

COUNCIL MEETING - 18 OCTOBER 2016

AGENDA ITEM: 6

QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

1. Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Education:
Grammar Schools

The Green Party would like to see all Schools eventually back under LEA control and all children given the same opportunities and outcomes. With the Conservative Government reaching back to the 1950s for its modern progressive vision of schooling in 2016, pushing for more selection of children at an early age, and more grammar schools, will the Lead Councillor join with me in rejecting the idea of education just for the privileged few and re-affirm Reading's view that all children are entitled to the best education this country has to offer?

RESPONSE by Councillor Jones Lead Councillor for Education.

Yes and yes.

2. Councillor McGonigle to ask the Lead Councillor for Housing:
Revenge Evictions

The Deregulation Act 2015 came into effect on 1 October last year and brought a number of changes to the regulation of private tenancies - one of which is to end 'retaliatory evictions'. Landlords evicting tenants for standing up for their rights to a clean, warm, safe home was a national scandal and I'm sure all parties here welcome this new legislation.

However, tenants are only protected if they have not only told the landlord about their complaint but also registered it with the Council's Environmental Health team, and that team has served an Improvement or Emergency Remedial notice on the landlord.

Can the Lead Councillor tell us what measures he has taken over the past year to ensure that all renters in Reading know their new rights, and how many notices protecting our residents from eviction have been served in that time?

RESPONSE by Councillor Davies Lead Councillor for Housing.

The Labour administration is committed to making Reading a better place to live for people who live in rented homes.

Our Private Rented Sector Charter sets out how the Council will lead in supporting, tenants, landlords, managing and letting agents to deliver a safe, healthy and thriving private rented sector. It promotes tenants choice and rights, landlords taking responsibility for their properties and it delivers robust and effective action where they fail to do so.

Work carried out as part of the Charter has resulted in 100% compliance being achieved with all Letting Agents within the Borough being registered with one of the 3 Government approved Redress Schemes. This means that landlords and tenants can access a free and independent service for resolving disputes with Letting Agents which in turns improves the Private Rental market and roots out those rogue landlords and letting agents.

A key to improving standards and identifying landlords and letting agents who are not complying with the law is to make sure tenants know what rights they have and how to access redress when those rights are being breached -without fear of retaliation.

To this end we are working to ensure all private renters are aware of their rights:

- A training programme is being developed for tenants to raise awareness of their legal rights and obligations when renting property.
- Renters who contact the Private Sector Housing Team in Environmental Health are talked through their rights in relation to their issue.
- And as part of the Private Rented Sector Charter work, officers have met local community and voluntary groups who work with tenants and have updated them on this piece of legislation and what it means so they are able to support residents and tell them how to access further help.
- We also use Landlord Focus which is newsletter provided by the Private Sector Housing Team for Landlords giving them updates on legislation and other relevant information about their obligations.

Reading Borough Council has a proud track record of standing up for renters and cracking down on rogue landlords and letting agents. Over the last year 6 landlords have been successfully prosecuted for breaches in housing legislation and there are a further 10 prosecutions pending. Since October 2015, 63 notices have been served requiring improvements to be made to properties.

Work is on-going to develop a 'Rent with Confidence' scheme which will be used to differentiate landlords and letting agents. The scheme is being designed in consultation with internal and external partners. This will assist in improving the sector and providing some assurance to tenants when they are looking for property for rent.

The new Council owned housing company, Homes for Reading, will, in time, make a valuable contribution to the private rented sector in Reading offering responsibly managed homes at market and sub market rents and being an beacon in the market, setting the standard for all Reading landlords.

Surplus income from Homes for Reading will be invested back into housing and affordable rent levels so will further help improve stock conditions and improve access to decent rented homes for those who can't afford Reading's ever-increasing rents.

3. Councillor Josh Williams to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport and Consumer Services:
Year of Culture

With only three months left of 2016 would the Lead Councillor give us a brief update on Reading's Year of Culture, and tell us what his own highlights have been. Will he also tell us whether Reading Borough Council is considering entering the bidding process to become the UK's 'City of Culture' in 2021?

RESPONSE by Councillor Gittings Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport and Consumer Services.

Many thanks Cllr. Williams - a question that's really difficult to answer concisely given the huge amount of activity that has taken place and planned for the future - especially given the relatively modest budget and tight timescales to deliver the Year of Culture in the first place.

