

AGENDA ITEM 6

QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

1. Councillor Moore to ask the Leader of the Council:

Local Government Finance Settlement

Given that the Labour Party is now in government nationally, will the ruling Labour administration in Reading Borough Council commit to working with the national Labour Government to review and reform the Local Government Finance Settlement, ensuring that Councils like Reading receive fair and sustainable funding to support vital services for our residents ?

Furthermore, how does the administration plan to advocate for multi-year settlements that address the financial pressures facing local authorities, and what steps are being taken to ensure that Reading's voice is heard in these national discussions ?

REPLY by Councillor Terry Leader of the Council.

Councils up and down the country are under severe financial strain. There are already 18 council's receiving exceptional financial support, and that number is very likely to increase significantly unless councils receive a significant and sustained increase in overall funding that reflects current and future demands for services.

The Labour Party manifesto gave a commitment to multi-year funding settlements and that commitment remains now that we have a Labour Government. However, given the £22 billion hidden hole in Government budgets inherited from the last Conservative Government, as confirmed by the Chair of the Office for Budget Responsibility, I understand that it is most likely that there will be another one-year funding settlement this year, ahead of a multi-year settlement next year.

The previous government started work on fair funding back in 2016 but failed to deliver a settlement and it is yet another vital issue that this new Labour Government must fix.

I have made sure Reading's 3 Labour MP's are fully briefed on the council's financial situation, the pressures it faces and the need for both a sustainable government funding formula to accurately reflect demand, resolving the Business Rates reset, and moving away from competitive bidding processes that waste much time and energy often for nothing.

So, yes – this administration will advocate for funding reform and I expect confirmation of multi-year settlements in due course. I have had the opportunity to speak to Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution along with other local government leaders and I know that he understands the pressures facing local government. But let us be honest, this Government has a great deal to do to fix broken Britain and I do not expect everything to be fixed all at once as it would seem most political commentators do!

I am sure the Minister of State and many others in Government want to avoid more council's issuing s114 notices or asking for exceptional financial support and understand that we need an increase in council funding that reflects current costs and demands for services like adult social care, children's social care, SEND and temporary accommodation.

2. Councillor Moore to ask the Lead Councillor for Corporate Services and Resources:

Winter Fuel Payment

Could the Lead Councillor provide an update on the following matters in light of recent changes to Winter Fuel Payment eligibility announced by the Labour Government ?

- What assessment has the Council made regarding the impact of restricting Winter Fuel Payments to only those pensioners in receipt of Pension Credits and other benefits, particularly for those on lower and middle incomes who will now be excluded ?
- Can the Council confirm how many pensioners in Reading are affected by the change in eligibility criteria, and what percentage of local pensioners currently receiving Winter Fuel Payments will no longer be eligible ?
- Given that only 63% of those eligible for Pension Credits nationally are currently claiming them, and over 880,000 pensioners are missing out on this support, what steps is the Council taking to raise awareness and increase the uptake of Pension Credit in Reading ?
- With the Energy Price Cap set to rise by 10% in October, how does the Council intend to support the thousands of local pensioners at risk of falling into fuel poverty due to the combined effect of rising energy costs and the removal of Winter Fuel Payments for most pensioners ?
- Finally, will the Council consider writing to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and local MPs to call for a pause on the changes to Winter Fuel Payment eligibility, and if so, could the Council explore the possibility of a joint letter from all group leaders ?

REPLY by Councillor Emberson Lead Councillor for Corporate Services and Resources.

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.

During 2023/24, a total of 4,630 families in Reading claiming pupil premium school meals, and care leavers, received vouchers totalling up to £365; 880 eligible households with residents above state pension age received payments of £450; 2,651 payments of £125 were made to low-income households who applied for cost-of-living support; and a further 2,537 people were supported via Reading's voluntary and community sector organisations, who continue to reach people who may otherwise be missed.

The Council also continues to fund services from the local voluntary and community sector to support residents struggling with the cost of living. This includes providing funding of over £270,000 per year to the local Tackling Poverty Partnership and Citizens Advice Reading.

