

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

9 MARCH 2020

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 1

Lilla Price to ask the Lead Councillor for Education:

Reducing Carbon Emissions in Schools

As a young person at secondary school I am deeply concerned about climate change and the future for my generation and those who follow. What are the Council doing and going to do to reduce carbon emissions from schools to net zero? Is there any way that young people in schools can help?

REPLY by Councillor Pearce (Lead Councillor for Education):

Thank you so much for this question. Young people are leading the way on rightly holding us elected officials to account on climate change and what we are doing to help the environment. In the autumn Brighter Futures (who deliver the Council's education services) held our first climate change conference for schools. The contribution of young people at this event was really impressive. As a result, we have committed to having a UN accredited teacher in every Reading school, who can ensure climate change is embedded in the curriculum. Teachers are currently doing their online training supported by our climate change lead practitioner. This will help our teachers educate young people on steps they can take to help save the planet. For example, on a recent visit to English Martyrs Primary school I was informed about a scheme to help turn waste at their school into compost.

I am also aware that many of our schools are pursuing the "eco-school" award which is a reflection of their commitment to tackling this issue. Many of our schools have their own eco reps and have won individual prizes for green initiatives and raising awareness of climate issues. In classrooms I know that many schools are using Clean Air Schools resources provided by Friends of the Earth to help arm our young people with the knowledge and facts around climate change.

With our buildings we recently undertook a heating and electrical review of our school buildings that will help improve the energy efficiency of them, lowering both their costs and energy use. Our new secondary school to be built on Richfield Avenue will be built to BREEAM standards which gives accreditation of an asset's environmental, social and economic sustainability. We are also in discussions with two local schools regarding the introduction of School Streets. This campaign is aimed at reducing idling and pollution around pick up and drop off times for students at school. Alongside these measures we are encouraging schools and offering advice on updating their travel plans to ensure sustainability is at the forefront of thinking when it comes to getting students to school.

The best help that young people can give is to keep raising this issue - reminding us all that there is no planet B.

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PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 2

Ann Dally to ask the Lead Councillor for Corporate and Consumer Services:

Council Tax Protocol

We are very happy to see the Council Tax Protocol being implemented this evening and would like to ask how you think this will improve the experience of Reading residents overall, and especially those in financial difficulty?

REPLY by Councillor Emberson (Lead Councillor for Corporate and Consumer Services):

The Revenues team have made significant progress in implementing most of the recommendations made in the Council Tax Protocol and as a result have started to see the change in customer experience.

Following the introduction of the Protocol the Revenues team have seen residents experience improve, in particular:

- Improved engagement, particularly through the online portal that allows residents to submit their own arrangement proposals and manage their payment dates;
- Access to information and advice through improvements to the Council Tax web pages and further information supplied with bills and reminders;
- Maintaining payments by prioritising current year and allowing sustainable longer-term arrangements on arrears for those experiencing financial difficulty.

The Revenues team hope to further improve the residents experience by:

- Building a referral process with Reading CAB and other advice agencies, to ensure those in financial difficulty are given the appropriate advice and support;
- Actively promoting their commitment to the protocol to encourage resident engagement.

The Revenues team have shared the following quote from a resident which demonstrates how following this model can have a real impact:

'Wow thank you so much for your help. I will keep you updated with my future payments. I do hope to have the balance paid before the end of March but having the payment plan in place gives me space to breathe and get my rent back under control. It's amazing to find that by actually asking for help and not just worrying about money issues how much easier it is to get things under control.'

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PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 3

Richard Tredgett to ask the Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing and Sport:

Prevention Concordat for Better Mental Health

What does the Lead Councillor see are the advantages to individuals and the community of being signed up to the Prevention Concordat for Better Mental Health?

REPLY by Councillor Hoskin (Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing and Sport):

The Prevention Concordat for Better Mental Health articulates an aim of moving towards a more prevention-focused approach to mental health, and treating mental health as being both as important as our physical health, and inextricably linked with physical health.

Reading's Health and Wellbeing Board has recognised the Concordat approach as one which supports its aims to improve health and wellbeing and reduce health inequalities across the borough. On this basis, the Board agreed in October 2017 to adopt the Concordat commitments as a set of guiding principles for its future work.

Having regard to the Concordat has helped to highlight the need to address wider social determinants in strengthening how we promote good mental health for people and communities in Reading. A good example of this is the proposal being brought to the Committee today on adopting the Council Tax Protocol. The approach Reading Borough Council is taking here recognises how mental health and money problems are often linked. Financial difficulties are a common cause of stress, and stigma can place barriers in the way of people seeking help. Identifying people in particular difficulty and signposting them effectively can help to mitigate against the impact on people's mental health.