Some key facts about the Year of Culture to date:

- The Year of Culture has embraced involvement of the local community as well as national and international artists to deliver a programme that has engaged many thousands of people through the 12 monthly 'pillar' events. In addition, the wider community will have held over

300 events, badged as the Year of Culture and sold thousands of tickets. The pillar events started with a lecture by Sir Roger Bannister, the first man to run the four minute mile, and still an inspiration to young people so the bar was set high from the off.

- The Artangel 'Inside' project at Reading prison, that has attracted international attention, has alone been visited by over 16,000 people (over 60% of these being Reading residents). We received the welcome news last week that the Ministry of Justice has agreed to an extension of Artangel's exhibition until the 4th December to enable an even greater number of people the opportunity to visit this fabulous cultural event. Watching a performance by Reading Between the Lines of the Trial of Oscar Wilde in the prison chapel must rank as one of the highlights as far as I'm concerned.
- As a result of the Year of Culture local arts and heritage organisations have received significantly more grant funding from Arts Council England - approximately £300,000 in grant aid in 2015/16, an increase of 130% from the previous year.
- The Year of Culture has also secured over £60,000 of direct sponsorship funding from local businesses as well as great in-kind support and our economic development company, Reading UK CIC has been central to delivering the Year of Culture and getting businesses involved.

But there's also still much to look forward too: 'Reading in Reading' Book and literary festival - Tony Robinson, Ian Wright and Susie Dent all appearing; 'Dance Reading' - will mark the first collaborative dance project in Reading involving 120 local dance schools in Reading led by Junction Dance; and finally in December 'Light Reading' is a collaborative project between arts organisations and businesses, with 25 partners involved, details to be announced around the middle of November. I'm also looking forward greatly to the premier of Henry 1st in November, a not to be missed production if the taster performance last Spring is anything to go by. And of course there's the Pantomime at the Hex!

With regard to the UK's 'City of Culture' for 2021 we will not be putting in a bid as there are already a number of towns and cities already advanced in the bidding process. We will though consider very seriously future rounds not least because we have a significant legacy from the Year of Culture with lots to build from: a 3 year 'Ambition for Excellence' programme of visual arts in partnership with the University with over £500k of Arts Council funding; the Abbey Revealed project; the re-opening of the completely refurbished Museum of English Rural Life at the University; the re-opening of a refurbished South Street Arts Centre in November with an exciting new membership scheme and a new Cultural Education Partnership looking at opportunities for all young people to experience great culture and heritage. The list could go on but in summary I think that there is a great future for culture and heritage in Reading.

4. Councillor Livingston to ask the Leader of the Council: Universal Credit

Would the Council Leader please update me regarding progress on the rollout of Universal Credit here in Reading ?

RESPONSE by Councillor Lovelock Leader of the Council.

I thank Councillor Livingston for her persistent questioning on this issue.

The latest information provided to Reading from the DWP on the National rollout position is that the full roll out and migration for working age claimants isn't planned to complete until 2022.

They have also confirmed that there are no plans to begin the incorporation of Housing Benefits for pensioners into Pension Credit until the completion of the Universal Credit timetable.

On a local level we are seeing a decline in the number of Universal Credit Claims we are being notified of, to then move claimants off Housing Benefit.

The number of claims we have been notified of and moved off Housing Benefit since Universal Credit went live in September 2015 is 227. The number of claims broken down by month is:

Sep-15	5
Oct-15	7
Nov-15	32
Dec-15	27
Jan-16	31
Feb-16	25
Mar-16	22
Apr-16	29
May-16	14
Jun-16	7
Jul-16	12
Aug-16	8
Sep-16	8

It is quite clear that this much vaunted policy of the Tory/Lib-Dem coalition and the current Tory government is in chaos and if it wasn't so serious for those in need of support would rival a Brian Rix farce.

5. Councillor Livingston to ask the Lead Councillor for Housing: Benefit Cuts

What effect have benefit cuts had on families in Reading ?

RESPONSE by Councillor Davies Lead Councillor for Housing.

Reforms to the welfare benefit system have had the most significant impact on tenants renting in the Private Rented Sector (PRS). This has included the introduction of a benefit cap on the total amount of welfare benefits payable which is set to be reduced further.

