

COUNCIL MEETING – 15 OCTOBER 2024

AGENDA ITEM 5

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

1. Tony Page to ask the Leader of the Council Allocation of Councillors to Committee Places

Following the serious and unprecedented statement made by the Monitoring Officer (MO) under agenda item 11 of the Council AGM on 22nd May, (about the main opposition Green Group), would the Leader of the Council please provide an update on subsequent developments specifically addressing the following questions:

1. Will she clarify which Committees, Sub-Committees and other relevant appointments are still lacking Green Group representatives ?
2. What, if any, external advice or guidance has the MO requested on whether similar issues have arisen in any other authorities ?
3. Has the MO asked the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities or LGA for any advice about precedent ?
4. When will the Standards Board receive a full report, and what powers/sanctions might it have in such a situation ?
5. When will the MO call a special meeting of the Remuneration Panel, and will he provide a full report to them outlining the available options and/or sanctions on which they can then provide recommendations to the Council ?
6. Following the deliberations of the Standards Committee and the Remuneration Panel will the Leader undertake to bring a full report with recommendations to an early meeting of the Policy Committee and/or full Council ?

REPLY by Councillor Terry Leader of the Council

Thank you for your question Mr Page.

The Green Group has taken up twenty of the twenty-two seats it is entitled to across all committees and sub-committees at the Annual Council Meeting. The Green Group could have taken up, two additional seats on Policy Committee.

They are also under represented on Traffic Management Sub-Committee and Planning Applications Committee.

In terms of seeking advice about precedence, the Monitoring Officer has commissioned the Association of Democratic Services Officers (ADSO) to conduct a review of the Council's arrangements for allocation of seats and proportionality. An initial meeting with officers has taken place. The purpose of the ADSO review is to formulate recommendations on how the allocation of seats could be conducted in future to deliver best practice in this area. Another key consideration will be looking at the duty upon councillors to undertake the responsibilities which the Council requires of them. An important duty being participation in committees and making the difficult decisions required in the public interest. The outcome of the review will be reported to the Standards Committee as the body responsible for overseeing expectations on elected

members. If any changes are required to the Constitution then these will be presented to Council in due course.

The purpose of the review is to look at the systems of the Council and therefore the Standards Committee is not invited to review the actions of individual members. This is a democratic institution and voters can make up their own minds about whether their elected representatives are doing the work expected of them. Hopefully the review's conclusions will serve to foster a shared understanding of the nature of the role of councillors in the decision-making process across the Council and encourage full participation from all political groups.

Additionally, the Remuneration Panel met on 8 October 2024 and considered the issues raised by the Monitoring Officer in his statement to Council in May about underrepresentation of the main opposition group on some committees. The Panel was concerned at this situation and the increased workload that could be placed on other groups and individual councillors on those committees with effectively 'vacant' seats. As a result, the Panel decided it wanted to investigate further and plans are being taken forward to invite the group leaders individually and possibly other councillors to meet them in person to discuss the current situation in more detail. After this process, the Panel will formulate its recommendations for the Members' Allowances Scheme for 2025/26.

I won't anticipate the outcome of the ADSO review and the machinations of the Standards Committee and Remuneration Panel at this stage. Suffice to say, the Remuneration Panel will report to Council on the Members' Allowances Scheme in the new year and as ever we will consider its recommendations very carefully. Likewise, the Standards Committee will have the opportunity to refer any matters to the Policy Committee or Council it deems necessary. Finally, and most importantly, I look forward to the Council having all the information it requires when making committee appointments in May 2025 for the forthcoming year with the desired outcome of no groups being under-represented on those committees.

2. Ann Dally to ask the Lead Councillor for Corporate Services and Resources Pension Credit

In a Department for Work and Pensions press release published on 20 August 2024 it is estimated that 880,000 households nationally who are eligible to receive Pension Credit have not yet made a claim. As Councillors maybe aware those receiving pension credit are automatically entitled to the winter fuel payment of up to £300.

