

COUNCIL MEETING - 26 JANUARY 2021

AGENDA ITEM 6: QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

1. Councillor Ennis to ask the Lead Councillor for Education: Return to School

Could the Lead Councillor for Education please give an update on how the return to Schools has gone so far this year during the current pandemic ?

REPLY by Councillor Pearce Lead Councillor for Education

I thank Councillor Ennis for the question and a chance to give an update on the return of schooling after the Christmas break.

I'd firstly like to cover a little bit of the history here. Before Christmas with cases of Covid rising rapidly in many areas, some schools requested a switch to remote learning for the last few days of term, to keep staff safe and cases as low as possible. The Government refused these requests, and even threatened schools with legal action if they did shut.

Over the Christmas holidays, a period where school staff should be resting, relaxing and not working, the Government released further guidance on many different things which heads, and staff dutifully read and acted upon. One of these was mass testing in Secondary Schools where staff or volunteers needed to be recruited, risk assessments changed and logistics worked out because, at this stage, exam groups were to be back in classrooms on January 11th and all secondary pupils would be back on January 18th. Primary pupils were to be in from January 4th.

With pressure mounting on the Government from teaching unions, parents and head teachers, the Prime Minister went on TV on Sunday 3rd January and said "Schools are safe. It is very, very important to stress that." School staff continued with their lesson planning and preparation for in person lessons on Monday January 4th. As a Council and as a party, we have backed the judgement and knowledge of our head teachers here in Reading throughout this pandemic and said we would support the decision of our head teachers to decide how they would open on that Monday - fully or partially. In the end, a number of our schools decided it was safest to open only partially on that Monday.

Miraculously, and with seemingly new information that has not been shared with the public, the Prime Minister then went on national TV at 8pm on Monday January 4th to let us know there would be a national lockdown and schools would be open only to vulnerable children and those of key workers. The disregard that the Government demonstrated for school staff and for the greater spread of the virus amongst households on that day should not be forgotten.

Since the decision to partially close schools a whole new raft of issues has arisen. In Reading, the in-school attendance varies from school to school as you would expect but we have seen around 9% of pupils in our Primary Schools on average and around 12% in our secondary schools on average. Clearly many others are logging on remotely. The Government's changing of the definition of vulnerable still needs to be much clearer for this lockdown to have the full effect in stopping the spread of the virus.

With a delay in the physical return of most secondary pupils, mass testing preparation had a little more time, although at the time of writing, this is also now in doubt. Here in Reading

one of our Secondary schools took part in a pilot scheme where the Department of Education and other local schools could learn lessons on how a system could run.

With many pupils at home and learning remotely, the issue of Free School Meals arose again, with images of inadequate food parcels being shared online. Last year, before the national scheme came in, we had already set up a locally run voucher scheme and called for the return of these so that parents could make the right choice for their children. The Government have since U-turned on this.

Summer exams were cancelled by Gavin Williamson and a consultation set up to determine how grades would be allocated in the Summer. There was no plan B ready and schools, parents and pupils are still in limbo. The consultation opened last week where the main component seems to be that students will still have to sit, some form of exam. I spoke at a Governors briefing in October last year to discuss options that could have been taken up.

Last week Gavin Williamson said teachers would be “top priority” for vaccines. Whilst this is welcome, more detail and assurance is needed. Myself and others locally, including Reading East MP Matt Rodda, have spoken out in support of this for some time.

The Government made big noises about more laptops for disadvantaged students, something we all know is a major requirement to help close the disadvantaged gap. Last week The Sutton Trust called this “ineffective” and that “the picture has barely changed” since the scheme was introduced. In Reading we have distributed over 650 laptops, but we would like more, and we have received many generous donations from local individuals and businesses that we are co-ordinating.

The Government’s handling of School closures and re-opening has been woeful from start to finish. They have not listened to the voices of head’s, teaching unions, parents, governors, pupils or local authorities. At every step, local knowledge and action has outshone anything done nationally.

But the real story here are our teachers and school leaders. It is they that have picked up the slack, picked up the pieces, adapted, prepared, filled in the gaps that this Government refuses to do. They have worked tirelessly and in terms of this Government, thanklessly. But it is not thankless from us. I will never tire of praising the work of all of our school staff throughout the last year and will do so again. Thank you, you deserve far better from this Government.

2. Councillor McGonigle to ask the Leader of the Council:
Climate and Ecological Emergency Bill

As a Green Party Councillor I have written to Reading’s two MP’s expressing my support for this Bill, which calls on countries to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels.

Real and urgent action is needed to achieve this and time is running out. 2050 will be far too late.

