

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 1

Councillor Thompson to ask the Leader of the Council:

Cost of Living Vouchers

The Council has dropped holiday food vouchers for children on free school meals and replaced them with a combined 'cost of living' voucher. Could you tell me how many, if any, households will be worse off over the Christmas and half-term holidays as a result of the switch?

REPLY by Councillor Brock (Leader of the Council):

The Council originally received funding from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) in December 2020 (the Covid Winter Grant). At this point the fund was predominantly focused on provision of food support for families during school holidays. Approximately 2,500 children were initially supported.

As the funding has evolved, so have DWP's grant conditions which outline how the funds are to be used. This includes a newer requirement to support low-income pensioners, which clearly doesn't sit easily as part of a school holiday food voucher scheme. As the Cost of Living crisis has worsened, the grant conditions have also placed a greater focus on providing support for residents with energy costs and broadening our provision to include households with older people in need of support.

In the latest round of the Household Support Fund (1 October 2022 - 31 March 2023) we have combined the energy and food voucher schemes into one Cost of Living voucher and continue to support the same cohorts of residents, those being families and older people.

One of the benefits of the Cost of Living voucher is that it provides flexibility to residents as they can redeem their voucher for cash and choose how to use the funds according to their individual needs. In so doing, it also helps to avoid some of the wholly undeserved, but nonetheless perceptible, social stigma that accompanies a food voucher scheme. Indeed, there was a shortfall of claims against the former food voucher scheme.

In the period to March 2023, as well as providing £125 Cost of Living vouchers to approx. 3,800 families and young people, we will provide cost of living support to approx. 4,200 older people households (at a value of £100 per household). In addition, we have expanded support of £650 to 355 residents who are in receipt of Housing Benefit but not in receipt of any other DWP benefit - these are residents who previously missed out on Government support.

Over the period October 2022 to March 2023, we expect to provide a total of over £800,000 support in Cost of Living vouchers to over 8,000 households. Since October, each household with one or more children eligible for free school meals will have received (or be receiving) a £49 voucher as well as the £125 voucher. The scheme is not readily comparable to the food vouchers, but the simple mathematics would mean that any household with 3 eligible children would receive approximate parity across Christmas and

the half-terms, but - importantly - they would also have much greater flexibility in using the money.

My sums here ignore all the other support (e.g. support with housing arrears, the separate Citizens Advice energy voucher scheme, and finance to VCS organisations providing direct support to families with food and clothing, among other things) that we have also funded via HSF. It also ignores the new the Holiday Activities and Food scheme (also known as the Holiday Activities Fund, or HAF), which is organised by BFfC on RBC's behalf. HAF will continue during the Christmas holidays and beyond and provides a meal with all activities. Access to HAF is free for all children on pupil premium free school meals and, beyond food, it also obviously provides some respite to parents.

Overall, the new package of support is far more holistic in supporting households in need than the food voucher scheme ever was. It is also a sizeable enhancement of the support previously offered and I feel confident in claiming both that the package delivers the most comprehensive support we can within the funding envelope provided and that families are receiving more support, not less. Moreover, it helps to avoid the very real problem of some families not wishing to claim the food vouchers.

I do note that, elsewhere, you have claimed that 'when we found out via a newspaper article on October 29 that RBC had dropped holiday food vouchers [...]' This is cause for some concern, as you received a Decision Book report for HSF 1st October 2022 - 31 March 2023 on 18th October 2022 (on which date it was also public). I might suggest that you do not rely on the external media to keep abreast of the Council.

In addition to the direct financial support being provided to over 8,000 households and the specific support being offered during school holidays, the Council has developed a comprehensive web site which details all the support available within the borough for residents who are concerned about the current rising cost of living. The Cost of Living and Money Matters pages can be accessed directly from the front page of the main Council website and includes information on advice and support on a broad range of issues, including reducing costs, accessing support for food and clothing, benefits checker, energy efficiency advice, and how to protect your health and wellbeing. This information has been sent to all households in the borough and is actively being promoted by local voluntary and community organisations.

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

15 DECEMBER 2022

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 2

Councillor McElroy to ask the Lead Councillor for Leisure and Culture:

Cricket Facilities at Cintra Park

In March this year this Committee considered my proposal for Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funding to improve cricket facilities in Cintra Park. Officers concluded that the proposal was “A deliverable project that would meet all of the set criteria, although delivery will be beyond 2022-23.”

