

AGENDA ITEM 5: QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

1. Andrew Hornsby-Smith to ask the Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing and Sport: Coronavirus and Mental Health

Given the ravages of coronavirus on mental health and wellbeing on leading to a reported increase of 30% in cases of anxiety, depression and eating disorders in particular as well as concerns about increased alcohol and drug misuse, how is the Council responding, together with health partners and the voluntary/community sector, to address these alarming challenges and ensure provision of resources is appropriate ?

REPLY by Councillor Hoskin Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing and Sport.

Thank you for your question Mr Hornsby-Smith which quite rightly highlights the impact of the Covid pandemic on mental health and wellbeing. Rising to the challenges this brings is absolutely a priority for the Council within our plans for response to and recovery from COVID-19, and beyond. As well as drawing on national data sets such as Public Health England's COVID-19 mental health and wellbeing surveillance report, we are also working closely with local partners in health, the voluntary and community sector and other agencies to identify and address emerging issues.

There was an initial suppression of demand for children's and young people's mental health services locally following the first national lockdown, but later an increase in referrals and a greater severity for those presenting. Following the first national lockdown, all local providers of children and young people's mental health support originally moved to a digital or telephone offer of support. Many are now offering both online and some face-to-face services. In direct response to the COVID challenges, the NHS Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) with local council partners has jointly commissioned the online youth counselling service, Kooth.

Work is continuing across the Berkshire West Future in Mind partnership to build a robust crisis offer for children and young people, strengthen the eating disorder offer, continue to tackle waiting times, and meet the expected additional demand due to lockdown and COVID. The Reading Mental Health Support Team is performing well and showing first signs of its impact. The mental health triage is in place and has good feedback from service users. The Primary Mental Health workers continue to have a long waiting list, but the teams are looking at what interventions can be offered for children and young people on those lists.

Loneliness and social isolation have remained key issues of concern during lockdowns and ongoing social distancing restrictions. In recognition of the health risks associated with social isolation, a range of local services reached out during lockdowns to existing users to offer short wellbeing checks or links into more substantive social connection support. Many local groups increased capacity for befriending support during lockdown - by diverting staff and volunteers from suspended face-to-face activities, by deploying new volunteers coming forward, and by making use of additional capacity of existing volunteers in some cases. Befriending resource was also increased for groups where there were apparent gaps, e.g. younger adults. The transition to virtual support has not suited everyone, however, and some people have suspended or declined offers of support in this way.

There have been anecdotal reports that people being supported to reduce loneliness or isolation have experienced higher levels of anxiety or other emotional problems since the

onset of the pandemic. Reading Borough Council's Wellbeing Team, incorporating Compass Recovery College, has developed and delivered a range of courses to local befrienders to increase their knowledge, skills and confidence in supporting people with mental health needs, and in supporting people to transition out of lockdown restrictions. This will involve developing confidence in physical and social skills in many cases.

Ahead of the publication of nationally validated data, Reading along with other areas across the Thames Valley monitors suicide rates via a Real Time Surveillance System based on police reports of deaths suspected to be by suicide. Comparator rates month by month have been tracked very closely since COVID-19 lockdown measures were put in place in England, and cases are being checked for possible COVID links. To date, there has been no increase in the overall Berkshire rates since March 2020. However, the Berkshire Suicide Prevention Group is also monitoring fluctuations in rates for different sections of the community within the total.

Partners remain vigilant and proactive in enhancing support around areas of heightened risk. Financial pressure is one such area which is particularly pertinent given the economic impacts of COVID. Reading Borough Council has adopted the national Samaritans / Citizens Advice Council Tax Protocol to target mental wellbeing support on those in problem debt, and put in place a range of additional measures to focus on supporting people to clear their debts. Funding has also been secured from Health Education England to deliver Mental Health First Aid and Suicide Prevention First Aid to frontline staff supporting people at points of financial difficulty, including JobCentre staff and third sector providers in Berkshire.

With a history of mental health difficulties being another known risk factor, Reading's efforts to build people's resilience and coping skills have continued via Compass Recovery College. Student enrolment with Compass has continued on an upward trend, despite being slowed by COVID-19 and lockdown which narrowed the range of opportunities for new enrolments. A wide range of courses have been adapted for virtual delivery, supplemented by outdoor wellbeing courses and social activities when these were allowed. Compass's capacity has been increased by funding an additional Recovery Worker post on a 12m trial basis.

Our commissioned drug and alcohol support provider, Change Grow Live (CGL), has continued to deliver services throughout the pandemic. As with other providers, they have developed a virtual offer, but continued to provide face to face interventions where necessary. CGL's approach includes supporting and building pre-recovery motivation, facilitating transition from a culture of addiction to a culture of recovery, and developing people's skills, insight and external support networks to maintain and sustain long term abstinence. All elements continue, and the Council continues to supplement CGL's offer by working through a range of partners (through our Making Every Contact Count programme) to offer brief interventions which encourage and motivate people to address problem drinking.

A series of measures are in progress to deliver on the findings of the Mental Health Crisis Review in 2019, and build system resilience to address the need for mental health support which has been exacerbated by the pandemic. This includes making urgent and emergency mental health crisis support accessible via NHS 111. A procurement exercise is currently underway to secure a new Crisis Café in Reading offering an alternative point of contact with support for people experiencing mental health crisis, and this will be delivered in partnership between a selected VCS provider and Berkshire Healthcare Foundation Trust. The CCG is also developing a new Primary Care mental health pathway and Primary Care Mental Health team, strengthening the peer support offer for mental health within primary care. In addition, funding has been secured from NHS England to develop a peer support service for people discharged to primary care following a hospital attendance for self-harm.

