

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

2 NOVEMBER 2020

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 1

Councillor White to ask the Leader of the Council:

US-UK trade deal

I have been contacted by local campaigning group Global Justice Now on the US-UK trade deal. Negotiations for a US-UK trade deal are currently taking place every month. The US-UK trade deal is a high-risk deal, posing multiple risks to economy, society and environment. Such risks include the possible introduction of chlorinated chicken, extending privatisation in the NHS and blocking action on climate change. Do you share these concerns? And if so will you write to our local MPs and the Secretary of State for International Trade raising these concerns?

REPLY by Councillor Brock (Leader of the Council):

Naturally I share these concerns - I'd imagine almost everyone would - and I'm happy to write to MPs and the Secretary of State. One might hope that the imminent elevation of Joe Biden to the US Presidency will be a positive change in respect of this issue, and I note positively his undertaking to bring the USA back into the international community in a meaningful manner (quite especially by restoring the commitments of the Paris Agreement).

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 2

Councillor J Williams to ask the Leader of the Council:

Rogue algorithms

"The government recently dropped its rogue algorithm that caused such misery over exam grades because it was unreliable and wrong. It was arbitrary, made mistakes, and had a huge effect on people's lives. Residents are worried that other algorithms are in use in Local Government too. Can the Lead Councillor please tell me what algorithms and automated decision-making programmes the Council uses, and how reliable and accurate the results from them are?"

REPLY by Councillor Brock (Leader of the Council):

Thank you for your question Cllr Williams. You will be pleased to hear that the kind of algorithm in use for exam grades last summer is not in place in the Council.

However, as you might expect, there are some computerised tools in use for assisting officers with decisions, but these do not automatically make decisions about residents and services, they only aid officers in their work.

For instance, in the Revenues and Benefits team there is a package which is classified as Risk Based Verification software - indeed, you will have seen all of the details of this at the Audit and Governance Committee you attended on 30<sup>th</sup> January 2020. This application assigns a risk group to applicants for Housing Benefit and Council Tax support. This software determines how much verification is required for each application, so that those applications considered routine are asked to provide less verification and evidence of their claims, and those considered higher risk are asked to provide more verification and evidence. The decisions on each case are made by officers after receiving the evidence. There is no automated decision making on those cases.

A pilot project using Robotic Process Automation is being developed. This is not an algorithm as perhaps you have envisaged in your question, but it would automate the staff starting and leaving process by taking information from one system and automatically transferring it to other systems. The best description of this would be automated cutting and pasting.

The Council is likely to be looking at the use of analytics to support decision making in the future, but any such moves would be subject to business cases which would both assess the relevant risks and would also be visible to councillors.

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 3

Councillor Manghnani to ask the Lead Councillor for Corporate and Consumer Services:

Concerns of the use of fireworks and the anxiety and stress that can be caused to pets, the elderly, the vulnerable and the environment

The increase in the use and acceptance of fireworks being used to celebrate events throughout the year has clearly led to an increase in complaints and concerns from residents. For many a firework display is an enjoyable experience, however it has its downside in that noisy explosions and bright flashes of light can also have a very frightening effect on some people and household pets. There is also the health and safety aspect from the very present dangers to members of the public when handling what is effectively explosive material.

Whilst many events throughout the year are well publicised such as Guy Fawkes night, New Year's Eve, Chinese New Year, Diwali and Eid, dates where precautions are taken to ensure pets are kept safe indoors, there are other instances where fireworks are being used.

Therefore, will the Council reassure the residents of Reading that all steps and precautions are taken, including:

- the education of the dangers of fireworks especially in schools and colleges;
- that those who are looking to hold private displays are made mindful of neighbours, public safety and the environment;
- the management and monitoring of those selling fireworks to ensure that the fireworks sold adhere to the safety standards and in accordance with the Pyrotechnic Articles (safety) Regulation 2015 and the Explosive Act that those purchasing fireworks must be over the age of 18?

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

Thank you for your question, firstly I'd like to say I fully understand the impact of fireworks having had a lot of case work this year from my own ward where fireworks have caused issues. Cllr Manghnani may also recall I had a firework put through my own letterbox two years ago, so I really do appreciate the impact as referred to within the question.

There are a number of elements to your question, so I will address each in turn.

The Council has no specific role in education around the dangers of fireworks, but Thames Valley Police's schools officer undertakes a range of education activities of which fireworks is one of the topics that they cover. This is an area which the Police are willing to expand their education approach on if it is considered to be of concern.

I have accordingly asked the Lead Member for Neighbourhoods, Cllr Adele Barnett-Ward to raise with Thames Valley Police.

Regarding regulations, private displays are to some extent limited by the Fireworks Regulations 2004, which prohibit anyone under 18 possessing fireworks and prohibit the use of fireworks at night between 11pm and 7am. There are some time extensions for events held on Chinese New Year, Diwali, New Years Eve and Bonfire Night. These regulations are enforced by the Police with penalties of up to £5,000 or 6 months in prison.

Outside of the regulations, there are other ways in which the Council support the responsible use of fireworks, for example social media messaging from the Animal Warden and Environmental Protection team during key dates. It is noted that the website currently has limited information in respect of responsible firework use and officers are currently addressing this to provide the following advice:

- Tell neighbours - especially the elderly and those with children and pets that you plan to have a firework display - better still, invite your neighbours.
- When purchasing fireworks, avoid really noisy ones. Your supplier should be able to tell you what they are selling.
- Make sure pets and other animals are safely away from fireworks.
- Consider timing. If you have a firework party, hold it on a Friday or Saturday and make sure the noise is over by 11.00 pm. For traditional celebrations like New Year and Bonfire Night, avoid continuing noise into the early hours.
- Avoid letting off fireworks in unsuitable weather - when it is still and misty, in strong winds or when air quality is poor.
- Let off your fireworks in an open garden area - noise bounces off buildings and smoke and pollution builds up in enclosed spaces as well.
- If a neighbour complains that you are disturbing them, their pets or livestock, be considerate.
- After your display, clear up firework fall out and dispose of it safely.

Trading Standards licence premises storing and selling fireworks. An inspection is conducted of the premises and officers have detailed knowledge around the standards for each of the brands and products. Officers work jointly with the Police and over the last three years, where test purchasing has been conducted for under 18s sales, there have been 1 or 2 sales per year resulting in enforcement action, but broadly compliance is high amongst retailers. Due to the specialist nature of the sales, the actual number of premises selling fireworks has been reducing.

To me, fireworks are clearly an issue every year which not only cause anxiety for pets, the elderly, the vulnerable and the environment, but can also be used in a way which may cause serious harm. I am of the view that the regulations stipulating how fireworks are sold should be reviewed and this would go a long way in preventing danger and misuse of fireworks. Naturally, this is something for the government to consider and I would therefore suggest Cllr Manghnani write to Alok Sharma MP in this regard.

I hope that this helps answer your questions in terms of what the council is doing on this issue.

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14 DECEMBER 2020

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 4

Councillor White to ask the Leader of the Council:

Council accepting reduced offer for Central Club

At a recent Council meeting Green councillors voted against accepting a reduced offer from the private developer Redline for the Central Club building without going back to other bidders such as Aspire who are a community bidder for this building. Two months since the Council's decision to accept a reduced offer can the Council confirm if the new contract between Redline and the council has been signed and if not when is the Council's deadline for getting this contract signed?

REPLY by Councillor Brock (Leader of the Council):

The revised contract is now substantively agreed. The aim is to achieve completion around the end of 2020.