I would also urge anyone who is struggling with their finances to visit the Money Matters page on the Council's website. Here residents can find information about the support and advice that is available to them.

In relation to the call for a joint letter, we note the motion calls to Council for the same, please refer to our amendment. We are not supportive of any such letter.

**3. Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Corporate Services and Resources:
Labour Cutting Winter Fuel Payments to Pensioners**

Green Councillors oppose Labour's plan to cut winter fuel payments to pensioners

Labour research from 2017 claimed Tory plans to scrap the winter fuel payment for better-off pensioners could lead to almost 4,000 additional deaths over winter. With increased energy costs, more austerity coming and minimal progress insulating homes does the Lead Councillor think that this horrific Labour figure is accurate? If not why not?

REPLY by Councillor Emberson Lead Councillor for Corporate Services and Resources.

When addressing this question, it is important to be clear about the limited role of the Borough Council in reviewing national research, especially any research that was conducted during the tenure of a previous government.

It is the stated aim within our Corporate Plan to enable everyone who lives in Reading to share in the success of doing so. The Council is focused on understanding local need within the borough and where possible providing support to our residents to mitigate the challenges that they face.

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I would also urge anyone who is struggling with their finances to visit the Money Matters page on the Council's website. Here residents can find information about the support and advice that is available to them.

I would also comment that the Chancellor has ruled out any return to austerity and I trust that the forthcoming Autumn Budget will clarify more so Labour's commitment to change. We must stabilise the economy if we are to invest in our public services and I have no doubt a Labour government shall do both.

4. Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Corporate Services and Resources:
Reading Council Call Centre Wait Times Too High

Earlier in the year a number of residents contacted me about very long Reading Council call centre wait times. The Council informed me that the average wait for the year so far was 42 minutes for residents phoning about Council house repairs, 36 minutes for Council house allocations, 27 minutes for Council Tax enquiries and 26 minutes for waste and street care calls (figures from end of July).

These wait times were all approximately double the year before. Does the Lead Councillor agree with me that these wait times are totally unacceptable ? What action has been taken to bring down these wait times and what are they now ?

REPLY by Councillor Emberson Lead Councillor for Corporate Services and Resources.

Thank you to Councillor White for his question.

Wait-to-answer times were higher than we would have liked at the time the information was provided to Councillor White. There were several issues which came together to create major pressure on the ability for the Council to provide a good service.

I agree these wait times are unacceptable which is why Council officers from the Customer Fulfilment Centre and relevant front-line services took immediate action to remedy the situation. We constantly strive to improve response times within a very difficult budget situation. Improvements are on-going but wait times have improved and in September they averaged 12 minutes for Council Tax and less than 10 minutes for housing repairs.

The specific issues which caused the problems during the summer were to do with teething problems with the new Housing Services' IT System made worse by a national problem of recruiting trade operatives to do repairs, an unusual number of waste vehicle breakdowns which meant bins were not collected as effectively as normally, and high level of sickness in the Customer Fulfilment Team.

We have taken great strides to fix these problems. The Housing System issues are being corrected and we are delivering a second phase of its introduction which will, for example, allow residents to directly book most repairs. We have introduced voice automation to certain telephone enquires which allows residents to get an immediate answer to many questions. And we and the Housing Team are recruiting more staff to improve services.

For the future we will continue to develop our technology including rolling out our new Customer IT system and looking at options such as Chat Bots and AI. We will also be revamping our web

sites over the coming year to make them more user friendly and ensure the join up better with our new technology.

But technology is no good without our great staff. So alongside driving recruitment in key areas we are putting a lot more into training and continually improving how we work so that they can give the best to our Residents.

Even with the strides we have made in introducing new tech and improving how we work, the challenging finances over the last few years has made it extremely difficult to provide the excellent service for which we would wish. I am proud of our dedicated and hard working staff and their achievements under these difficult circumstances.

