

AGENDA ITEM 5

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

**1. Len Middleton to ask the Leader of the Council:
Settled Status of EU Citizens in Reading**

EU citizens in Reading are caught up in events over which they have no control and the deadline for EU citizens registration for Settled Status is 30th June, this year.

I'm conscious that the self-employed or workers in the gig economy and anybody living in less formal circumstances, will have little help.

Some Councils are taking active steps to contact EU residents e.g. Brighton & Hove City Council have delivered a postcard to all addresses in the city, with a friendly message on the front, "We want EU citizens to stay in Brighton & Hove", and providing information sources, including phone numbers, on the back.

Given that there are a large number of EU citizens in Reading what plans does the Council have to assist its residents with obtaining their new status ?

Has the Council started to minimise the problems that it will face in social Services and Social Care if EU citizens lose their status by helping people with whom it has direct contact ?

REPLY by Councillor Brock Leader of the Council.

I thank Mr Middleton for his question.

The Council values the contribution made by EU citizens in Reading and would encourage them to take advantage of the EU Settlement Scheme to ensure they can continue to enjoy living and working in the Borough. The Council put out a press release and social media feeds in February 2020 to remind EU citizens in Reading to apply to stay in the UK, providing the details of the government website. This information is also on the Brexit page on the Council's website www.reading.gov.uk/council/brexit/.

Residents are able to make an appointment through UK Visa & Immigration system and attend Reading Central Library to provide documentation required as part of their EU Settlement Scheme application.

The Council has undertaken numerous internal campaigns reminding staff to apply for the EU Settlement scheme. It has also taken a targeted approach in engaging staff working with residents and young people to apply for EU Settlement status.

In addition to the Council's direct workforce, Adult Social Care officers have been working with external providers since 2019 to ensure their affected staff are supported to achieve settled status. This has included regular communications, signposting to further support and guidance around business continuity plans for those Providers who considered themselves to be adversely affected. The situation is being monitored on a regular basis and we currently have no evidence to suggest that services will be overly disrupted. Staff from EU countries play a vital role in our Reading workforce and we have been keen to support them via their Employers as much as possible.

From now until June 2021, we plan to use materials from the national campaign across our communication channels to raise public awareness of the scheme.

**2. James Denny to ask the Lead Councillor for Education:
Provision for Pupils with SEN in Reading**

Can the lead Councillor for Education please provide me with an update on the provision for pupils with Special Educational Needs in Reading ?

REPLY by Councillor Pearce Lead Councillor for Education.

We are pleased that over the last few years we have invested in capacity and resources in Reading for our young people with Special Educational needs, and we continue to do so, we are currently working on a programme of significant capital investment to ensure we have local places for Reading children.

Hamilton School (formerly Phoenix college) is in the process of being relocated to a more modern and appropriate site on Hamilton Road. The school helps pupils with Social, Emotional and mental health issues and this move will increase capacity for the future, as well as now being able to accommodate female pupils as well.

The Oak Tree Academy, a new school to be delivered in conjunction with Wokingham Borough continues to progress, and this will provide education for 150 young people with Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) from year 1 to year 13. The school will be located in Winnersh, will be run by the Maiden Erlegh Trust and is due to open in September 2021.

We are also in the process of identifying suitable locations for 2 new ASC units in our Primary Schools, one in the north and one in the West of the town. These will provide additional capacity for primary aged pupils with ASC alongside the existing facility at Christ The King. Alongside this we are developing a support package for our resource bases to invest in school staff to have the necessary skills to support these children.

For our existing mainstream schools, we have recently agreed to increase top up fees (additional money schools receive for SEN pupils) by 5% which we hope will go some way to help plug the gap in funding.

These plans are on top of work in previous years including the opening of The Blessed Mary Ward Centre, located at Blessed Hugh Faringdon Catholic School in Southcote, that provides 30 places for youngsters with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

We have hit 100% of all EHCPs being completed within the statutory timeline for September, December and most recently January. In January 2019 this figure was just 49%.

This investment is alongside all our school's work in becoming trauma informed, examining the influence and impact on students in our schools of factors such as racism poverty, peer victimisation, community violence, and bullying

These steps are helping to ensure pupils are getting the most appropriate education in a suitable location, nearer to their friends, families and communities.

Further to this, we will be reviewing and updating our SEN strategy later this year, in full consultation with schools, parents and pupils.

**3. Alice Mpofo-Coles to ask the Lead Councillor for Education:
Decolonisation of the Primary and Secondary Curriculum in Reading Schools**

Could you please let us know as the Lead Councillor for Education what steps are being taken to decolonise the curriculum in primary and secondary schools in Reading ?

REPLY by Councillor Pearce Lead Councillor for Education.

Thank you for this question. It is an extremely important area and I'm pleased to report the activities we have in hand for supporting our schools. You'll be aware that schools must teach the National Curriculum in line with guidance from the Government, so our role locally is quite limited. However, I agree with the Labour Leader Keir Starmer when he said pupils should learn more black history in schools.

