

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

13 DECEMBER 2021

Petition from Kathryn McCann:

Petition to re-open the Palmer Park Toilets and locally list the three Heritage Buildings

During Covid the toilets in the Café and Sports Stadium have been closed to park and play area users, leaving no public facilities in one of Reading's best parks.

Please save, restore, and re-open our Palmer Park toilet block.

The three buildings - the Park Keepers Lodge, the Pavilion (now Tutu's Ethiopian Café) and the toilet building were all present when the park was opened to the people of Reading in 1891, by George Palmer of Huntley & Palmers. Designed by nationally recognised local architect, William Ravenscroft, these heritage buildings are a focal point in the park and an East Reading landmark.

Please locally list, restore and re-open the Palmer Park toilet block!

*The sports stadium toilets are now open again.

RESPONSE by Councillor Rowland (Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation):

I thank Ms McCann for presenting the petition and for her question.

The old toilet facility in Palmer Park has been shut for over 25 years. The age of the building means the scope for the modern requirements of accessibility for all is very limited. Fully functioning and accessible toilet facilities have been and will continue to be provided nearby throughout the build-out of the new Palmer Park Sports Centre, which has longer opening hours than the Council's other public toilets. What we are providing meets present day public facilities requirements and therefore we are not considering reopening this facility at this time, as it would be very expensive, likely involve extensive redevelopment and require managing for its intended use. Instead we are focusing our limited budgets on reopening public toilet facilities across the borough closed during the pandemic and which do not have alternative conveniences nearby, unlike Palmer Park.

Notably, the new Palmer Park Sports Centre will have fully accessible modern toilets and essential Changing Places facilities when it opens in late 2022. This was extremely important to the Council to ensure accessibility for all with our new state-of-the-art facilities.

Furthermore, in recognising the importance of providing public toilets, we have recently removed charging mechanisms which were prone to vandalism to make them more accessible and available to the public.

The Council is in the process of reviewing a range of future options on the Palmer Park toilet block. The toilet block has been subjected to anti-social behaviour in the past and with a constrained budget, we must be mindful of the on-going maintenance costs of any number of the arguably "charming and attractive" Victorian buildings and monuments that dot the Council's estate, as the answers to maximise their uses can often be very complex and expensive. That being said, I can assure you that the Council has never flagged in its commitment to the retention of the old toilet block and its associated

buildings. As such, the Council will consider this petition that represents the feelings of residents as part of the process in determining its future use.

Palmer Park Pavilion, including all buildings referenced in this petition, were nominated for addition to the list of locally important buildings or the “local list” on 23rd September 2020. The Council has recently put in place a new process for adding buildings to the local list which means that decisions are made by the Planning Applications Committee, which I also sit on. Consideration of this nomination was delayed whilst this new process was put in place. The process is now up and running, with Committee on 1st December making the first additions to the list under this new process.

Consultations on adding Palmer Park Pavilion to the local list were sent out to the relevant consultees and stakeholders as specified in the process (landowner, ward councillors, the Reading Conservation Area Advisory Committee and the Reading Civic Society) on 7th October 2021. In my capacity as Lead member for Heritage I was also advised in this process. The consultation period has now closed, and a decision on whether to add the building to the local list will be made at a forthcoming meeting of the Planning Applications Committee.

I can certainly understand and appreciate the public’s affinity for the charming and attractive Victorian buildings within Palmer Park that this petition speaks to, but I would also like to place a bit of context to the conundrum we face in dealing with some of these quaint Victorian public facilities. I cite an advert from 7 September, 1900 for a Park Keeper and Constable for Palmer Park which included the maintenance of these buildings. In that advert, the “man” that was to accept the Keeper/Constables’ role was also expected to have a “wife” that would specifically “be required to attend to the ladies’ lavatory”. I am sure as such, you would agree that times have moved on substantially from when the block was built and the demands of a “Constable and wife,” is clearly no longer in keeping with responsible Council budgeting nor achieving the requirements for public accessibility. However, as a final reassurance, in my role also as Reading’s Heritage Champion, I look forward to continuing innovative conversations with officers and the community to find a fitting answer to utilise the building in the future.

