

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

23 SEPTEMBER 2021

QUESTION NO. 1

J Wellum to ask the Lead Councillor for Corporate & Consumer Services:

The Council's Response to the Challenges of Home Working

The pandemic has resulted in many employees working from home. Employers face two major challenges:

- (1) Ensuring that production from home delivers the required standards and productivity,
- (2) Motivating employees. I have in mind Herzberg's Motivation and Hygiene Theory. An employee feels that their contribution adds value to the organisation's objectives, is recognised and respected by colleagues rather than they are a bullied automaton (an extremely simplified, idiosyncratic summary.)

Reading Borough Council Internal Audit report that staff resources are stressed. How has Reading Borough Council responded to the two challenges?

REPLY by Councillor McEwan (Lead Councillor for Corporate & Consumer Services):

- (1) The Council's workforce has continued to deliver many 'business as usual' services throughout the pandemic in challenging circumstances, as well as delivering several new services such as the One Reading Community Hub and setting up a new Covid Response team to deal with supply and distribution of PPE, community testing etc. In addition, we have delivered several improvements including signing a new Leisure contract and transitioning to a new IT operating model. The Council conducted a staff survey in May 2020 and again in December 2020, to assess staff's views on working remotely. The majority felt that they were more productive working remotely than they had been in the office. Our 1-1 Supervision Policy requires all managers to carry out regular 1-1 meetings with their staff to discuss workload and productivity as well as wellbeing, health and safety and behaviours. Issues of concern e.g. poor performance should be addressed through this process initially, and support is available for managers from the HR Advisory team to assist them if needed. The Council's Managing Poor Performance Policy may be used if informal action to improve performance has not been successful.
- (2) The Council's People Strategy recognises that our staff are central to achieving our vision of providing excellent services to Reading. Our aim is to celebrate high performance, empower and enable people, and create an environment that promotes diversity and inclusion, continual improvement and greater collaboration across the Council. Our TEAM Reading values (working Together, being Ambitious, Efficient and making a Difference for Reading) underpin the way we work day-to-day. We have a range of policies and initiatives in place to achieve this and motivate our staff. Examples

include a Leadership and Management Development Programme for all levels of manager to ensure they role-model our Team Reading values and behave in a way that inspires, motivates and supports employees. Our Wellbeing Strategy is underpinned by monthly wellbeing newsletters which give practical advice and support to help staff manage both their physical and mental health, as well as access to a confidential Employee Assistance Programme which includes access to counselling amongst other services. We conduct regular staff surveys to ensure that our People Strategy is achieving its aims. The most recent survey from April 2021 showed that 95% of staff feel they make a valuable contribution to the success of the Council by doing their job and 89% felt that their line manager shows genuine interest in their wellbeing.

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QUESTION NO. 2

Richard Stainthorp to ask the Lead Councillor for Education:

London Fringe allowance

Does the Lead Councillor for Education support an extension of the London Fringe allowance to Reading?

REPLY by Councillor Pearce (Lead Councillor for Education):

I would like to thank Mr Stainthorp for his question.

Back in 2016 I put forward a motion to this Council that said the fringe allowance should be extended to Reading. The motion passed unanimously, we wrote to and lobbied the Department for Education but sadly to no policy change with the fringe allowance still stopping at our near neighbours Bracknell.

This needs to be taken in a wider context. Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said last year “We owe everyone working in schools an enormous debt of thanks for what they have done this year and I am especially grateful to our heads and senior leaders”. Perhaps debt is the key word in that statement because this summer Williamson told the school teachers pay and review body not to even bother looking at teachers’ pay as he and his Government were going to “freeze” it. A freeze in pay is of course in reality a cut as prices are going up but pay remains the same, so it certainly will mean more debt for teachers.

The Tories’ on/off decade-long pay freeze for teachers means that a teacher that has been in the classroom for six years will have lost £357 a month or £4281 per year. That is over £40,000 this decade, this would have been a handy house deposit for many. During this time as I am sure we are all aware, house prices have continued to rise. The average for Reading is around £300,000 (up nearly £10,000 this year alone) and is £266,000 for first time buyers. All of this has a knock-on effect with the recruitment and especially retention of teachers, with 27% of young teachers quitting within three years.

So to get back to the question, yes I would like to see the fringe allowance extended to Reading and fully support this extension. In an ideal world, teachers would have been fairly paid by this Government in the last ten years but sadly this has not been the case. In a very competitive market and with higher house prices in our area than in some places that do receive the fringe, this seems to be an unfair anomaly that the Government should fix.

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QUESTION NO. 3

Ann Dally to ask the Lead Councillor for Corporate & Consumer Services:

Council Tax collection: Best Practice guidance

Can the Lead Councillor detail how RBC's plans to incorporate the methods outlined in the August 2021 *Council tax collection: best practice guidance for local authorities* into its current debt recovery practises; especially the ability of councils to make an early request for attachments to earnings or benefits, so avoiding adding costs and increasing vulnerable residents' debt, stress and anxiety?

