

(C) QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

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

Could the Leader update me on the latest situation regarding the implementation of Universal Credit. Can she confirm that after all the delays which indicated it would not be introduced until 2022 it is now happening by the end of 2017? Can she also say what impact that is expected to have on families on the lowest incomes in Reading?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock Leader of the Council.

Once again the government has revised the time-table for the roll out of Universal Credit, bringing it forward to this December in Reading.

The chaotic introduction of Universal Credit is being rolled out across the country in different stages and different areas have different implementation dates. Full Service Universal Credit (UC) will be rolled out in two stages in Reading depending on a claimant's post code. The first stage will be from 6th December 2017 which will cover most of Reading then with the remaining areas following on 17th January 2018. The roll out will be for any new claims or if anyone claiming a current benefit has a change in their circumstance.

The biggest impact for any UC claimant will be the minimum 6 week waiting period for their first payment. Reading Borough Council is offering to support UC claimants through Personal Budgeting Support to help them through that 6 week wait and can help by assisting the claimant to organise an advanced payment, preparing them for monthly budgeting including setting up serviceable bank accounts and to make a Food Parcel referral where necessary. We have dedicated officers in place who can assist UC claimants including assisted Digital Support which can help with the making of a UC claim or the ongoing maintenance of their claim. We are also in the process of fully updating our website to give claimants full information on what UC is, how to make a claim and what support is available to them.

As Councillor Livingston will be aware there was much speculation in the press that the government might finally heed the warnings about the impact on those in greatest need, but sadly they seem determined to drive this through despite the impact on the poorest in the community.

2. Councillor Steele to ask the Lead Councillor for Education:
Health and Safety Policy

Has the important Health and Safety Policy been updated since 2015 and if so why has Nursery Schools not been informed of the update?

REPLY by Councillor Jones Lead Councillor for Education.

I must admit I do not understand this question.

It's not so much the rather ugly phrasing of "why has Nursery Schools not been informed" - presumably Councillor Steele meant to say "why have Nursery Schools not been informed".

No, it's the fact that if Councillor Steele sincerely believes that Nursery Schools have not been updated on any aspect of the Council's Health and Safety Policies since 2015, why has he left it to being the subject of a question tonight?

If his concern is sincere, then why has he not raised it me as soon as he became aware of it? In person, by phone, by email?

If he thinks that there has been some failing in our corporate Health and Safety responsibilities surely the proper thing to do would be to raise an immediate alarm, almost literally, so that any potential risk to our school children, teachers or anyone else associated with our schools, could be addressed without delay.

How would he feel if an accident had occurred after he had become aware of any short-coming, but thought "Hmm, I'll keep that information to use as a question to council".

Really, really?

However, we are bound to accept that any councillor is entitled to ask any question (within certain norms and reasonableness) and that as Lead Councillors we are bound to respond.

Some questions invite answers of agreement in "Does the Lead Councillor agree that ..." and as some will know, my response could be "Yes" or "No", but others usually say more.

In the case of this particular question, it is so vague that a fuller response is required.

Let me be absolutely clear, Reading Borough Council, as I believe does every other council, takes its Health and Safety responsibilities very seriously. Not only because it is the right thing to do, but we know that any significant failure could have tragic and legal consequences.

The Council relies on the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 (as amended) as the primary piece of legislation covering health and safety in Great Britain.

The Health and Safety Executive, with local authorities is responsible for enforcing the Act and a number of other Acts and Statutory instruments, including the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 which are of particular importance.

The local authority, governing body, proprietor or other employing body is responsible for health and safety, but tasks associated with its implementation may be delegated.

Employees have a duty to look after their own and the health and safety of others.

Employers, school staff and others have a duty under common law to take care of children.

Claims for negligence are mostly brought against employers who have public liability insurance and not against individual members of staff. It is rare for criminal prosecutions to be brought against school staff with regard to accidents involving children.

The Health and Safety Executive are mainly interested in risks arising from serious breaches of the law.

The HSE policy statement *School trips and outdoor learning activities: Tackling the health and safety myths* (<http://www.hse.gov.uk/services/education/school-trips.pdf>) explains this.

The document clarifies that the HSE seeks to encourage schools and local authorities to focus on real risks, not the paperwork, and explains what is taken into account when a decision is made whether or not to prosecute following an incident.