The benefit cap was announced by the coalition government in the 2010 Spending Review; it was rolled out in Reading in September 2013. The cap placed a limit on the total benefits that families and working age people can receive to £26,000.

The cap applies to a range of benefits including child benefit, child tax credit, job seekers allowance and housing benefit.

Due to the fact that housing benefit is included in the capped amount and the excess (above the cap) is deducted from the housing element, the cap has mainly had an impact in high rent areas, such as London and parts of the South East. So far Reading Borough Council has seen approximately 180 families since Sept 2013 that have had their benefits reduced, mainly affecting larger sized families living in the private sector, requiring 3 and 4 bedroom properties.

The announcement of the further reduction to the overall cap to household benefits in the Government's 2015 Summer Budget adds significant concern about the affordability of accommodation to households on low incomes in Reading. The Welfare Reform and Work Act

2016 capped benefits for families to £20,000 and £13,000 for single people, taking effect in Reading in autumn 2016, meaning a cap to weekly income for families of £384.62 regardless of family size.

This added reduction will significantly increase the number of non-working families who are affected by the cap. In Reading current estimates place the number at well over 500 households, approximately 140 of which are likely be RBC tenants; 100 tenants of Registered Providers; and 250 are living in the private sector.

One of the consequences of the further reduction to benefits will be that, for the first time, larger non-working families living in social rented tenancies will now feel the impact of the cap, whilst a greater number of smaller families in the private rented sector will also become affected.

Families will find themselves having to make increasingly difficult decisions about their household expenditure and how to prioritise their finances. For example, a couple with 2 children living in a two bedroom property with rent at Local Housing Allowance (LHA) level will face a weekly reduction of £70 in their overall benefits.

A single parent with 2 children in a 2 bed private rented flat will see a shortfall of over £28 per weekⁱ. A couple with 3 children living in a 3 bed Council home at lower social rent levels will face a reduction of over £70 per week and a single parent with three children in a three bed Council home would face a £29 per week reductionⁱⁱ.

The level of this reduction is likely to mean that households will be unable to pay both rent and basic living costs, potentially having to make decisions about meeting their children's most basic needs or falling into arrears and debt, leading to homelessness. Many households in the borough are already becoming reliant on foodbanks in making the decision to ensure their rent is paid.

Many households attempting to resolve their housing situation may do this by moving into smaller accommodation subsequently becoming overcrowded. This creates unsuitable living conditions for families, especially those with a large number of children who are most financially affected by the cap.

The Council's Housing team and other services have taken a targeted approach to helping households affected by the cap in order to prevent homelessness. Households have been supported to understand whether any exemptions apply to their circumstances (for example if they are eligible for disability benefits); to enter into more than 16 hours employment per week; or move to alternative cheaper accommodation where this is possible.

ⁱ Based on 2 bedroom LHA in Reading, receipt of JSA, Child Benefit and child tax credit relevant to household composition.

ⁱⁱ Based on HB paid at target rent for a 3 bedroom property Reading, receipt of JSA, Child Benefit and Child Tax Credit relevant to household composition.

6. Councillor Debs Absolom to ask the Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods: Traveller Incursions

Could the Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods tell me what is being done to deal with the unacceptable number of traveller incursions into our parks and other public land?

RESPONSE by Councillor Terry Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods.

The number of unauthorised encampments on Reading's parks and open spaces varies from year to year. In recent years, groups have regularly parked on land at Meadway Recreation

Ground, land in Cow Lane managed by the Parks team, as well as other parks and Council managed locations.

During 2015, physical barriers were installed at Meadway and Cow Lane to prevent incursions. These included wooden bollards and a height barrier at Meadway and a height barrier at Cow Lane, largely funded by Community Safety capital. These have proved to be successful in protecting these areas.

In addition to this a number of other locations that had been subject to unauthorised encampment have been or are now being developed such as Island Road. Areas of highways previously vulnerable including Gillet Way and Deacon Way have been secured.

The Council is also working with the Police to use our legal powers of enforcement wherever possible. An unfortunate side effect of this success appears to be that traveller groups now have limited numbers of sites that they are able to access, notably Prospect Park, Palmer Park and Coley Recreation ground where there are long boundaries with limited protection. There have been an exceptionally high number of traveller incursions at Prospect Park during the summer of 2016 (8 recorded since 19th June).