Will the Leader of the Council join me, and will he urge group leaders to do the same, in order that our MP’s know that when it comes to the climate emergency we are standing up for social and environmental justice.

REPLY by Councillor Brock Leader of the Council:

I thank Councillor McGonigle for her question.

I note that the Climate & Ecological Emergency Bill is a Presentation Bill, a type of Private Members' Bill which requires no Parliamentary debate or vote and which, as a result, has very little chance of becoming law. While I support many of the sentiments behind the Bill, our current focus is on delivering the existing, very challenging commitments which we recently signed up to in the new Reading Climate Emergency Strategy.

I can assure Cllr McGonigle, however, that this administration shares her desire for more urgent and effective government action on climate change. To this end the Chief Executive recently wrote to Alok Sharma MP, and other senior Ministers, calling for a higher level of more sustained financial support for our efforts to tackle emissions in areas such as housing retrofit, transport and renewable energy which we have identified as priorities, but which require a level of investment beyond our means locally.

We believe at this stage that meaningful government funding to help deliver these commitments would be of greater value than draft legislation which offers no guarantee that the resources required will be forthcoming. We will therefore continue to lobby for that investment in our ongoing communication with local MPs and government, as well as pressing on with our own programme of low carbon investment via our capital programme.

3. Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Housing:
Rough Sleeping in Reading

In 2020 the Council did a great job of housing the overwhelming majority of rough sleepers during the initial lockdown. Please can the Lead Councillor update me with the monthly headcount of our rough sleepers for each month in 2020. Can the Lead Councillor also update me on progress with permanently housing the rough sleepers who were temporarily housed in 2020?

REPLY by Councillor Ennis Lead Councillor for Housing:

Between March and August 2020, the Reading Housing Needs teams accommodated 264 individuals through the 'Everyone In' initiative.

Of those that were placed under Everyone In, currently there are 55 individuals still accommodated in this Covid-19 emergency accommodation, with a further 10 in RBC temporary accommodation; 26 of those in emergency accommodation are EEA or third country nationals without recourse to public funds.

Since December 2020 an additional 35 individuals have been accommodated in emergency winter provision accommodation, with 28 people using it at point of writing.

129 individuals (to date) have been moved on into settled accommodation. With 46 into private rented/settled accommodation and 38 into supported accommodation.

During January 2021 there have been between 2-6 people sleeping rough on any night. Apart from a small number who are offered accommodation, these are known individuals who, either have accommodation available but are temporarily not using it or are refusing to engage with any offer of accommodation. Our outreach services continue to work with them to encourage them to accept or use the offer of accommodation.

Figures below provide a snapshot of people found sleeping rough on the dates indicated, it is worth noting that they fluctuated heavily over the course of the Everyone In period - Those individuals reported in that period that did not already have accommodation available will have been provided an offer of emergency housing.

Everyone in called March 2020:

30 th April 2020	30 th May 2020	24 th June 2020	29 th July 2020	26 th August 2020	Everyone In response stopped August 2020	30 th Sept 2020	31 st Oct 2020	30 th Nov 2020	Winter Provision implemented until March 2021	31 st Dec 2020
6	6	13	20	10		26	20	19*		5

* Annual rough sleeping count figure

On 8th January 2021 the Government provided renewed advice and guidance for local authorities in respect of Covid 19 and people found rough sleeping. The guidance required local authorities to ensure that everyone found rough sleeping is made an offer of safe and appropriate accommodation and that steps are taken to ensure that their health needs are assessed and that they are registered with a GP.

The service continues to support those found sleeping rough through commissioned accommodation based and outreach support services and additionally through cold weather plans/winter provision which are in place until the end of March, making offers of accommodation to all verified rough sleepers including those with no recourse to public funds.

Move On Accommodation

The Council has invested heavily in the provision of move on accommodation for rough sleepers with an innovative 10 bed women only project opening this month and the development of 40 modular constructed homes at the Cattle Market due to be complete in the Spring. As a result of a successful bid for Next Steps Accommodation funding to the MHCLG both accommodation projects will have 24-hour intensive support provision to help the residents to rebuild their lives.

Health

The NHS Housing Outreach Liaison Team (HOLT) has been working with people found sleeping rough since the beginning of the pandemic to assess their clinical needs and to arrange registration with a GP. A GP practice was identified by Health to accept the registration of individuals in this position. The HOLT nurses and St Mungo's our commissioned outreach service continue to prioritise this as an action for all individuals although it can be challenging due to the chaotic nature of some clients.

The Housing Service is working with Public Health in collating client numbers and frontline staff numbers working with this cohort so they can be factored into local area action plans in line with JCVI advice on Covid vaccination prioritisation.