

AGENDA ITEM 6

QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

1. Councillor Moore to ask the Lead Councillor for Children:

Two-Child limit on Universal Credit and Child Tax Credit

The two-child limit on Universal Credit and Child Tax Credit, introduced in 2017 by the Conservatives, has been identified as a significant driver of child poverty, affecting over 1,000 households and 10% of children in Reading as of 2022. Families subject to this cap lose £3,455 per year for each child beyond the second, exacerbating financial hardship and contributing to the 28% of children in Reading currently living in poverty.

Children in poverty are more likely to face mental health challenges, lower educational outcomes, and reduced job opportunities later in life. Furthermore, the Commons Education Select Committee has highlighted the link between poverty and increased absenteeism in schools. The Institute for Fiscal Studies projects that an additional 250,000 children will be affected by the policy this year, and there is evidence that the policy has also disproportionately impacted Muslim and Jewish communities. Unite, Unison, GMB and the NEU are among ten trade unions that have all called on the Government to reverse the cap.

In light of this evidence and the potential for 250,000 children to be lifted out of poverty if the policy were removed, what action is the Council taking to advocate for Reading families affected by the two-child limit?

REPLY by Councillor Griffith Lead Councillor for Children.

Across the UK, poverty, and deep poverty, where household income is less than 50% of the median, is having a profound negative impact upon the lives of children, their development, and the outcomes that they achieve. These national trends are reflected across Reading where the cost-of-living crisis continues to bite and over 5000 children are eligible for pupil premium and free school meals.

In 2020 the previous government announced that the holiday activities and food programme (HAF) would be expanded across the whole of England as it has been recognised that school holidays create pressure points for some households because of increased costs (such as food and childcare). Free holiday clubs are a response to this issue, and they can have a wider positive impact on children and young people's mental health, educational attainment, and self-esteem. As part of the offer, holiday club places were available for the equivalent of at least four hours a day, four days a week, six weeks a year.

98% of schools across Reading are connected with the Local Authority's HAF programme. Between March 2023 and December 2024, a total of around 4500 unique children had attended over 18,600 HAF sessions delivered across Easter, Summer, and Christmas holiday periods.

In January 2025, the Government announced that the HAF programme would be extended for 2025.

The Council also continues to focus the support available from the Household Support Fund on low-income households with children through the provision of cost-of-living vouchers that can be cashed and tailored to the needs of each individual family.

During 2024/25, cost of living vouchers worth £250 have been sent to over 4,000 households within the borough who have children who receive Pupil Premium Free School Meals. Low-income households have also been able to apply for a cost-of-living payment from the Household Support Fund, with approximately £500,000 being paid out to local residents during 2024/25.

The Council has also provided over £200,000 to local voluntary and community organisations to enhance their provision of direct support to low-income families within the borough.

Last year the Government announced that the Household Support Fund would be extended until October 2025.

2. Councillor Moore to ask the Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Community Safety:
Fly-Tipping

Local residents are concerned about the ongoing issue of fly-tipping in Reading and the significant costs associated with its cleanup. I would like to draw your attention to successful approaches taken by other Councils to address this issue more effectively.

Manchester City Council has implemented movable cameras in fly-tipping hotspots with notable success. Additionally, Winchester City Council has managed to reduce fly-tipping by 40% by focusing on prosecutions, resulting in criminal records for offenders, rather than relying on the government-preferred Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs).

In light of these examples, I would like to request the following information:

1. The current annual cost to the Council for cleaning up repeat fly-tipping incidents.
2. Any estimates or assessments the Council has made regarding the potential costs and benefits of adopting movable camera enforcement in known fly-tipping areas.
3. Whether the Council has considered or reviewed the effectiveness of moving toward a prosecution-focused approach, as seen in Winchester, and the potential impact this could have on reducing fly-tipping in Reading.

I believe that exploring these alternative strategies could lead to more cost-effective and long-term solutions for our Borough

REPLY by Councillor Rowland Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Community Safety.