Any civil proceedings in negligence taken against schools are only likely to be successful if the school has not taken care of a child in the way a parent would have done, if as a result the child was injured and the injury was foreseeable.

Most people will be familiar with the term “in loco parentis” which means “in the place of the parent” where by the school takes on the responsibility of the parent while the child is at school.

The HSE recommends that the following should be included in any employer’s health and safety policy:

- A general policy statement
- How tasks are delegated [i.e. who is responsible for doing what]
- The arrangements for the establishment, monitoring and review measures which are necessary to meet health and safety standards satisfactorily.
- Additional things that schools may include in their health and safety policy and risk assessment are as follows:
 - Staff training in risk assessment and health and safety;
 - Arrangements for consulting with employees;
 - Safety in the workplace for teachers, other members of staff, pupils and visitors;
 - Fire safety to include alarm testing and procedures for evacuation;
 - Supporting medical needs and first aid;
 - Trips and slips;
 - Manual handling;
 - Procedures and policy for off-site trips to include school-led adventure activities and residential visits;
 - The recording and reporting of accidents to staff, pupils and visitors to include incidents reportable under the RIDDOR [Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 2013];
 - Policy, procedures and contact details for dealing with health and safety emergencies;
 - Occupational health services and managing work-related stress;
 - Security of the school site and related procedures;
 - Violence towards members of staff possibly cross-referenced to the school behaviour policy;
 - Hazardous substance control;
 - Management of asbestos;
 - Movements of vehicles on the school site;
 - Working at height;
 - The selection and management of contractors.

The Council also relies on the Department for Education advice “Health and Safety: advice on legal duties and powers – for local authorities, school leaders and governing bodies”.

The document describes how, and I quote “The Government is determined to reduce burdens on schools. We want to simplify health and safety requirements and explain them better. The Government is making it easier for schools to take pupils on trips, removing paperwork and taking steps to reduce teachers’ fears of legal action. Teachers should be confident that they know best how to look after pupils and keep them safe.”

This document summarises the existing health and safety law relevant to schools and explains how it affects local authorities, governing bodies, headteachers and other school staff. It covers activities that take place on or off school premises, including school trips.

The Council’s Health and Safety Policy was last updated in August 2017.

The updated document was uploaded to both the Council's intranet and the schools portal - to which all nursery schools have access - at that time. Each school, including nursery schools, are given a unique user ID so that they can access this information.

Access to the portal is also monitored by the Council with a record kept of the when each school has looked at the information.

Maintained schools - which include nursery schools - also receive regular contact from the Corporate Health and Safety Team to ensure that they are kept apprised of any important changes to Policy or guidance.

Schools also complete an annual audit to confirm that they are effectively controlling risks and managing their health and safety responsibilities in line with the Council's Health and Safety Policy.

That audit is reviewed by the Corporate Health and Safety Team to ensure that any shortfalls are promptly rectified.

It should be noted that whilst the Council's Health and Safety Policy was updated in August 2017, the changes to the document were related to the management and monitoring of contractors and companies in which the Council has an interest.

The fundamental roles and responsibilities of services and schools have remained unchanged for a number of years.

This question is either highly stupid or deeply insincere. And to date, I have not thought Councillor Steele to be insincere.

To para-phrase Lord Heseltine's description of the Conservatives last week-end, these are the politics of the desperate: a desperate question, from a desperate councillor in a desperate party.

The Conservative leader from time to time likes to remind the council of their one glorious year in power since 1986. Well some of us can also remember that it isn't so long ago that the Tories were a group of three councillors.

At this rate they are closer to being that again than ever approaching a position of power.

To play political games with Health and Safety in schools is a new low even - for the Tories!

3. WITHDRAWN

4. Councillor Steele to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:
Tilehurst Station

Tilehurst Station was commissioned in 2013 and included "passive permission" for the installation of lifts. Currently there is no funding available to install the lifts at Tilehurst Station. Is Reading Borough Council applying pressure to encourage the "industry" possibly through Access for All programmes to provide these much needed lifts?

REPLY by Councillor Page Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport.

I thank Cllr Steele for his question.

Reading Borough Council has on-going liaison with all levels of the rail industry including the train operating companies, Network Rail and the Department for Transport regarding the need for improvements at local stations in Reading Borough. This includes regular meetings with high-level management from both Network Rail and Great Western Railway.