I am told there are a couple of key things all Members could help the Customer Fulfilment Team with. Firstly, our call centre is extremely busy first thing Monday morning, so encouraging Residents to call at other times would be helpful. Secondly, also encouraging them to use the web site as often as possible.

We are committed to maintaining a telephony and face-to-face service as we know how important this is for our most vulnerable residents, but there is much that can easily be done online by more than currently use it.

5. Councillor McCann to ask the Leader of the Council:
Can the Council Save Whitley CDA ?

Whitley Community Development Association (CDA) is at risk of closure due to lack of funds.

Rightly known as 'the beating heart of Whitley', Whitley CDA provides essential community services to some of the most marginalised people in Reading, across Whitley, Church, Redlands and Katesgrove wards, from its base at the South Reading Community Hub. As well as helping people access food, support and information on health and social welfare issues, the café and community museum provide important opportunities to connect and feel a sense of being part of a warm, supportive community.

We understand the association has made it through to the second round of applications for The National Lottery Community Fund. To be successful at this stage, it needs to demonstrate that it receives financial support from the local authority. It currently receives no statutory support and in fact pays rent of £27,000 per annum.

We would like to suggest that the Council considers reducing the rent down to a peppercorn rate. This would both provide the support the association needs to show for the second round of Lottery funding and ensure the money it receives goes further, so it can make even more of a difference.

The services Whitley CDA provides are even more needed in the face of the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, and it has built up a level of community engagement that would be very hard to reestablish.

The deadline for Round 2 applications is 12 December. Can the Lead Councillor assure us that the Council will take some action before this date to ensure Whitley CDA has a fair chance of continuing its vital work ?

REPLY by Councillor Terry Leader of the Council.

Reading has a vibrant, effective, and committed voluntary and community sector. The sector is an important part of the fabric of our society, supporting residents and enhancing the town's

cultural opportunities. It makes a significant contribution to social inclusion and community cohesion across Reading.

Although the Council and the groups and organisations in the voluntary and community sector are separate, there is a long history of working together in partnership for the benefit of our residents and the Council respects and values the independence of the sector.

The collaborative working relationship that the Council has with the sector encompasses many different approaches, including directly providing funding for specific activities or outcomes. In 2023/24, Reading Borough Council provided approx. £8.3M of funding to voluntary and community organisations operating within the borough.

Unfortunately, the reality of the Council's financial position means that it is unable to provide funding for all the VCS organisations operating within the borough. This is one of the reasons why the Council provides funding to organisations like Reading Voluntary Action who exist to support other voluntary organisations and their ongoing resilience, including other funding opportunities. The Council also provides the Reading4Community Funding portal so that local VCS organisations can search and apply for other forms of funding.

Within South Reading, by utilising their Big Local funding and other income that they generate each year, the Whitley Community Development Association (WCDA) have been an important and visible local community organisation providing support to residents, as well as hosting other local voluntary organisations and activities within the space in the South Reading Community Hub that they lease from the Council.

In recognising the great work that the WCDA does, the Council has already applied a reduced charity rate for their lease of the South Reading Community Hub, which is lower than other hire rates charged across other local authorities in Berkshire. There are other costs associated with the £27,000k referenced in the question that are not rent and I understand that Council officers in meetings with the WCDA have been open to discussions about alternative arrangements that could reduce these costs, and as I understand it these discussions are on-going.

Which does lead me to make two other points: where would Councillor McCann suggest the compensatory costs of reducing the rent and associated costs paid by WCDA come from? And to challenge that the National Lottery Community Fund states that the WCDA must demonstrate it receives financial support from the local authority? The Council does do this in that the rent is a reduced rent but I believe the issue is one of bids being more likely to succeed if the organisation bidding has other sources of funding. Clearly that isn't just local authority funding, and I will be meeting with a representative of the organisation myself to suggest some other funding opportunities.

The Council will of course continue to work with the WCDA and other local voluntary and community groups within the borough to explore new opportunities to make the best use of our collective resources to support our residents.