

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

12 MARCH 2018

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 1

Andrea Elliott to ask the Leader of the Council:

Statutory Services

Given the projected increased spend on Adult Social Care and Children's Services, outlined in the 2018-19 budget to Full Council, can the Leader of the Council outline in detail the measures being taken to safeguard statutory services in other Directorates (for example homelessness provision and Libraries) in order to ensure that the Council meets its legal duty in respect of these services?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

Thank you for the question. All of the relevant considerations regarding the budget were contained in the budget reports to the two Policy Committee meetings in January and February, which agreed budget savings measures, and the report to full Council. During the creation of the Medium Term Financial Strategy every effort has been made to protect services and to find even more efficient means of service delivery, including early intervention to manage demand.

Of course the Council budget is set with full consideration of the Council's legal duties across the whole Council. The gross budget of both of the services you refer to were increased to reflect growing demand arising from safeguarding children and adults at risk. However, both services have also been set demanding efficiency targets, which need to be netted off against the growth caused by those pressures. A one-organisation approach to budget setting has been taken where all services have been required to find savings (including efficiencies and income generation) and our legal obligations have been examined in all areas.

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COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 1

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Education:

Real Living Wage for School Cooks

The Green Party has long been campaigning for everyone in Reading to receive the Living Wage Foundation Living Wage. This will make a big difference to tackling poverty. The Council recently produced a report on phasing in the Living Wage Foundation Living Wage for people working on the school meals contract. The recommendations were not voted on though as the report was pulled from the ACE Committee.

I would like to see school cooks getting the Real Living Wage as soon as possible. Please can I get an update on progress to make sure people working on the school meals contract get a Living Wage?

REPLY by Councillor Jones (Lead Councillor for Education):

As councillors know, this Council is a publically recognised supporter of the Living Wage Foundation Living Wage, as the plaque in the council offices foyer proudly declares.

The report, to which Councillor White refers, was wrongly included on the agenda of the last ACE Committee meeting and was a first draft prepared by council officers. As it did not have my support nor that of the Labour Group, it was withdrawn from the agenda.

I am pleased to advise that the contract extension has now been negotiated with the current provider of school meals and this includes the payment of the real living wage in full to all staff from the beginning of that extension later this summer - we made it clear to Council officers and the contractor that we would accept nothing less.

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COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 2

Councillor Robinson to ask the Lead Councillor for Education:

Admissions to Highdown School

Ordinarily it is expected that there may be some pupils that live within a designated area, that cannot be given a place at their chosen local school owing to over-subscription, however in Peppard and Caversham we have a serious issue in that the number of local pupils in year 6 wishing to gain admission to Highdown School but have been refused, numbers 172, with many being offered places at Prospect and the John Madejski Academy both of which are some considerable distance away. This for many parents is simply unacceptable.

Can the Lead Councillor for Education please advise how this situation came to arise when mechanisms are supposedly in place to address and mitigate such issues, and what actions are being taken to provide workable solutions for these pupils and their parents?

REPLY by Councillor Jones (Lead Councillor for Education):

I appreciate it is always disappointing for families who are not offered a place in their preferred school.

So let me say now, I will use whatever efforts I can to help those who are in distress and am intending to meet a number of concerned parents later this week. It is also important that parents make full use of the appeal process which closes on Thursday 29th March.

As I have previously reported to this Council, Reading currently has an overall surplus in the secondary school system - in plain words, more school places than school child. For ease of reference I have reproduced the raw data included in my answer to Council on 28th February 2018 below:

school year	10 year old population	year 6 cohort (Y-1)	year 7 forecast	Housing Impact (128 pa)	year 7 capacity	surplus / shortfall	extra classes
2017/18	1,959	1,571	1,375	20	1,584	189	
2018/19	2,112	1,690	1,504	20	1,584	60	
2019/20	2,057	1,949	1,754	20	1,584	-190	7
2020/21	2,091	1,892	1,722	20	1,584	-158	
2021/22	2,084	1,958	1,782	20	1,584	-218	1
2022/23	2,101	1,947	1,772	20	1,584	-208	
2023/24	2,239	1,968	1,791	20	1,584	-227	

The table shows that Reading is moving from a position of a surplus in places to a deficit in the years 2019/20 onwards.

Councillors will also be aware that:

1. All of Reading's secondary schools are academies, with the exception of the Blessed Hugh Farringdon School, which the Catholic church has been pondering on whether to follow the same route.
2. Reading cannot build a secondary school on its own, but would need to find an academy partner to do so.
3. The central government would not consider supporting an application from a council and academy for a new school until such time as a proven need for more places.
4. That the council has recently commissioned this process and is actively seeking a development partner and site for a new six form entry school.
5. An application could be made to establish a free secondary school at any time by non-council parties.

I have absolutely no doubt that the great uncertainty around the threat to close Chiltern Edge last year at the time parents were being asked to express their preferences created an unusual distortion in this year's allocation figures.

I believe as a consequence, Highdown has been hugely oversubscribed this year. Highdown has capacity and an admission number of 250 students. However, 311 parents listed Highdown as their first choice with a further 96 listing the school as second, third or fourth choice.

Sixty nine parents within the Caversham area only listed Highdown on their preference form with no alternative school. Parents listing only one school preference are not treated any differently than other parents. However, if unsuccessful in their choice, and with no alternative preference, the local authority has a statutory duty to offer a place for their child at one of the borough's secondary schools that has appropriate capacity. It is always in the best interests of parents to fully consider the range of schools and to complete their admissions forms fully.

The Borough works very carefully to understand the changing demand for school places. It annually reviews sufficiency, and plans accordingly. As I indicated earlier, currently the local authority can meet the demand for secondary school places within the authority's maintained and academy secondary schools, with the addition of Chiltern Edge in South Oxfordshire.

Reading as a borough offers a diverse range of secondary education and students do travel from many different locations across the borough to attend schools and colleges of their choice and which meet their needs. We do not anticipate that the secondary admissions this coming September will significantly change this.

However, as I indicated in my introduction, I do appreciate that individual pupils have individual circumstances and that parents have the right to express these through the appeals process.

Parents have had their initial letters of allocation for secondary schools this year and they have until 15th March to inform the local authority whether they intend to take up their place. The Council will be working with parents to help them through the next stage of the process and through any independent appeals that take place.