The need for full accessibility at Tilehurst has been raised and is noted by the rail industry. However Tilehurst station has not so far featured in any specific proposals which will enable funding to be accessed to provide full disabled access.

The DfT's Access for All scheme is highly oversubscribed and is not generally available for local stations within close proximity to major stations that do have full disabled access. Therefore, with Reading Station being the natural hub for Reading, and having full access, it is unlikely that Access for All funding will be available for Tilehurst Station.

However, decisions regarding this and other railway funding sit with the railway industry and the Council will continue to promote the importance of investment in stations within Reading Borough.

**5. Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Children's Services and Families:
Cuts to Children's Centres**

Can the Lead Councillor update me on the restructure of Children's Centres following the council's decision to reduce the number from 13 down to 4 ?

REPLY by Councillor Gavin Lead Councillor for Children's Services and Families.

Thank you Cllr White for your question. I am of course happy to update you about how this council is being forced to cut universal services to families in our Children's Centres because of the savage cuts in funding to this town from Government.

As you will be aware the new Children's Centre offer started on 1 October 2017, having been agreed by the Adult Social Care, Children's Services and Education Committee of this Council. The new service is being delivered from 4 hubs - Ranikhet, Southcote, Whitley and Sunstreet with 3 satellites in Caversham, Coley and Battle Library also operating a programme.

The hubs are located in areas identified as having the highest need. Health visitors will be sited in all hubs and some satellite buildings, along with midwifery services so they are accessible to all families. This will occur gradually over the next twelve months as buildings are adapted and staff can be accommodated appropriately.

All families will still be able to receive universal services such as ante-natal care, health checks and clinics; in addition, having listened to the consultation response there will be universal open access groups for new parents with babies up to a year old. There will be low-level parenting support up to the age of five, all of which will help early identification of vulnerable families who may require further support.

Targeted group support, such as parenting courses and housing and employment advice, will also be available, as well as more intensive one-to-one support where required. The hubs will also support and host the excellent work done by New Directions in helping people into employment through training opportunities.

We have taken £400,000 out of this service, this represents a cut of one third of the Children Centre budget, this has inevitably meant that there have been redundancies in the service.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank and commend the Children's Centre staff who remained professional and committed to children and families throughout what has been a very difficult time. We should all be sorry to have lost so many dedicated and talented staff.

The changes to staffing are as follows:

Previous staffing structure	FTE	New staffing structure	FTE
Manager	4	Managers	2
Senior Family Development Worker	4.2	4 Children's Centre Co-ordinators	3.2
Family Development Worker	11.5	Family Development Workers	11.5
Activity Workers	14.3	Family Group Workers	8.0
Total	34	Total	24.7

The new service only started operating 17 days ago, so it is a little premature to start evaluating the changes yet. However, I am confident in reporting to colleagues that there is a high level of enthusiasm and commitment in all the new teams to develop a high quality and more focused Children's Centre service.

Meetings with partners, agencies, faith groups and the community have been held to explore how we can work together to provide services from our buildings. The response has been positive and officers will continue to pursue opportunities.

6. Councillor White to ask the Leader of the Council:
Central Club Meeting

Can the Leader of the Council confirm if she has met with the Aspire central club campaigners to discuss protecting the site of the Central Club for the community and the future of the mural ?

Can she confirm when this occurred ?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock Leader of the Council.

As Councillor White knows the Council is inviting new bids and Aspire can either re-submit their bid or put in a new bid. It would be inappropriate for me to meet with one potential bidder at this time.

7. Councillor Tickner to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:
BBC Caversham Park Site

Could the Lead Member update the Council on any discussions that have taken place between the Authority and the BBC or its Agents regarding the future of the BBC Caversham Park Site ?

REPLY by Councillor Page Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport.

I thank Cllr Tickner for her question.

Representatives of the BBC have been in discussion with officers of the Council in relation to the future use and development of the Caversham Park Site, when it is vacated by the BBC. I also understand that the BBC is currently in the process of marketing the site.

Councillors will be aware that Caversham Park House is a Listed Building. The whole of the extensive grounds that make up the site is a Listed Historic Park and Garden. Historic England is therefore likely to play a significant role in determining the future use and development of the site.