The Council is also working in partnership with the Department of Work and Pensions to develop a training programme which will enhance frontline staff skills to recognise and address potential mental health needs. This will focus on supporting residents who are claiming welfare benefits, many of whom have limited capacity for paid work because of long term health conditions or caring responsibilities. Developing mental health awareness in support staff addresses the need to take a holistic approach to improving health and wellbeing, along the lines of the Prevention Concordat for Better Mental Health.

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COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 1

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Housing:

Rough Sleeping on the Increase

More and more people are sleeping rough. Living on the streets is dangerous. It causes health problems and affects people's wellbeing. Can the Lead Councillor update me on the reasons for the recent increase in rough sleeping in Reading as measured by the annual headcount of people sleeping rough?

REPLY by Councillor Ennis (Lead Councillor for Housing):

The annual headcount number for 2017, prior to any additional funding and recommissioning of services was 31. In 2018 this reduced to 25 and in 2019 this increased by three to 28. This year's increase is still fewer than the number counted in 2017, prior to additional interventions and changes in commissioned provision.

It is worth noting that the headcount is indicative and as such any small variance should be treated with caution and with an understanding of the underlying causes. Overall and proportionally when looking at the number of people who have slept rough across the year, rather than on the 'typical night' that the annual count captures, rough sleeping numbers have stabilised in Reading. The 'typical night' snapshot number can be affected by several unknown factors including people who are transient and those who have accommodation open to them but may be choosing to sleep rough on that particular night; for example in the 2019 headcount four of the individuals found on the night in fact had suitable accommodation available to them.

Collectively, local authority areas who have received Rough Sleeper Initiative funding from Government have reported a reduction in rough sleeping numbers. However, since the 2019 national count data was published, if and how effective the 'single night' figure is in representing overall rough sleeping numbers in each local authority area has been under scrutiny.

For Reading the 2019 headcount data has highlighted that those without recourse to public funds has contributed significantly to the difficulties in reducing the annual snapshot figure. Those with a local connection outside of the UK were 36% of overall numbers found in 2019 equating to 11 individuals; an increase from 10% in 2017 and 8% in 2018. This has contributed to people remaining on the streets for longer periods of time without housing options here in the UK.

For comparison, on average, South East local authorities showed 18% of the individuals seen in their headcounts had a local connection outside of the UK in 2019. This demonstrates that this population is much higher in Reading than in many of our neighbouring Authorities.

Those migrants who rough sleep and have no recourse to public funds are subject to immigration control and have no entitlement to welfare benefits or to public housing. This precludes them from receiving advice and assistance under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 from the Council's Homelessness Prevention teams. This is a condition imposed nationally, on their immigration status, rather than a decision made at a local authority level. Accommodation options for someone with no recourse are limited as they are not entitled to claim benefit support for rental costs. Without employment to pay rent, they must rely on friends and family, or can end up sleeping rough.

Reading is an attractive place for people to want to settle. Many of those with no recourse to public funds do not wish to accept offers of re-patriation to their country of origin. The Council is working closely with its commissioned outreach service St Mungo's to assist this cohort of rough sleepers. They have developed robust relationships with the local DWP, immigration bodies and access to employment services. In addition they have a keen focus on working with people to obtain pre-settled/settled status through the EU Settlement Scheme which is a lengthy process. Those that successfully apply to the EU Settlement Scheme will be able to continue living and working in the UK after 30 June 2021, and will also have to access to the public services and healthcare required to move them away from rough sleeping.

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COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 2

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Housing:

Building Sustainable Housing

Housing built to the Passivhaus standard reduces greenhouse gas emissions and delivers significant long-term energy savings to the tenants. The low running costs and higher quality building mean that costs are significantly reduced over the life of the building for the occupiers. The council recently committed to building housing to this standard on the Arthur Hill site. Will all future housing built on council land be built to this standard?

REPLY by Councillor Ennis (Lead Councillor for Housing):

It is the Council's ambition to include Passivhaus Principles wherever possible in the delivery of future housing built on council land. This includes a range of measures such as photovoltaics, triple glazing, air or ground source heat pumps and increased levels of insulation. These measures will ensure the new properties delivered as part of the LANB programme help meet the challenge faced in fighting global warming whilst providing much needed homes to residents in Reading.