The following works have been identified to protect Prospect Park from further incursions and possible sources of funding, including Community Safety Capital, Section 106 receipts and existing budgets.

1. Tilehurst Rd boundary - installation of a post and rail fence in vulnerable sections of this boundary. £8,000
2. Renew bunding (banking) along the main driveway. £2,000
3. Car Park: installation of lockable, steel, height barriers at the entrance and exit. The cost of doing this is estimated at £4,850 per barrier i.e. Total £9,700.
4. Replacement wooden posts on the south side of the driveway between the football courts and the top of the drive (approx. 180m). £5,000.

Total cost £24,700.

Meadway/Church End Lane grass verge. Steel knee rail barrier will be installed shortly to prevent further incursions onto this grass verge.

Officers are also looking at the feasibility and cost of protecting other areas.

7. Councillor James to ask the Lead Councillor for Housing:
Council's Housing Register

Can the Lead Councillor please tell me about the progress of the review of the Council's Housing Register and the number of people currently registered as waiting for Social Housing?

RESPONSE by Councillor Davies Lead Councillor for Housing.

The Council has conducted a wholesale re-registration for applicants on the Housing Register in preparation for the introduction of a new housing allocations IT system.

It is good practice for all Local Authorities to ensure that the information from applicants on their Housing Register is up to date and accurate. Whilst all applicants are regularly advised to update their applications with any changes of circumstance, many fail to do so which means information held on the Housing Register can quickly become out of date and the

priority given to their applications may become inaccurate. As a result from time to time a wholesale re-registration of applicants has to be carried out.

Whilst Reading Borough Council Housing Service completes partial re-registrations of applicants, a wholesale re-registration has not been done for some time. In order to ensure a transfer of data that is as accurate as possible to a new IT system, the service took the opportunity to carry out a full re-registration exercise.

The process has resulted in a significant reduction in the number of households on the Council's housing register with 88% of those not re-registering being in the 'No Priority' category, followed by Band E (low priority). There are now a total of 5,207 households on the housing register as at September 2016.

Officers attempted to contact all of those in bands A-C (who had failed to re-register) by telephone to speak to applicants in person to ensure that they understood the process, and to encourage those in need to register. A wide range of internal and external services were also contacted to advise them of the process so that they could encourage applicants to respond and assist those that are vulnerable. Support was also available to applicants with filling out forms from a number of sources.

Despite the re-registration exercise there remain 2,878 households registered in housing need. 1,213 of these are in Bands A-D and 385 of these are homeless applicants. There remains an acute shortage of affordable housing - unfortunately evidenced by continued significant use of B&B in spite of strenuous efforts by the Council to increase the supply of affordable housing in the town through a variety of means. This includes building new Council homes and new temporary accommodation; developing a housing company; continuing to promote our innovative Rent Guarantee Scheme; proactively seeking to prevent homelessness and supporting those impacted by welfare reforms; and working positively with housing associations, landlords and agents in the town.

An analysis of the reduction in numbers registered by priority banding as a result of the re-registration exercise shows that the bulk of the reduction (4,601) comes from the lowest band E and the 'no priority' category.

Further to the re-registration exercise, officers undertook further analysis to better understand why a significant number of applicants had not re-registered.

On the basis of this sample it would seem that the majority of those who have not re-registered were either not in significant housing need (i.e. Band E or no priority) or have, at least to some degree, resolved their housing issues. However, those contactable are a relatively small sample and clearly not statistically valid.

The reduction in higher priority bands is likely to be tenants who have resolved their own housing situation through carrying out mutual exchanges and under occupiers (Band B) who no longer wish to move.

The low return rate from those with little or no priority is likely to be as a result of applicants having not obtained social housing over a number of years and repeated media publicity on housing both locally and nationally confirming that there is very limited social housing available (and little likelihood of being accommodated through this route therefore).

Whilst a re-registration can always be expected to significantly reduce numbers on a Housing Register, with further welfare reforms on the horizon and depletion in the stock of social housing it is inevitable that the Housing Register will continue to show a rise in numbers of those in housing need.

Following the implementation of the new IT system the Housing Service plans to now carry out a full re-registration of the Housing Register on an annual basis in order to ensure that applications are kept up to date with accurate details.