CIL funding was not awarded though officers have said that they have held several meetings with both Berkshire Royals Cricket Club as well as Berkshire Cricket Foundation to identify the best way of letting facilities to bring cricket and the pavilion back into use, and access funding for sports facilities, prior to a letting process being started.

Could we please get an update on any progress on how the letting process has gone?

REPLY by Councillor Barnett-Ward (Lead Councillor for Leisure and Culture):

The opportunity to let the Pavilion at Cintra Park including use of the cricket pitches and other sports facilities is due to be advertised through the Community Lettings process in the new year.

A bidding and evaluation scheme has been written to ensure an organisation offered use of the pavilion will meet both the objects of L G Sutton charity, for which the Council is Trustee, and will also meet the criteria to access funding available through Berkshire Cricket to upgrade the cricket pitches.

I will ask officers to keep Redlands Ward Councillors updated on the progress of this letting.

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COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 3

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Education and Public Health:

Ensuring School Meals Remain Tasty and Nutritious

With the cost-of-living crisis the number of children on free school meals has risen from 3688 in 2019/20 up to 4966 in 2021/22. These meals are more important than ever. However reports in the press are that because of inflation school meal providers are reducing the quality of ingredients and shrinking portions. Green councillors would like an update on how Reading's school meals provider is handling pressures such as inflation and making sure school meals remain tasty and nutritious.

REPLY by Councillor McEwan (Lead Councillor for Education and Public Health):

The provider continues to meet the national food standards and Food for Life accreditation. This ensures that healthy, balanced meals are provided to pupils in Reading and a variety offered across the three-week menu cycle. The provider has also confirmed that they have made no changes to quality of ingredients or portion sizes and are meeting the requirements set out in the contract specification. Brighter Futures for Children (BFfC) continue to work in partnership with the provider and schools to monitor contract performance, gather feedback and look at ways to increase uptake, especially for those entitled to a free meal.

BFfC facilitate a quarterly online School Meals Forum to give all schools in contract the opportunity to share their views and concerns. At the October meeting, the provider was asked to present on the standards for portion size and have encouraged schools them to notify them if this isn't being delivered.

In June we agreed, in consultation with schools, a meal price increase with the provider. This was kept to a minimum and is in line with contract conditions, which allow an increase to take into changes to CPI and Living Wage Indices. However, the provider has indicated that since then there have been increasing pressures such as inflation and a further increase in the Living Wage Foundation Living Wage due by May 23. Therefore the provider has requested a review in the new year to discuss the meal price and specification. Any proposed changes to either the meal price or menu products will be done in full consultation with schools.

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

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15 DECEMBER 2022

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 4

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Climate Strategy and Transport:

Traffic Light Outages

The traffic lights at the junction of London Road and Cholmeley Road have been out since approximately June. My Katesgrove Green Party councillor colleagues tell me the pedestrian crossings over Whitley Street have also been out for some time. Please can I be updated on how many traffic lights and pedestrian crossings are currently out, how long each has been out for, what the reason for the delay in reinstating them is and what the Council is doing to improve the situation?

REPLY by Councillor Page (Lead Councillor for Climate Strategy and Transport):

I thank Cllr White for his question.

At the time of writing, there are two sets of traffic signals that have unplanned outages. In July this year a road traffic incident caused significant damage to the traffic signal equipment at the junction of London Road and Cholmeley Road, which included the destruction of the traffic signal controller. Whilst this was a site that used older equipment, it remained a reliable and serviceable junction. However, the damage required a complete and unplanned technical refresh of the entire junction.

The Council installed a temporary set of traffic signals at this junction whilst it was assessed, along with design and specifications produced and materials ordered. There has been a significant delay experienced with the delivery of the components required, which is not an issue that is unique to Reading, but replacement works are due to commence before Christmas.

The dual pedestrian crossings that span Southampton Street and Mount Pleasant have been offline since the beginning of October.

Traffic signal engineers were quick to assess the reason, which was traced to a loss of power supply. The Council's street lighting contractor also responded rapidly to the issue and identified that the fault was located outside the Council's local street lighting power supply and is within the national grid power network, managed by Scottish & Southern Energy (SSE). The Council cannot undertake works on this third-party apparatus.

While a fault was swiftly raised with SSE, it is a nationally recognised issue that often on-street equipment is not considered a priority for electrical fault responses, which can impact on street lighting, traffic signals and other powered highway apparatus. This is an issue that the industry has been trying to change for many years and officers are continuing to pursue SSE for an urgent investigation and rectification of this power supply issue.