

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

29 OCTOBER 2018

QUESTION NO. 1

Roger Lightfoot to ask the Leader of the Council:

Sale of Arthur Hill pool site

Earlier this year we were told by the Leader of RBC that the bidding process for Arthur Hill Pool was closed and that a result would be announced at the end of the summer.

The end of the summer has come and gone and we are none the wiser due to the "commercial confidentiality" conditions RBC has wrapped around this.

Which party has attached these conditions to this, RBC or the purchaser? Will you please set a date to release the information?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

The confidentiality provision was agreed by both parties. To disclose the information at this stage would prejudice the commercial interests of the parties concerned. This is because the information requested is commercially sensitive and if released could damage the council's position regarding the sale of Arthur Hill as the contract for sale is not yet complete. Furthermore disclosure of the information could also prejudice the buyer's commercial interests going forward.

It is the intention to release the identity of the purchaser upon exchange of contracts. I can assure you that I am asking for an update regularly and the Council will make the information public as soon as possible.

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QUESTION NO. 2

Peter Burt to ask the Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing & Sport:

Leisure Procurement Timetable

At its meeting on 31 October 2016 the Policy Committee agreed a timetable for future leisure provision which aimed to award a contract to design, build, operate, and maintain leisure facilities by November 2017, commence construction of new swimming pools at Rivermead and Palmer Park in July 2018, and open the new pools in January 2020.

At the current date the new leisure contract has yet to be awarded, and we are not even close to commencing building work on new swimming pools to replace the two that the Council has closed since the end of 2016.

If the Council misses its target date of January 2020 for opening the two new pools, who will be held accountable for this failure? Will it be the Head of Economic and Cultural Development, the Director of Environment and Neighbourhood Services, the Chief Executive, or yourself, as the Lead Councillor responsible for Health, Wellbeing, and Sport?

REPLY by Councillor Hoskin (Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing & Sport):

Thank you for your question Mr Burt. At the meeting you refer to, Policy Committee endorsed the leisure procurement strategy and noted the overall timetable for the procurement process and delivery of new facilities, albeit that this timetable was caveated in the body of the report.

At the full Council Meeting of 23 January 2018, at which I believe you, Mr Burt, were present, Cllr Hacker answered a question from Mr Lightfoot in which she confirmed slippage in that timetable. In an answer that was well reported in the local media Cllr Hacker reported that the project was now aiming for facilities to be open in "Summer 2020 into 2021". At the Full Council Meeting 26 June 2018 on the item on Leisure Procurement the council's report stated "It is anticipated that new facilities ...will come on stream approximately 18 months after the award of contract, in January 2021, although because of the complexities of major construction projects this timetable cannot be guaranteed at this stage."

I can confirm that the Council has now commenced a formal procurement process and completed the Pre-Qualification Questionnaire (or PQQ) and Outline Solutions stages. The next steps in the process are for detailed solutions to be developed and evaluated (including all financial aspects), dialogue with the bidders to refine proposals and then submission and evaluation of final tenders. Sign-off for the award of contract would come back to this Committee for approval in June or July of next year. As we have always said, this is a complex procurement process and a major construction project so whilst we seek to be open and transparent about the timetable we are aiming to achieve it is not one we could ever guarantee.

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QUESTION NO. 3

Jim Vincent to ask the Lead Councillor for Adult Social Care:

Social Care Direct Payments

The Council has no formal policy in relation to the annual uplift of social care Direct Payments. I can illustrate the consequences of this from my own experience:

I am the Direct Payment trustee for my disabled daughter, who lives in her own home and receives Domiciliary Care ('Homecare'). A Direct Payment was first granted to her in 2010. In June 2017, on a review of my daughter's care package, I advised her social worker that the Direct Payment had not been increased for 7 years and that I could no longer pay for my daughter's care. The social care team's response was to attempt to cut the budget! This resulted in 15 months of intense stress and substantial legal costs. A small increase in the budget has recently been agreed in relation to the costs of overnight care, although the budget for my daughter's day care remains at £16.31 per hour. This is well below the Council's own standard Domiciliary Care rate of £17.00 per hour. To avoid further stress I have accepted this budget but have to provide a substantial top-up of fees privately.