Most of the site is noted in the Council's Local Plan as a 'Major landscape feature' (Policy SA17 applies). The allotment land and open space to the south of the Caversham Park buildings are also noted as 'Public and Strategic Open Space' (SA16). Core Strategy Policy CS37: Major Landscape Features and Strategic Open Space, notes that, "Planning permission will not be granted for any development that would detract from the character or appearance of areas designated as a Major Landscape Feature."

The site also contains areas of ecological importance. The trees within the site are covered by an area Tree Preservation Order.

The Draft Local Plan upon which there was consultation earlier in 2017 contained a draft policy on the future development of the site. That policy is now being taken forward in the Submission Draft Local Plan that it is intended will be published for consultation at the end of November 2017. A copy of the relevant policy and explanatory text is attached for information.

This is therefore an extremely important and sensitive site. Officers will work positively with the owners and any prospective developers to ensure an appropriate reuse of Caversham Park

House, and any limited compatible development, in accordance with the draft policy in the emerging Local Plan.

Draft Reading Borough Local Plan

CA2: CAVERSHAM PARK

Caversham Park and Caversham Park House are key features of the heritage and landscape of Reading. Caversham Park is a Registered Historic Park and Garden, and the site contains a number of listed features. These assets will be conserved.

Conversion of the house from offices to residential and/or a cultural, community or heritage use will be acceptable if it sustains the significance of the listed building. It is estimated that up to 40-45 dwellings could be accommodated, but the figure will be dependent on more detailed historic assessment of the building and the precise mix of uses.

Any development or conversion proposals should open as much of the park as possible up to public access, including reinstatement of historic public footpaths.

This policy does not allocate the site for additional development over and above conversion of the house. There may be scope for some limited development on previously developed land within the site, which will need to be justified at application stage. Such development must comply with the criteria below:

- *No development will harm the historic interest or the important landscape value of the site.*
- *Development will not detrimentally affect protected trees or areas of biodiversity importance.*

8.3.6 Caversham Park is a historic estate in Caversham totalling 38 ha, the origins of which date back to at least Norman times, with the estate featuring in the Domesday Book. It was formerly the home of the Earl of Pembroke and later the Earls of Warwick¹. The site is a registered historic park. A succession of manor houses has stood within the site, but the current listed Caversham Park House dates from the Victorian era. The house and its grounds have been used by the BBC as its Monitoring Station, together with the base for BBC Radio Berkshire. Given its location at the top of a hill, it is highly prominent from a number of locations in Reading, in particular the entrance along the A329(M).

8.3.7 In July 2016, the BBC announced its decision to vacate the site². This leaves a very large area comprised mainly of open space, to which there has been no public access up to now. There is clearly an opportunity to secure a beneficial use of an important listed building, and also to secure access to a large area of much needed open space of significant historic interest for the local population.

8.3.8 Caversham Park is a Registered Historic Park and Garden³. The Historic England website⁴ states that:

"Historic parks and gardens are a fragile and finite resource: they can easily be damaged beyond repair or lost forever. Whether in town or country, such places are an important, distinctive, and much cherished part of our inheritance and we have a duty to care for them."

8.3.9 It goes on to say that:

¹ http://www.berkshirehistory.com/castles/caversham_park.html

² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-berkshire-36712152>

³ <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1000524>

⁴ <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/what-is-designation/registered-parks-and-gardens/>

"The main purpose of this Register is to celebrate designed landscapes of note, and encourage appropriate protection. ... Registration is a 'material consideration' in the planning process, meaning that planning authorities must consider the impact of any proposed development on the landscapes' special character."

8.3.10 A variety of uses of the existing building may be acceptable, although the extent of internal works to the listed building will have a strong influence over the form of the conversion. These possibilities include conversion to residential, a cultural or heritage use that capitalises on the heritage of the park, such as a visitor centre, or a community use that could include education. It may be possible to achieve a mix of uses within the building.

8.3.11 For clarity, this allocation is not for additional development. At this stage, it has not been demonstrated that significant additional development within the area will not harm the historical significance of the site or is otherwise appropriate. Any proposal that includes additional development would need to be accompanied by compelling evidence that such development will not have a detrimental impact on the many features of importance within the site, including areas of important habitat, significant trees, the House and other listed structures, views in and out of the site, and the overall significance of the park itself, as well as on considerations such as access.

8. Councillor Ayub to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:
Reading Prison

Could the Lead Member update me on any recent discussions between the Authority and the Ministry of Justice regarding the timetable for disposing of the Reading Prison site ?

