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West Berkshire Council challenged over man hours spent on CIL payments row

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HUNDREDS of man hours may have been spent by West Berkshire Council's legal team in dealing with two cases of mistakenly-incurred Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) debts.

The potential figure was revealed at a meeting of the council's executive committee on Thursday, June 10.

In February, the district council was branded "morally and ethically wrong" for reportedly allowing citizens to fall into debt traps of tens of thousands of pounds.



West Berkshire Council's Market Street offices (47167345)

The issue was first raised by this newspaper back in 2019, when the former district council leader Gordon Lundie accused his own authority of allowing a Lambourn builder to unwittingly face financial ruin.

In April, at a meeting of the council's executive committee, members refused calls for an independent investigation into its handling of CIL payments.

Jeff Brooks (Lib Dem, Thatcham West) told the meeting he was "aghast" at the council's stance.

Jeff Brooks (48273084)

But the Conservatives who run the local authority pointed out that two cases involving bills totalling £90,000 were reviewed by the Local Government Ombudsman and that the council's CIL team has been audited twice – but no issues were identified.

At the executive committee's June 10 meeting, Mr Brooks asked how many officer hours had been spent chasing the cash in those cases.

Richard Somner (Con, Tilehurst South and Holybrook) replied that it was not possible to answer because no overall records of man hours spent were kept.

But he did reveal that, in the case of the council's legal department alone, around 160 hours had been spent dealing with just one of the two cases.

Mr Brooks noted that "time is money" and added: "Isn't it time the council cut its losses, which are now innumerable, and quashed these cases where CIL was never intended to be used?"

Mr Somner replied that, in one case, the money had been paid and that the matter was regarded as closed.

He added that it would be "inappropriate" to quash the other.

Newbury

John Garvey

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