A public engagement exercise to inform a new Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy has recently concluded, and this highlights the importance local people place on developing mental health resilience in the aftermath of COVID-19. Reading has a well established Mental Wellbeing Group, chaired by our Public Health Consultant and bringing together a range of partners across health, housing, drug and alcohol support, homelessness provision and other voluntary sector partners. This group is well placed to oversee further development of Reading's mental health and wellbeing support, which no doubt will continue to be a priority.

**2. Nicholas Fudge to ask the Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods and Communities:
Food Waste and General Waste Bins**

With the introduction of the new food waste bins and the roll out of the reduced size general waste bins, what are the short and long term costs and savings of both schemes per household and do the Council think there will be an increase in fly-tipping as a direct result of the smaller general waste bins, and if so how will they address this ?

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

Thank you for the question Mr Fudge.

The introduction of the new food waste collection service, and the replacement of 240l residual wheeled bins with 140l wheeled bins has been delivered and costed as a single project.

As part of the Council's capital programme for 2020/21, which was agreed by Full Council at the end of February, £1.489m of capital expenditure budget was agreed to fund the new caddies and replacement residual waste bins. Despite the project being delayed by 6 months due to the pandemic, this planned capital expenditure has been spent in this financial year 2020/21.

The net revenue saving for this project is estimated at £233k per annum. This takes into account the cost of borrowing and on-going associated revenue costs. Excluding the cost of borrowing, the savings are £171k pa in the first part year and then £342k in a full year. This has been incorporated into the Council's Medium-Term Financial strategy.

Financial savings, whilst very much needed following over a decade of central government cuts to local government funding, are not the only reason for introducing the new food waste service and reducing the amount of waste Reading sends to landfill.

The council predicted that introducing food waste collections would increase Reading's recycling rate from 34% to 45% and I am delighted to be able to announce that early results from the new service indicate that we we have indeed reached that 45% target. This is a truly impressive improvement in the recycling rate, and I would like to thank Reading's residents, as well as our hard-working council officers in waste management, for embracing the new service and making it a success. Reading's kerbside food waste collection means that our town's excess food is now used for make fertiliser and generate electricity instead of rotting in landfill releasing methane, a powerful greenhouse gas, into the atmosphere. This demonstrates the Council's commitment to delivering the actions set out in response to its Climate Emergency declaration in 2019.

The Council's early adopter programme, which provided the 140l bins and food waste kerbside collection to five areas across the borough from October last year did not result in an increase in fly tipping as a direct result of introducing the smaller residual waste bins, and to date this has been the same for the main roll-out.

The Council has a Recycling and Enforcement team who investigate fly-tipping reports. The team will take the appropriate enforcement action against an individual or business if evidence is found during the course of the investigation. The Council is committed to work hard to identify and prosecute those who commit these offences. Since the establishment of the team in November 2019 they have not only supported the food waste roll out and provided one-to-one support for households who are struggling to manage their waste, but have also issued 518 fixed penalty notices for waste that has been dumped and successfully prosecuted 31 individuals in court in relation to waste offences, and further court dates are set.

The Council will not tolerate environmental crime as the residents of Reading should not have to put up with fly tipping in any circumstances.

3. Richard Stainthorp to ask the Lead Councillor for Education:
Public Sector Pay Awards

In January in a speech to Parliament, Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said: "I would like to thank all our teachers, all our education staff and social workers for all they have been doing to keep children and young people safe and learning". A sentiment I am sure we can all agree with.

In December, in a letter to the School teachers Review Body, Gavin Williamson said: "It is right to temporarily pause pay awards for the majority of the public sector."

Can the Lead Councillor for Education comment on which Gavin Williamson he prefers, the December version or the January version ?

REPLY by Councillor Pearce Lead Councillor for Education.

I thank Mr Stainthorp for his question and the chance to explain what has happened to teachers pay under successive Conservative Governments and leaders over the last decade. We have seen recently with regards to nurses pay what this Conservative Government really thinks of our dedicated public service workers who worked so tirelessly to see this country through the biggest crisis in a generation. They were rewarded with a real terms pay cut, not even enough per week to cover the cost of parking at the hospital where they do their jobs.

Similarly, the Department for Education admitted last year that teachers are over £4000 a year worse off in real terms since 2010 or a cut of 10%. For those just starting out their teaching careers, (those on M1) this means they are £209 a month worse off. For those more experienced teachers but still in the classroom (those on UPS3), they are £537 a month worse off. It seems it doesn't matter whom the Tory leader is, the impact on teachers pay is the same, cut, cut and cut some more.

The Conservative Governments current plan to thank school staff for all of their work this year is to cut the pay for the majority of teachers, but there are a lucky 6400 teachers nationally who may receive the princely sum of £250 added to their annual salary. Not such good news for school leaders and bursars as the additional £2.2m cost of this is "affordable from current school budgets" according to the DfE. It may be affordable if you are one of Matt Hancock's or mates or Dominic Cumming's but for schools with incredibly tight budgets not so much.

False gratitude and hollow platitudes have been a hallmark of this Government throughout the last decade and especially over the last year. Claps and thanks do not pay teachers bills and they will not help recruit the next generation of teachers to the profession. It is teachers,

like so many of our other key workers and public servants who have kept this country going over the last year, and they are being repaid by this Government with a further pay cut.

So, in answer to the question, which version of Gavin Williamson I prefer, it is the Gavin Williamson who is nowhere near the Education department.

4. WITHDRAWN