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 1

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Education:

School Meals: good bad or ugly?

When at school I was the type of child who enjoyed school meals. Green councillors think the government should fund all schoolchildren getting a delicious free school meal to make Reading fairer. Brighter Futures has a contract with a new school meals provider following the previous one ending. I know a number of children who don't like the new school meals. I also know that meals have been tweaked in response to some of the negative feedback. Please can I get an update on the percentage of children and young people who were eating school meals for each month since the new contract started? Can I get the same information for each month in 2019 (before Covid) for comparison? Also what areas for improvement has Brighter Futures identified?

REPLY by Councillor Pearce (Lead Councillor for Education):

The school meals contract was recently awarded to Caterlink and commenced on 1 August 2021. The initial term is until 31 July 2024, with the option to then extend in periods of no less than 12 months. The primary meal price was finalised at £2.10 which is 10p less than the previous contract. Caterlink will be delivering meals that meet the Silver Standard of the “Food for Life Served Here” catering mark, the previous contract met the Bronze Standard. All staff will be paid in line with the National Living Wage Foundation Living Wage rates.

As well as this Caterlink offered a range of added value and community engagement initiatives as part of their tender, and these will now form part of the contract and performance review as part of ongoing contract management. There is also a requirement in the contract for Caterlink to employ a minimum of one Apprentice and one work experience placement per year, from the Council area.

Unlike Cllr White, unless I am mistaken, I am someone that spends every working day in a school and has done so for the past 15 years. I can vouch from my own experience that the quality of school meals has improved significantly over this time. Rather than knowing “a number of children who don't like the new school meals”, and the unsubstantiated negative feedback, my feedback and experience of school meals is the opposite.

Below is a summary of the total % meal uptake for September to November 2021, along with a comparison to the same period in 2019. September 2019 was chosen as the comparator as it was the start of an academic year that wasn't interrupted by the pandemic.

	2021	2019
September	42%	48%
October	45%	48%
November	45%	53%

There has been progress since the start of term, with a 3% increase in overall meal uptake from September to November 2021. Although the levels of uptake are reduced from the pre-pandemic comparison, this is to be expected given that schools and pupils are adjusting to a full menu and not eating in the classroom. There was also a late or staggered start for many schools and continued higher than average levels of absence due to COVID. Other local authorities have had similar experiences.

Universal free school meals were of course a Labour party manifesto policy at the last election but as my party did not win, this is unfortunately not something we can enact. Maybe Cllr White could lobby the Conservative Government, including Reading West MP Alok Sharma to take up this Labour party policy.

A filling and nutritional meal is a vital part of a young person's day that helps ensure their focus is on learning, and we are pleased so many young people take up the offer of school meals and hope more choose to do so in the future. We are also very pleased that the recent contract award is better value for money, of a higher quality and that sees staff rewarded with a wage they can live on.

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 2

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

Diesel Fumes at Children's Play Areas

Does the Lead Councillor agree that running diesel engines close to children's play areas is damaging to their health and to the wider environment? Ice cream vans have been part of British history for decades and a welcome sight (and sound) on a hot day. Will the Council do everything it can to support a change from diesel vehicles to electric, including consulting Reading's vendors and installing electric vehicle charge points at pitches such as Palmer Park and across Reading?

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

I thank Cllr White for his question.

It is well known, and referenced extensively in our draft Local Transport Plan and Air Quality Action Plans, that emissions from diesel and petrol engine vehicles are harmful to health.

As reported to Policy and SEPT Committees it is the intention of the Council to phase out the use of diesel and petrol vehicles, where feasible, from our council-owned or licensed vehicles, and to replace them with cleaner alternatives such as electric-powered vehicles.

This phasing out requires both policy changes and consultation, as well as the development and provision of appropriate infrastructure. Due to the financial impact of the pandemic on all street traders any proposals would need to be sensitive to the cost of vehicle replacements, especially in the absence of any central government grants.

Officers across the relevant departments will be bringing forward further proposals next year.