Our support therefore is focused on enabling schools to look at the National Curriculum in a way which embeds good anti-racist practice.

To this end, a strategy is being developed to embed good anti-racist practice with all of our schools. The main aims of this are:

- Support schools to embed good anti-racist practice into their current school curriculum - particularly black British history
- Collaboration - develop links with national and local groups to gain a greater understanding of racism and the role of diversity in creating Reading's communities
- Improve recruitment strategies in schools to ensure that there are no barriers to BAME candidates being recruited
- To offer professional development for school staff. Some of the key areas to focus on are:
 - Understanding white privilege
 - Understanding cultural differences
 - Deconstructing a colonial world view
 - Knowledge about black British history
 - Communicating the experiences of BAME children and families
 - Overcoming fragility/ working with sensitive issues
- Develop therapeutic approaches to dealing with racism within our schools. Review and improve how schools deal with racism.

We are currently in the process of appointing a lead practitioner to support this work across Reading schools. We have had 8 expressions of interest for the role so far.

We have organised a meeting with representatives from Reading International Solidarity Centre (RISC) next month to develop and refine our strategy further. RISC is a Development Education Centre which works with schools and community groups to raise the profile of global issues and promote action for sustainability, human rights and social justice.

We are working with a consultant who is a member of the BAMEed Network to create a training offer for schools in the remainder of the academic year.

The BAMEed Network connects, enables and showcases the talent of diverse educators so they may inspire future generations and open up possibilities within education careers. The steering group members are volunteers who commit their time and efforts into creating a support network to equip teachers and leaders with the tools to progress into and through the workforce. The group connects with other education organisations and individuals through events and regional networks across the UK.

This Government may not believe that black history should be a compulsory part of the curriculum, and until we get a Labour Government, we can't change that but we will continue to do everything we can locally to help and support our schools in delivering a fully inclusive curriculum.

4. Alice Mpofo-Coles to ask the Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods and Communities:
Black Bins

There are some local residents who had previously paid extra for the extra big black bins as they have disabled members of the family who use incontinent pads and now have smaller black bins. Could you advise of the process of how they can continue to meet environmental needs but have space to dispose of the waste ?

REPLY by Councillor Barnett-Ward Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods and Communities.

Thank you for your enquiry.

It is the Council's policy not to issue larger bins as a matter of course in order to control the amount of waste being presented. The council does not charge residents for larger bins, or for second recycling and food waste bins.

Charges only apply to the supply of grey domestic bins to newly built properties or if they have been damaged by residents. Until April 2020 new bins were subject to a delivery charge but this no longer applies.

The Council will continue to provide additional capacity free of charge for those residents who satisfy the criteria set out in the waste service standard which is available on the Council's website.

The Council provide the following means of disposing of non-hazardous absorbent hygiene products:

1. If the volumes dictate they can be placed in the grey domestic collection bin.
2. If the 140l bin capacity proves to be insufficient residents can apply for extra capacity via the Council website at:

<https://www.reading.gov.uk/environment/waste-and-recycling/order-a-bin-or-bag/>

Their application will be assessed and if the relevant criteria are met a larger bin will be issued free of charge, with no delivery charge. If the assessment team feel it is more appropriate residents may be offered a weekly clinical waste collection rather than a larger bin.

3. The clinical waste service is available if:
 - A resident produces a large amount of non-hazardous healthcare waste (incontinence pads).
 - a resident is self-treating a medical condition and has healthcare/clinical waste which could potentially carry an infection (e.g. needles, syringes or other sharp instruments, any waste which includes blood or body fluids, human tissue, swabs or dressings, drugs or other pharmaceutical products).

The Council will collect these free of charge on request. (If a resident is in receipt of care from a healthcare professional, any sharps/healthcare hazardous waste produced during treatment, should be removed and disposed of by the healthcare professional).

Residents requiring a clinical waste collection should be referred to the Council by their GP Surgery, District Nurse or NHS Trust. Such referrals should be in writing either by letter or email and be clearly identifiable as coming from the patient's medical providers.

Households that require the collection of clinical waste of this nature will be reviewed every 2 years for eligibility to receive the service.

5. Andrew Hornsby-Smith to ask the Lead Councillor for Housing:
Advice to Tenants

Would the Lead Councillor for Housing please confirm that, in the light of the government's refusal to end the prohibition on evictions even while we are still in lockdown, what measures the Council are taking to ensure that robust arrangements are in place to mediate between landlords and tenants finding themselves without the ability to pay their rent?

Secondly, for those renting in many parts of the town, and particularly in areas such as Redlands, there are concerns that some landlords of HMOs are not legally registered, and that in some cases tenants in HMOs and tenants generally are unsure of their rights. What steps is the Council taking to provide advice to private renters, and what levels of enforcement are in place? Will he undertake to ensure that advice is readily available to tenants and that this is widely publicised?