REPLY by Councillor McEwan (Lead Councillor for Corporate & Consumer Services):

The Revenues team have reviewed the 'Council tax collection; best practice guidance for local authorities' recently published at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/council-tax-collection-best-practice-guidance-for-local-authorities/council-tax-collection-best-practice-guidance-for-local-authorities>

The team continue to work innovatively to deal with the needs and circumstances of debtors while maintaining high rates of collection and the prevention of arrears. They recognise that supportive recovery techniques can significantly improve outcomes, both for authorities and for debtors.

Having reviewed the steps outlined in the best practice guidance the team advises as follows:

The team recognise the importance of the design of the Local Council Tax Support (LCTS) scheme. A proposal to consult on amendments to the current scheme will be put before the Committee at this meeting. These proposals seek to provide a more generous scheme than that currently in place.

As well as Local Council Tax Support, a resident's bill can be reduced by a wide range of discounts and exemptions that reflect individual circumstances. These are now actively promoted on each Council Tax bill following review of our literature, during implementation of the Citizens Advice Council Tax Protocol. Frontline staff have the right knowledge and information to give accurate advice to those council tax payers who may have limited understanding about the support that is available. This helps to ensure that everyone pays the right level of council tax, which can be crucial in supporting those who are potentially financially vulnerable. Frontline staff have also been provided with details of the recently published 'Debt management vulnerability toolkit', with training to be scheduled:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/debt-management-vulnerability-toolkit>

The team also continue to build on information available online.

Following the approval of the Corporate Debt Policy, the aim is to work towards a 'single view of debt' to ensure that multiple debts are brought together onto a single system, so that they can offer well-informed support if households fall behind in their payments.

Revenue managers of billing authorities across Berkshire meet every month in order to explore and better understand the latest trends in council tax collection. These meetings allow authorities to discuss solutions to emerging challenges. The team work with both internal and external debt advisors at any point in the collection process and regular discussions are held between the local debt advice agencies in order to ensure each group is fully sighted of the local trends in council tax collection. The service has adopted the Citizens Advice Council Tax Protocol and the team regularly review their signposting and referrals processes to maximise the opportunities to guide people towards free debt advice, where appropriate. This information is contained within all Council tax bills.

The Revenues teams have developed localised reminders that are delivered through multiple platforms, including text. The team are looking to extend this further using informal email reminders. Where residents fail to respond to a bill, or miss an instalment, the team will carefully consider the options available to them in their attempt to engage with the individual. Soft text reminders will be issued prior to any statutory reminder process. It is only where attempts to engage billpayers have not succeeded, that the team consider the option of applying for a liability order.

The team make continued efforts to engage and support their residents alongside their application for a liability order. For instance, after a court summons is issued, the team offer an automatically generated repayment plan in order to try to avoid further enforcement action.

Where local authorities seek a liability order, they are able to charge the reasonable costs incurred in obtaining the court summons and liability order and add those costs to the council tax bill. In making an assessment of the costs, they always bear in mind that the costs will be borne by residents already having difficulties paying their bill, and those costs should be kept as low as possible. They do however have to consider that the cost of recovery will be the same, no matter the circumstances of the resident. Unfortunately, legislation does not allow an early request for attachment of benefits or earning. A liability order must always be obtained before this action can be undertaken.

The team have a range of options open to them when they decide to take further action following a missed instalment. The team always seek to use these options before taking other action, such as referring a case to enforcement agents. The team would always look to agree an affordable repayment plan, failing that an attachment to benefit/earning would be preferable, with enforcement agents as a last resort.

The team are often particularly cautious about applying two attachments of earnings to residents known to be in positions of vulnerability. Where the application of two orders would cause financial hardship, an order may be withdrawn.

The team will always consider an individual's circumstances when taking any form of enforcement action and seek to work with the individual for the best outcome.

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 1

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning & Transport:

Improving road safety on Crescent Road

On the 20th July 2020, responding to my question on Crescent Road road safety improvements, Councillor Page stated that over £87,000 generated by the Alfred Sutton school expansion had been spent already on the 20mph speed limit and the resident parking scheme in the area. Internal Audit have investigated this claim and discovered that it was incorrect - in fact, after seven years, the money is still unspent. Would the Lead Councillor take this opportunity to apologise, and correct his answer?

Green Councillors want this money spent on permanent improvements to road safety in Crescent Road and the surrounding area where children from three schools, soon to be four, regularly walk and cycle to and from school. Does the Lead Councillor agree, and will he pledge, seven years after receiving the money, to spend it on road safety measures to protect our children?

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

I thank Cllr White for his question.

Unlike many section 106 agreements that require spending within a specified time the Alfred Sutton payment was not time limited, nor was it specified for any scheme other than '*transport improvements identified in the Eastern South Eastern and Central Reading Action Plan Areas of the Council's Local Transport Plan for the time being in force*'.

As Councillor White will be aware, the section 106 funding received from Alfred Sutton School was in fact pooled along with other relevant payments to form a larger funding pot for the delivery of schemes in the Eastern South Eastern and Central Reading Action Plan areas, which form part of the Council's Local Transport Plan.

At the time that I responded to your last question in July 2020, the officers delivering the 20 MPH and residents' parking schemes understood that these had been secured against the Alfred Sutton funding.