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 3

Councillor White to ask the Leader of the Council:

Tackling climate change through fossil fuel divestment

Green councillors share the concerns of many residents and council employees that we must ensure that our council pensions are not funding climate disaster. In 2015 the council stated that Berkshire pension fund had £27m invested indirectly in fossil fuels. Please can I get an updated figure for Berkshire Pension Fund's direct and indirect investments in fossil fuel companies? Please can the Leader of the Council also update me on the pension fund's progress towards being fully divested (both directly and indirectly) from fossil fuels?

REPLY by Councillor Brock (Leader of the Council):

I thank Councillor White for the question. Perhaps I can start by, again, explaining the structure of local government pension funds which provides important context for my answers.

Reading Borough Council does not manage the pension fund, this is administered by the Berkshire Pension Fund, for which the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead (RBWM) acts as the administering authority on behalf of all the local authorities in Berkshire.

The Berkshire Pension Fund's Environmental, Social and Governance Statement (see https://www.berkshirerpensions.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/bpf_esg_statement.pdf) summarises its approach to the management of environmental risks, including climate change.

Section 5 of the Fund's Investment Strategy Statement (available at <https://www.berkshirerpensions.org.uk/bpf/investments/investment-policies>) also sets out how RBWM is mindful of the need to protect its reputation as an institutional investor by taking account of environmental considerations. The Statement goes on to explain that 'RBWM will not place social, environmental or corporate governance restrictions on the Investment Manager [see below] but relies on it to adhere to best practices in the jurisdictions in which they are based, operates and invests.'

The 'Investment Manager' referred to is an organisation called Local Pensions Partnership (LPP) which manages investments for a number of local government pension funds, including the Berkshire scheme. LPP has a Responsible Investment Policy which includes a specific annex on climate change, both of which can be viewed here: <https://www.localpensionspartnership.org.uk/Home/Investment-management/Responsible-investment/Responsible-Investment-policies>. These set out how LPP uses a target-based approach to 'ensure that it invests in companies which are addressing and assisting the transition to a lower carbon future and moving out of those which are not managing risk effectively on behalf of shareholders' - in other words, the process of divestment. It also sets out how LPP

is actively divesting specifically from companies engaged in thermal coal extraction.

Reading Borough Council adopted a policy supporting the principle of divestment in fossil fuels as long ago as 2015 and we apply this to all investments within our direct control. While pension fund investment decisions are not within our direct control as explained above, we have made our position clear to the relevant authorities. For example, in March 2021 we forwarded correspondence with a concerned resident to the Berkshire Pension Fund as a reminder of the Council's position.

The Berkshire Pension Fund Committee, at its meeting on 22nd March 2021, agreed a comprehensive Responsible Investment Policy which is available on their website, and I am advised that the Fund has one of the lowest levels of investment in fossil fuels among all local authority pension funds. LPPI has embraced a commitment to net-zero carbon emissions by 2050, although I would like the Berkshire Pension Fund to establish a shorter timescale as asset owner. I am pleased that, when the matter was discussed at the Committee last week, there was an undertaking to establish a cross-party Task and Finish group to consider the Fund's asset owner commitments. I was left under the impression that the exact terms of the group are still to be agreed, but I doubt that advisory participants, such as myself, will be able to participate.

I trust this provides some assurance that, while divestment is a complex process rather than a single event, I am very mindful of the role which investments can play in tackling climate change, and that the policies referred to above should be taking the Pension Fund in the right direction, even if I must temper my own impatience in pursuit of collective agreement to further commitments. I will, however, forward your question and this answer to the Berkshire Pension Fund as a further reminder of the Council's position, and to underline our concern to see rapid progress in this area.

At the time of drafting this response, we have yet to have confirmation from RBWM as to the current investment levels in fossil fuels. Once such information is received, officers will ensure that it is disseminated.

As I have said previously, I would also encourage all interested parties to make direct representation to RBWM and to the pension fund. It is a source of some frustration to me personally that this request is so rarely taken up - we all know that a multitude of voices speak louder than a single one.