In the Reading Borough Council area, Policy in Practise estimate there are 1,686 households missing out on Pension Credit of approx. £6.5 million - that is an average £3,851 a year per household. Pension Credit tops up your weekly income to £218.15 if you're single and your joint weekly income to £332.95 if you have a partner. And receiving Pension Credit could mean people are eligible for other benefits.

Could you please let us know what RBC are doing to publicise possible entitlement to Pension Credit amongst our community and secondly how you will provide rapid support for residents to enable them to make a claim for Pension Credit as soon as possible.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pension-credit-awareness-drive-as-thousands-of-eligible-pensioners-yet-to-claim--2#:~:text=While%20around%201.4%20million%20pensioners,who%20are%20yet%20to%20claim>

<https://policyinpractice.co.uk/2024-unclaimed-pension-credit-value-by-local-authority/#table>

REPLY by Councillor Emberson Lead Councillor for Corporate Services and Resources

In published DWP Pension Credit Take-up statistics, it is estimated that up to 880,000 households who were entitled to receive Pension Credit did not claim the benefit.

However, these statistics are only available at Great Britain level and cannot be broken down to smaller geographical areas. The latest available Pension Credit take-up statistics for Great Britain cover the financial year 2021 to 2022 and are available at: [Income-related benefits: estimates of take-up: financial year ending 2022 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/income-related-benefits-estimates-of-take-up-financial-year-ending-2022)

The Council's Revenue & Benefits Service has identified 175 residents within the borough that are likely to be eligible for Pension Credits, but who are currently not claiming them.

To help residents get access to all the support they are entitled to, the Council has written to these 175, providing details of how to apply to the DWP for this additional payment.

The Housing Benefit team will be proactively following up on these cases over the coming weeks to ensure customers have taken the advice given.

The Council has also commissioned Age UK Berkshire to offer help and support to pensioners in Reading in completing applications for Pension Credits where help is required, and we would urge anyone in need of assistance to email info@ageukberkshire.org.uk or phone 0118 959 4242.

With the announcement that the Household Support Fund scheme will be extended until the end of March 2025, low-income residents will be able to continue to receive additional support through the winter months.

Within the current Household Support Fund scheme for Reading, households with residents above state pension age who do not meet the criteria for the Winter Fuel Payment, but who are eligible for Council Tax Reduction support, will receive a payment of £200 this winter.

3. Wendy Rooke to ask the Lead Councillor for Climate Strategy and Transport Plant Based Treaty

Plant-based diets result in 75% less greenhouse gas emissions and land use than diets with 100g of meat daily. They cut wildlife destruction by 66% and water use by 54%. An analysis by the Office of Health Economics shows that plant-based diets would save the NHS £6.7bn yearly, with 2.1 million fewer cases of disease. Research consistently shows that local governments are trusted more than national politicians, making the Council well positioned to introduce plant-based initiatives and deliver public education. Will the Lead Councillor ask officers to reach out to Edinburgh Council to learn about their experiences of endorsing the Plant Based Treaty, and do an impact assessment report within the next year for a future Full Council meeting ?

REPLY by Councillor Ennis Lead Councillor for Climate Strategy and Transport

The Council is a signatory to the Reading Climate Change Partnership which, through its Climate Emergency Strategy, highlights the benefits of a reduced meat consumption and plant based diets on climate change. The Council work with other Council's through a number of formal collaborations and partnerships and welcome the suggestion to consider the approaches being taken by Edinburgh Council. A report will be brought to the Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport Committee and/or Policy Committee in November 2025 presenting a new 2025 to 2030 Climate Emergency Strategy for the Borough of Reading. This is currently being developed with partners and participants to incorporate agreed future actions and proposals to tackle the climate emergency up to 2030. As part of that process the policies and best practice put forward by other authorities will be considered including, as suggested, Edinburgh's experiences of endorsing the Plant Based Treaty.