This arrangement will only be sustainable if my daughter's budget is uplifted annually in line with increases in local market rates. As inflation is currently running at 2.5%, and wages are increasing commensurately, it is almost certain that all care providers will have to increase their costs over the next year, and I will find myself in exactly the same position this time next year unless an appropriate uplift is applied annually to my daughter's budget. I am aware of several other people in the same position, and I imagine that this is a problem faced by a good many others.

The Council reviews local market rates annually and adjusts its own rates for Domiciliary Care and other types of service provision accordingly (although I believe that this process has not yet been undertaken for the current financial year). My question therefore is this:

Will the Council please confirm as official policy that a) local market rates will be reviewed annually as of the 1st April, and b) that any resulting percentage increase in the Council's approved social care rates will automatically be applied to the personal budgets of all in receipt of Direct Payments?

REPLY by Councillor Jones (Lead Councillor for Adult Social Care):

Thank you Mr Vincent for your question.

I can advise that the Council complies with the Care Act 2014 requirements, and in this regard has adopted the Care Act 2014 (Personal Budgets/Direct Payments Guidance).

I can also confirm that the Council reviews care costs in Reading annually in line with relevant inflation and market pressure changes, as part of its overall budget review responsibilities.

Furthermore, I can also confirm that the Council fulfils its obligations to ensure that people in receipt of a Direct Payments are aware that they can request a review of their specific care and or support needs, including a review of their personal budget. If Mr Vincent has any particular or specific concerns regarding the arrangements for his daughter, I would be happy to discuss these with him outside of this meeting.

However, I trust that Mr Vincent and the Committee will also be interested to hear that the Council is currently producing a refreshed guide entitled "*A Guide to Personalisation in Reading*", to replace the information held on the Council's website, which highlights and makes clear the Council's obligations. The guide will explain personal budgets and direct payments in detail, and provide answers to the frequently asked questions that are presented by personal budget end users, including a section setting out the method in how the council calculates its cost of care within a direct payment arrangement.

Following a wide consultation on the draft guide, I trust it will be published early in the new year.

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COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 1

Councillor Eden to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:

Companion Bus Passes

As Chair of Access & Disabilities Working Group I have met with disabled residents concerned about the possible changes to the concessionary fares scheme for access pass holders. They are particularly concerned about the possible removal of companion passes, something many disabled residents and carers rely on to help them get out and about.

Residents are telling me they understand that the only reason this is being considered is the continued cuts from central government but ask that this is looked at again.

Could the Lead Councillor update me on the recent consultation on these changes?

REPLY by Councillor Page (Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport):

I thank Cllr Eden for her question and the opportunity to update on this important issue.

As she will be aware Reading Borough Council administers the statutory England National Concessionary Travel Scheme (ENCTS), which provides free off-peak local bus travel anywhere in England to eligible older and disabled people from 9.30am to 11:00pm on weekdays, and at any time on weekends and bank holidays.

In addition to the statutory scheme, the Council has historically provided a more generous scheme with additional discretionary elements for both holders of the older person and disabled (Access) concessionary pass.

However, like all local authorities, the Council faces significant financial pressures with reduced funding from central government, and increasing demands on its services. This led to the Council removing a number of the discretionary elements of the scheme for Older Person pass holders in April 2017; and in February 2018 the Council's Policy Committee agreed to consult on a further budget saving proposal to make changes to the discretionary elements of the scheme for Access pass holders.

The Council wrote to all of its nearly 6,000 Access pass holders in May seeking views on the following proposed changes to the scheme:

- No longer providing free travel within Reading before 9:30am or after 11:00pm on a weekday for Access pass holders (of whom there are about 3350);
- No longer accepting companion bus passes for eligible Access pass holders who cannot travel alone (of whom there are about 2400); and
- No longer providing free travel on Readibus services for Access Pass holders (of which about 72000 trips were made in 2017-2018).