REPLY by Councillor Page Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport.

I thank Cllr Ayub for his question.

As the Council will be aware, Reading Prison formally closed in January 2014 following the sudden closure announcement in September 2013. Since that date the Council has engaged with the Ministry of Justice and their agents in considering the future use and development of this important site.

To remind colleagues, the site lies within a Scheduled Ancient Monument and contains a grade 2 Listed Building, famous for the incarceration of Oscar Wilde and with many other important historical associations.

The site also forms part of the Abbey Quarter, an area of national significance for archaeology and the history of Reading. The Council has succeeded in obtaining significant funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund for major conservation works that are currently being implemented and which will enable the Abbey Quarter to be opened up for public use later next year.

The Council has engaged with the Ministry of Justice and adopted an Outline Development Framework for the site in March 2015. As previously reported to Council, the Ministry of Justice has commissioned archaeological and historic buildings assessments of the site which are needed as the basis for pre-application discussions about the future use and development of the site.

Following the preparation of a very comprehensive desktop archaeological study and a historic building study, Historic England agreed an extensive programme of trial holes and other carefully controlled excavations to confirm the archaeological remains that lie under the site. There has also been separate survey work using ground penetrating radar.

Most of the agreed works have now been undertaken. However, some excavation is still needed inside existing buildings. This is complex and is awaiting structural engineering advice. In addition the presence of asbestos has caused some issues and has led the Ministry of Justice to seek Historic England's agreement to revised locations for a number of trial pits. The current position is that significant progress has been made but a small amount of detailed archaeological survey work and evaluation is still to be completed.

Conserving and enhancing the important archaeology and other historic assets of the site are the most important aspect of the future use and development of the site. The site has a long history covering a number of periods and establishing the archaeology that lies under the site is proving a complex and time consuming operation.

The specialist report on the investigations when completed, (hopefully very soon), will allow further detailed discussions between the Ministry of Justice, Historic England and the Council, and inform development proposals for the site in line with national legislation and RBC planning policy.

9. Councillor Skeats to ask the Leader of the Council:
Accounts

Could the Leader of the Council please explain why, almost uniquely, Reading Borough Council is unable to present accounts for audit by the external auditor ?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock Leader of the Council.

The annual sign-off of the Council's accounts by the Director of Finance and the subsequent EY external audit review is an important part of the Council's governance framework. The deadline for completing the 2016/17 accounts process was 30 September 2017, but it was not possible meet this for a number of reasons. It is, of course, with significant concern and frustration that the Council finds itself in this position.

The draft accounts were prepared by 30 June 2017 as required and the audit of the accounts progressed during July and August. However, this audit identified technical issues and by mid-September it had been judged that it would be more cost effective and productive to place the audit on pause while the challenged matters were reviewed and corrected as required.

While there were a number of technical corrections to the accounts required, most of which were carried out (but not audited) by 30 September, the most significant issue was that the Council's journal process was not sufficiently robust. In many cases journal transactions lacked easily accessible supporting evidence. The work being carried out now is a detailed review of the 2,700 journal entries to ensure the necessary supporting evidence is attached to them. This will enable the Council to satisfy itself on the robustness of the entries.

There are now a range of actions underway to both address the presentation of the 2016/17 accounts in the short term and to ensure that this situation is not repeated in the future. In particular:

- Most of the technical corrections to the accounts have been implemented already;
- A review of all 2,700 2016/17 journals is underway, with the aim to complete this task as soon as possible so that the accounts can be audited;
- Additional interim resources have been secured to ensure that there is sufficient capacity and capability in place to deliver good quality accounts for 2016/17 and

2017/18. In addition a new Chief Accountant has been recruited and will join the team once her notice period has been worked;

- A revised journal process has been implemented for 2017/18 to ensure that all journals are correct and properly evidenced;
- A fundamental redesign of Financial Services is underway. The new structure will include at least three people focussed on technical accounting tasks;
- New accounts closedown software will be installed in November 2017 to assist with technical accounting processes;
- Financial Training for budget managers is being delivered to improve financial reporting and the accuracy of input records.

As Councillor Skeats knows her Conservative colleague Councillor Stevens is Chair of the Audit and Governance Committee and I am sure he will continue to update her on progress with the actions outlined at the last Audit and Governance meeting in September.