REPLY by Councillor Ennis Lead Councillor for Housing.

Q1

In response to the financial situation that many households may find themselves as a result of the pandemic, the Council is in the process of developing two web-based resources, one for tenants and one for landlords, which when launched will be accompanied by an advertising campaign focussed on reaching those who are not used to accessing Council services already, and who may not be aware how much support we can offer both landlords and their tenants

- The 'Money Matters' website is being designed all for tenants who have concerns about their financial situation and provides information about the resources available and how to access them.
- The 'Click Before you Evict' website is being designed for landlords who are looking for help with their tenancies and will cover issues such as disrepair and anti-social behaviour as well as financial concerns.

Both websites will be created to offer maximum accessibility: both will include video information which can be subtitled in a variety of languages, and Click Before you Evict will also offer information sheets which can be downloaded as pdfs, which a landlord could give to a tenant who was not able to access the information digitally.

The Councils Homelessness Prevention Teams continue to provide advice and assistance to tenants who contact us with concerns about their tenancies, including rent arrears. Officers provide advice and support to tenants and mediate or negotiate with landlords as required.

Resources available to 'rescue' tenancies where tenants have financial problems include referral to the RGS Money Advisor or the Debt Advice Team, use of the Homelessness Prevention Fund and Discretionary Housing Payment to resolve arrears and secure accommodation, and bringing the tenancy onto the Rent Guarantee Scheme.

Those households that are most at risk financially are being proactively contacted to determine what support may be offered.

Additionally, the Housing Needs service has appointed a Tenancy Relations Officer on a one year fixed-term basis, to provide specialist advice and support to tenants and landlords. The majority of cases referred to this officer will involve rent arrears, when mediation can be carried out between tenants and landlords. It is intended that this officer provide specific assistance to tenants where there is threat of illegal eviction.

Over 700 households in the Borough are accommodated in the private rented sector with assistance from the Rent Guarantee Scheme. Rent is paid by the Council directly to the landlord on the tenant's behalf, and the Council then collect the rent from the tenant. This means that landlords are not affected by any changes in the tenants' income or ability to pay their rent, and the tenancies are therefore secured.

RGS tenants who find themselves unable to pay their rent have a wide variety of help and resources available to them, including the RGS Money Advisor and the Debt Advice Team, who provide specialised advice and access to discretionary additional funding where required.

Q2

The Private Sector Housing team is responsible for investigation of complaints of disrepair across the private rented sector and enforcing the Council's Houses in Multiple Occupation Licensing scheme. Detailed advice and ways to contact the council about any concerns are available via the Council's website. The website also includes an up to date register of all HMO's that are licensed. Members of the public can simply add forward slash hmo to the council's website address to find out more.

It is worth noting that currently not all HMOs are required to be licenced. The current criteria is those properties with five or more people, forming two or more households sharing amenities such as kitchens and bathrooms. There are currently 1,307 Licensed HMO in the Borough.

The Council investigates complaints and where necessary has power to take enforcement action, for failure to protect tenant's health and welfare, poor management or breaches of conditions of a licence.

Where there is serious or persistent non-compliance by a landlord, the Council can prosecute. An example of this was a successful prosecution heard at Reading Magistrates Court on Friday 18th December 2020 whereby the landlord was fined £66,000 plus costs in excess of £4,000.

As an alternative to prosecution, the Council also issue financial penalties of up to £30,000. For example, in the financial year 2019-2020, the Council issued nine financial penalties relating to HMO licensing offences.

Recognising that tenants are often concerned about financial protections, a Trading Standards Officer has been embedded in the team to focus on compliance of legislation such as the Tenants Fee Act 2019 (which controls the fees that tenants can be charged), the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008 (which protect tenants from unfair practices

by landlords and letting agents) Consumer Rights Act 2015 (that controls contractual obligations) and also ensuring agents have an appropriate redress scheme and Client Money Protection in place.

The team also operates the Council's Reading Rent with Confidence scheme. The aim of this discretionary scheme is to rate properties in the private rented sector based on the scheme's criteria relating to quality of accommodation, along with good management practices, they receive a bronze, silver or gold award. Properties and management practices are vetted during the application process; successful candidates are helped with the promotion of their properties (a website is currently being developed for this) and with advice about regulatory matters. The idea of this is to provide good landlords with a market advantage over rogue landlords and potential tenants with confidence as to the property standard they are renting.

Prior to the pandemic a regular drop in session was held at Reading University to provide advice to students on their rights and responsibilities.

6. Carolyn Lyle to ask the Leader of the Council:
EU Citizens Settled Status

Please could the Leader of the Council tell me the plan of action for contacting Church Ward's EU citizens so that nobody fails to apply for Settled Status before the deadline at the end of June ?

REPLY by Councillor Brock Leader of the Council.

I thank Ms Lyle for the question and refer her to my response to PQ01 this evening.