The consultation was undertaken between 25th May to 20th July and over 1,300 responses were received.

Initial analysis of the responses has demonstrated a clear need for the Companion Pass element of the scheme to remain, as this provides a vital lifeline for disabled residents who are unable to travel alone and rely on carers to help them get out and about. **I am pleased, therefore, to announce that the Council does not intend to pursue this element of the overall budget saving proposal.**

However, in order to make a final decision on the other elements it has become clear a further consultation needs to be undertaken specifically with holders of the Older Persons pass who are currently eligible to use Readibus services for free, alongside eligible Access pass holders.

We are therefore working with Readibus to ensure all relevant pass holders are fully engaged in this additional consultation and the results will be analysed alongside the responses already received from the consultation regarding use of Readibus by Access pass holders.

A final decision on any changes to the scheme will be taken by the Council's Policy Committee in due course, taking account of all responses and representations to the consultation, assessing these against the Council's financial situation.

We have already made clear that if any changes to the scheme are approved by the Committee, these will not come into effect until 1st April 2019.

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COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 2

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Children:

Exempting Care Leavers from Council Tax

The Children's Society are calling on councils to make young people leaving care exempt from paying council tax until they turn 25. A brilliant 85 councils around the country have taken this action.

This important change would give young people valuable time to learn how to manage their finances without the worry of falling into council tax debt.

Will the Lead Councillor bring a report forward on taking this action to the next Adult Social Care, Children's Services and Education committee?

REPLY by Councillor Terry (Lead Councillor for Children):

I will consider this proposal and have instructed officers to produce a report evaluating the possibility of an exemption for the next Adult Social Care, Children's Services and Education Committee. Given the severe budgetary pressures on the Council - resulting from £58m of government cuts - I cannot guarantee that it would be possible to implement a universal exemption at the current time, although we all continue to look for ways that we can best support our care leavers in Reading. The report will also need to consider the impact for any other vulnerable groups and the likely budget implications.

It should be noted that the Council does operate a discretionary special hardship fund for all residents to assist council tax payers facing significant difficulties, each application for this fund is considered on its individual merits and I would encourage any care leavers experiencing financial hardship to submit an application.

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COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 3

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing & Sport:

Cuts to swimming in Reading

The council has devastatingly closed Arthur Hill and Central swimming pools. People in East Reading no longer have anywhere convenient to swim. Please can I get figures for how many people on average were swimming in Reading at all swimming pools the council has access to information for, per month, in 2015 - when Central and Arthur Hill swimming pools were open. I would also like to know how many people are swimming on average per month in 2018?

REPLY by Councillor Hoskin (Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing & Sport):

Thank you Cllr White for your question. Swimming is an important part of the Council's Leisure offer and we have invested in providing swimming facilities and will continue to do so. As you are aware, the huge cuts councils have faced across the country has led to extremely difficult choices about how to cut spending and how to prioritise our reduced budgets. In this context the Council undertook significant work to Central Swimming Pool to extend its operating life until the demountable pool at Rivermead was opened, providing interim swimming facilities until new facilities are provided.

Unfortunately the short notice of your question, and the timing falling over the school holiday period, has made accessing some information more difficult especially from third parties. Consequently some assumptions and allowances have been made, for example for the closure of the pools at South Reading Leisure Centre for improvement and at Rivermead for changing room refurbishment. The attendances to swimming lessons and access to general swimming sessions at Council pools (Meadway, Arthur Hill, Central, Rivermead, South Reading) has risen slightly from approximately 26,100 to 26,300 per month or about 1%.

This has been achieved by the investment into facilities along with more efficient and better programming to encourage greater use. This includes the provision of the demountable pool and improvement in changing facilities at Rivermead. This has created a facility with a broader range of services, better catering for all age ranges and families.

When considering these participation statistics in swimming, it should also be noted that the proportion of people regularly swimming nationally, as measured by Sport England, has fallen by almost a sixth from over 8% to below 5.7% over the last 10 years or so.