I'd like to thank Councillor Moore, for his question, which allows me to clarify the work of our street-cleansing and enforcement teams and how we are amplifying the ways in our enforcement team deal with fly-tipped waste and litter across Reading going forward.

Addressing your first question, the Council has a duty to keep the public highway and other Council-owned land clear of waste. Cleansing operatives routinely empty street litter bins, collect litter and remove fly-tipped waste from public land at the same time. As such, the costs associated with clearing fly-tipped waste are not recorded separately from the Council's broader daily street cleansing functions.

With regards to your second and third questions on enforcement, the Council has a team of Recycling & Enforcement Officers that not only investigate litter, fly-tipping and other waste offences, but they have duties also in educating residents and businesses regarding recycling and appropriate waste management/minimisation. This work will become even greater as we

continue to meet the Government's Simpler Recycling targets. This is a large volume of work for our enforcement team who have done a formidable job to date, but are eager to do more.

Fly-tipping and littering is proliferated by an unscrupulous few, the results of which adversely affects the majority of residents who manage to do the right thing by blighting the local environment and reducing residents' positivity about where they live. I must thank you for your timely question as I am pleased to advise you that a significant change is in the air. The Recycling & Waste Service is currently in the final stages of planning to enter a 12-month trial arrangement with a partner organisation for the robust enforcement of environmental offences in Reading. I would urge you to take note of a report which will be presented to HNL committee on the 11th March providing an overview of this zero cost partnership arrangement, its benefits in context with our strategic priorities and the contractual conditions that will protect the interests of our residents, the Council and its stakeholders. This trial arrangement is planned to commence in May and will double the enforcement resources available to the Council, with priority given to the tackling of fly-tipping and littering offences.

Where fly-tipping is investigated by this enhanced team, and an offender identified, enforcement action will take place in the form of a Fixed Penalty Notice (FPN). An FPN is designed to give the opportunity to dispose of the offence out of court and avoid prosecution by payment. For large scale or repeat offences, the Council and its partner can decide not to issue an FPN and proceed straight to court for the alleged offences.

To that end, we have also looked critically at FPN charge rates and proposals for the review of the Council's Fixed Penalty charge rates have been submitted as part of the Council's annual review of fees for implementation from the 1st April 2025. These charges will seek to amplify fees for both littering and fly-tipping offences and recover the cost of enforcement. It is hoped that enhanced FPN fees will act as a significant deterrent whilst remaining reasonable and proportionate through the offender making early payment arrangements.

Furthermore, we will also be announcing a refreshed approach regarding our free bulky waste service which will directly take on work in those communities where fly-tipping is at its worst. The prior arrangement was significantly over-subscribed and failed to sufficiently address those communities that needed it most.

Finally, the team currently operate three sets of moveable CCTV cameras for fly-tipping purposes. These are in frequent fly-tip hotspot areas and are monitored regularly. The cameras are currently situated at Kensington Road bottle banks, the Anstey Road/Howard Street public bins and bottle banks and Whitley Wood Recreation Ground bottle banks. These cameras are most effective where waste is deposited from a vehicle and a vehicle registration can be identified from the CCTV however, we are optimistic with enhancement of our enforcement work, even that CCTV surveillance can be improved and expanded going forward.

I hope that you and the many good residents of Reading will be reassured by these upcoming changes to how we address littering and fly-tipping in our Borough.

3. Councillor White to ask the Leader of the Council:
Ceasefire in Gaza and Ending the UK's Arms Trade with Israel

As I write this question there is a fragile ceasefire in Gaza.

However, Israel's assault on Palestinians in the Gaza Strip has killed tens of thousands of Palestinians - almost half of them children.

In January, the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the world court, handed down an interim ruling affirming there is plausible evidence Israel is committing genocidal acts against Palestinians in

the Gaza Strip. As a State Party to the Genocide Convention, the UK has a binding obligation to employ all means reasonably available to prevent and deter further genocidal acts.

We all have a responsibility to stand with Palestinians in the face of such catastrophic violence and do everything in our power to bring such suffering to an end.

