

**AGENDA ITEM: 5**

**QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC**

**1. Richard Stainthorp to ask the Lead Councillor for Education:  
Support for Parents to Help Children Thrive in Education**

Last year was a very different and, in many ways, difficult year for everyone involved in education, including parents who in many cases had to take on the dual roles of working from home and home educating their children. With things in education slowly returning to some form of normality, can the Lead Councillor for Education advise me on the support available for parents across Reading that will help their children thrive in Education?

**REPLY** by Councillor Pearce Lead Councillor for Education.

Thank you for this question and the opportunity to give an update on what services are available to support parents. I would firstly like to say a huge thank you to all the parents and carers across Reading who did so much to help their children and schools cope during the lockdowns of the last year. I know that juggling their own work and taking on the role of an educator was extremely challenging but just like our young people, you rose to the challenge to support and help our young people continue their education.

From the very start of the pandemic, Brighter Futures for Children (the company delivering children's services for Reading) has been extremely active in supporting parents, children and young people. This support has ranged from activities during the school breaks through to web-based apps and a range of websites to support physical and mental health.

The Move More campaign promoting walking and cycling sits alongside the borough council's work on school streets and the work in September 2020 to encourage children and young people back to school by highlighting ways to walk or cycle.

As well as this support, our schools have been very active in providing remote learning for children and young people during lockdown, with Brighter Futures distributing 656 laptops to children who otherwise did not have access. This is in addition to the significant number of computers that schools themselves have distributed.

For children and young people with special educational needs and their families, Reading's Family Information Service has continued to provide an outstanding service, signposting people to the wide range of activities and support available. As such it was nominated for a prestigious Coram award.

We are also particularly pleased by the work our mental health support teams have done. Working alongside our schools to provide support at the earliest opportunity and recognising the strain of the pandemic on many of our young people and their families.

If you'd like to know more do go to the Brighter Futures webpage:

<https://brighterfuturesforchildren.org/for-parents-carers/activities-things-to-do/>

**2. Andrew Hornsby-Smith to ask the Lead Councillor for Health Wellbeing & Sport: Hydrotherapy Pool at the Royal Berkshire Hospital**

Many people in Reading are very alarmed and concerned by the Royal Berkshire Hospital's announcement that it has decided to permanently close its hydrotherapy pool. Does he share my concern that this seems short-sighted given that the catchment population for the hospital is due to increase? They say they are now entering an engagement process. Does the Lead Councillor know what that means and could he explain what public consultation there has been from the local NHS on hydrotherapy services and what the council's response was?

**REPLY** by Councillor Hoskin Lead Councillor for Health Wellbeing & Sport.

Both the Council, as expressed by a number of unanimously agreed motions, and I, share your concern about the permanent closure to the hydrotherapy pool at the Royal Berkshire Hospital. We understand that alongside the NHS use, other providers, charities, groups and local residents, hire the pool for their use and will need to find alternative arrangements.

A consultation by the local NHS Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), who commission most NHS services, took place to engage on the future provision of the service. It related solely to hydrotherapy services for NHS funded patients and those referred by a physiotherapist or a consultant from the Royal Berkshire Health Foundation Trust using the NHS funding from the CCG.

The consultation ran between 10 August 2020 to 2 November 2020. They reported 498 individual responses had been received and nine written responses from organisations. Of the responses received, 217 identified as having used the NHS service and 279 had not. They noted that 59 were NHS patients who had been prescribed hydrotherapy.

It is reported by the CCG that the majority of the comments had been about the pool at the hospital rather than about hydrotherapy, many of these comments were from people who used the pool in a private capacity. Some respondents stated that hydrotherapy did not have to be provided at a hospital site, a better pool was needed, and that hydrotherapy was good at aiding pain relief.

Despite the public consultation response the NHS CCG asserted that there was a limited amount of good quality evidence on the effectiveness of hydrotherapy compared to land-based therapy and therefore the CCG Governing Body on 8<sup>th</sup> December 2020 approved an option to only commission hydrotherapy services via an individual funding request. Whilst we were informed that the criteria would be developed in partnership with the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP). I am now informed that the CSP do not believe their input has been taken sufficiently on board and there will be a considerable limiting of access to this service which does not reflect their beliefs in the benefits of hydrotherapy.

In terms of response the council, as a result of the full council motion, and ACE committee expressed its objections to the cutting of NHS hydrotherapy and concerns that this would lead to the RBH hydrotherapy pool no longer being viable.

I am still am concerned that ceasing or restricting access to hydrotherapy might further promote health inequalities and, indeed, with additional needs to support for rehabilitation from the long-term health effects of Covid (Long Covid) that there may well be a need for the expansion of NHS hydrotherapy linked to physiotherapy services.

The decision of the RBH's Trust's Board has therefore been taken following the decision made by the CCG after completion of the consultation process. The engagement process led by RBH

is, we hope, a positive opportunity for anyone to ask questions regarding the decision that has been made and for open communications on the topic.

However, I am concerned that there has never been a public consultation on the closure of the only NHS hydrotherapy pool in Reading and no clear indication of how any alternative provision will be supplied.

The Council will be considering a motion on this matter later at this Council meeting and, I am sure, will want to continue to object to the cutting of this vital NHS service and work with partners, local MPs and community groups to make this case.

**3. Andrew Hornsby-Smith to ask the Lead Councillor for Corporate and Consumer Services: Henley Road Cemetery**

I understand some residents have had concerns regarding available grave types at Henley Road Cemetery with particular concern due to faith requirements. What is the approach of the Council to meeting the needs for all our residents?

**REPLY** by Councillor McEwan Lead Councillor for Corporate and Consumer Services

The Council is committed to ensuring that our bereavement services meet the needs of all our communities. In 2010 we adopted the Charter for the Bereaved, which sets out a best practice model for cemeteries operations and an inclusive service provision for all faiths. We adhere to this wherever possible.

We have also planned our services to make best use of the land available to maximise the lifespan of the cemetery to serve present and future generations

In October 2020, representations were made to the Council raising concerns that the Bereavement Service the Council currently provides did not fully meet the needs of the Muslim community. The Council committed to take their concerns into account during a review of the current Cemetery and Crematorium Regulations and consult on the revised proposals.

The Council's current Cemetery and Crematorium Regulations were last updated and adopted in 2011. These have now been reviewed and a new draft of the regulations prepared and included in a report that will be considered at the Policy Committee on the 14<sup>th</sup> June.

The changes proposed are designed to benefit residents of Reading Borough and their families and enhance our service offer to meet the needs of our culturally diverse community, especially in relation to requirements based on religious belief.

Following the Policy Committee, a full consultation involving a wide range of consultation groups, existing grave owners and the public will take place over a period of 45 days.

A final draft of the proposed regulations, taking account of consultation responses received, will be brought back for consideration at the meeting of Policy Committee in September.