)

Wera was unaware of this move by Curo, and asked to be given the details.

Care Sector:

Mel Clarke: "I live in Rockliffe Road and work in St John's Court, on St John's Road. This is one of 5 Extra-Care Schemes in Bath & NE Somerset that is a complex of flats (52 in St John's) where some of the most vulnerable people in the district live independently, but with the support of the care team that provide 24/7 person-centred care. Sirona runs the care team and Curo is responsible for the building. We have been told that swingeing cuts in funding are being made to the Extra-Care Service throughout B&NES and generally to Adult Social Care. I would like to ask what Wera is doing to protect these services in a climate of bed-blocking in hospitals because there are not enough social care places for people who cannot live entirely without support. I would like to ask her for support in reversing these cuts as the short-term gains will only lead to further problems in the future." (Bathwick Estate)

Wera supported this statement, noting that the problem had been debated twice in Parliament recently, but to no avail, which she thought cynical of the Govt. Spending to support these services appeared to be a 'no-brainer' as it would save money in the NHS – probably more saving than it would cost.

Universities:

Chris Beezley: "Bath's residents are extremely concerned at the excessively high demand for HMO and purpose-built student accommodation in the city. The loss of potential Council Tax income to B&NES due to student HMO exemption alone amounted to over £4M last year. Do you agree with FoBRA that a formal Student Housing Policy, consistently resisted by B&NES, is long overdue; and should make further university expansion conditional upon their providing affordable student accommodation on campus for significantly more than a quarter of students?" (Beech Avenue RA)

There was applause at the posing of this question, to which Wera agreed. When she speaks to students they object to the high cost of accommodation in Bath and the crowded lecture theatres. Until now she has lauded the success of our universities and their associated expansion. However, she now felt there needed to be a 'ceiling on numbers' in view of the detrimental effect on affordable housing in the city. The universities must 'benefit the city': not harm it. Even the UoB's Peppercorn rent might be vulnerable. Ben Palmer (UoB Student Union) asked a supplementary about the UoB's being successful but being run 'as a business'.

Party Houses:

Robin Kerr: "Where are we in trying to curb the uncontrolled growth and consequences of Party Houses in Bath; waiting, as we are, for a 'Scrutiny Day' to be held on the subject by the Council à la the successful one staged by Brighton & Hove to tease out all aspects? What can Wera do to help?"

Wera acknowledged that this was a countrywide issue (though limited to a few, attractive cities like York, Brighton and Bournemouth/Poole, as well as Bath). She had applied for a place in the ballot for a Westminster Hall debate on the subject and asked for all the latest papers, so as to be prepared. [Actioned]

Rail Travel:

Emilio Pimentel-Reid: "Why do we have to put up with an unreliable and expensive rail service to London from Bath? The large number of players in the railway business - one of which is state owned (Network Rail) - seems to ensure inability to resolve the muddle."

Not much of an answer to this one: Wera pointed out that Govt funding did not exist to renationalise the system, however tempting.

Robin Kerr, final, 18 Feb 18