It is now understood that the alignment of the available funds has not been completed and therefore from a financial audit perspective the spend is not shown. However it remains the case that the scheme delivery was in full compliance with the allocation policy. The intention is to align that spend with the s106 from the Alfred Sutton School as soon as possible.

In respect of the request for permanent improvements on Crescent Road this would be premature ahead of the experimental School Street which is due to start on 1st November. Councillor White will be aware that this was approved at the last

Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport Committee on 30 June 2021 following local consultations conducted by Maiden Erlegh, the UTC Reading and Alfred Sutton Primary Schools. Over 150 consultation responses were considered and there was a clear majority in support of the trial.

This will be the most ambitious school street trial to date in Reading and it is important that we assess and monitor its effectiveness in conjunction with the local community, schools and residents.

Any more permanent road safety features on Crescent Road or the wider area can then be considered in the context of the school street review and subsequent local consultations.

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 2

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning & Transport:

Transit site for the travelling community in Reading

The travelling community has spent time on various pieces of land in Reading recently. In East Reading land such as Palmer Park, Cintra Park and the Crescent Road playing fields have been camped on. With no access to facilities such as adequate toilets and bins as standard these sites clearly aren't appropriate. I respect the travelling community's way of life and I think one way the council could show respect would be to create a transit site for the travelling community within Reading with decent facilities. I know that this has been looked at before. Please can the Lead Councillor update me on the current situation and what is being done to identify land for a transit site.

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

I thank Cllr White for his question.

As I have explained on previous occasions, the Council has assessed the need for accommodation for gypsies and travellers in the Gypsy and Traveller, Travelling Showpeople and Houseboat Dweller Accommodation Assessment published in 2017. Alongside permanent provision, this identified a need for a transit site that could accommodate up to 10 caravans.

As a result, the Council has been working for some time to try to identify a site or sites to meet both the permanent and transit needs for gypsies and travellers. As Reading is a tightly drawn urban authority, virtually all sites are in close proximity to existing residential properties, and where there are greenfield sites they are often at high risk of flooding.

After a thorough assessment of 80 Council owned sites, the Council did identify a possible site at Cow Lane in 2017 and carried out a consultation on it. This site did not proceed as it was required for a new school, as reported to Policy Committee in June 2018.

Since then, the Council has continued to try to identify possible sites within its boundaries to meet permanent and transit needs, as well as working with neighbouring authorities on whether our needs for permanent accommodation can be met on less constrained land just outside the Borough boundaries.

This work is ongoing and further information on progress will be reported when it is appropriate to do so, but identifying a site is a difficult process given the very tight constraints on land in Reading.

The Council continues to actively work on this as a matter of importance and a report about transit site provision is expected to be brought to the next Policy Committee on 1st November.

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 3

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Children:

Reading Council supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children

Children who have fled the world's most dangerous situations and made it to the UK without their parents deserve protection and support. Kent County Council say they are no longer able to take unaccompanied asylum-seeking children because of the number that have turned up. The government ask that councils take unaccompanied asylum-seeking children at 0.07% of their child population. Reading hasn't met this target. Does the Lead Councillor agree with myself and Green councillors that Reading should be taking its fair share of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and what will the Lead Councillor do to make sure Reading meets this target?

REPLY by Councillor Terry (Lead Councillor for Children):

Reading/BFfC currently has 21 unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people (UASC) under the age of 18 in care and 24 over the age of 18 years receiving support as Care Leavers. All 24 young people were taken into care when they were under 18 years of age and are now receiving support via a Personal Advisor for as long as they should need or want it, up to the age of 25 years.

The voluntary National Transfer Protocol is based on Local Authorities taking 0.07% of their under 18 population as UASCs. To meet that percentage BFfC would be providing support for 26 UASC. BFfC is one of the top ranked children's services across the South East in relation to meeting the 0.07%.

Of the 21 children in care, six were from applications made by young/adults in the Mercure hotel to have age assessments undertaken as they are disputing their Home Office age assessment. When young people enter the country there is an 'appearance and demeanour' assessment made by the Senior Immigration Officer to determine whether or not the young person is under 18 years of age (until recently this was to determine whether or not the young person was under 25 years of age). More recently, the Home Office have employed social workers to undertake a fuller but relatively short assessment.

In order to be lawful, age assessments must be 'Merton compliant' (see footnote). Unfortunately, the Home Office assessments are not fully 'Merton compliant'. Hence, BFfC is dutybound to undertake these assessments and must take these young people into our care whilst doing so.

BFfC is supporting the National Transfer Scheme's regional rota for a more equitable share across local authorities and has taken UASC through the South East rota system as well as through self-presentation of UASC to Children's services.

BFFC is committed to providing the very best support and/or care for these young people so that they can recover from their experiences and meet their potential in relation to health, education, employment or training as well as becoming effective adults who will contribute to our local communities.

As you can see Councillor White, Reading is doing its fair share and at any given time is likely to be meeting the 0.07% target. I, together with my Labour colleagues, and I would hope all councillors, will ensure that Reading remains a welcoming and supportive new home for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people.