From the obligations laid out by the ICJ, councils must avoid procuring from or investing the funds they manage, including Local Government Pension Scheme funds, in companies that facilitate Israel's breaches of international law.

Will the Leader of the Council:

1. Write to the Labour Prime Minister calling for him to do everything he can to bring about a permanent ceasefire, for the return of all hostages and for an end to the UK's arms trade with Israel.
2. Ask our representative on the Berkshire Pension Fund panel to call for and report back to Policy Committee urgently on the pension fund divesting:
 - a. from companies complicit in Israel's attacks on Palestinians
 - b. and those on the UN's list of businesses involved in activities in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and deemed complicit in human rights abuses.
3. Oppose Reading Council entering into contracts with such companies in future.?

REPLY by Councillor Terry Leader of the Council.

Last week the Council hosted the Holocaust Memorial Day event and yesterday marked the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau and if my references are correct the 30th anniversary of the genocide in Bosnia.

I reference these events because when Councillor White says:

'We all have a responsibility to stand with Palestinians in the face of such catastrophic violence and do everything in our power to bring such suffering to an end.'

I am reminded that in remembering past events which challenge our sense of humanity we all too often respond to the next terrible acts by calling for us to be on one side or another.

For me all killing is wrong and I stand with those families whose lives were torn apart by the events of 7th October 2023 and with those whose lives have been lost and devastated by the Israeli Government's response.

So in answer to the specific requests, I am not minded to write to the Prime Minister as I am sure that the situation in the Gaza Strip is already upper most in his mind and his Government is already doing what it can to bring about an end to the violence, a surge of humanitarian aid into Gaza, with the UK standing ready to do everything it can to support a permanent and peaceful solution.

Councillor White's second request was that we call for action from the Berkshire Pension Fund on limiting investments.

I refer Councillor White to a response given by the then Leader Councillor Brock back in December 2021. In that response he reminded you once again that Reading Borough Council does not manage the pension Fund,

The Fund, administered by the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead (RBWM) acting on behalf of the all the local authorities in Berkshire has been contacted. A response has been received which is too long and detailed to be included here but I would draw you attention to the following:

“The Fund’s investments are managed under full delegation by Local Pensions Partnership Investments (LPPI), invested primarily through pooled investment vehicles, so in order to get a more detailed updated response I will need to forward your email to them.” (This information is not available for this meeting.)

The Fund has fully delegated the implementation of its investment strategy to LPPI, so any disinvestment decisions will be made by LPPI, based on their investment research and due diligence activities. This also includes consideration of the Fund’s Responsible Investment Policy. This policy, alongside LPPI’s responsible investment frameworks, ensures that environmental, social and governance considerations are part of investment decisions.

The response went on to say:

“I would also refer you to the Counsel’s Opinion obtained in October 2024 by the Local Government Pension Scheme Advisory Board on the Local Government Pension Scheme and implications of the current events concerning Gaza, which can be found here: [LGPS Scheme Advisory B - Legal Opinions](#).”

Rather than agreeing to your request at point 2(a) & (b) I suggest that you consider the information provided in the link above and the range of information easily available from the pension Fund itself.

The Council’s representative will continue to monitor LPPI’s management of investments and engage with them regarding responsible investment considerations.

With regard to point 3, I would remind Councillor White of the Council’s ethical investment statement in our Treasury Management Strategy which I was certain he already knew?

“1.86 The Council will not knowingly invest directly in businesses whose activities and practices pose a risk of serious harm to individuals or groups, or whose activities are inconsistent with the Council’s Corporate Plan and values. This would include institutions with material links to:

- human rights abuse (e.g. child labour, political oppression)
- environmentally harmful activities (e.g. pollution, destruction of habitat, fossil fuels)
- socially harmful activities (e.g. tobacco, gambling)

1.87 Further, the Council will only invest in countries deemed as “Free” as per the Freedom House Global Freedom rating system.

The Council strengthened this statement to include human rights abuse to cover, amongst other areas, political oppression. The principles in this statement are applicable to all investments made by the Council.

The Council check potential contractors against its policies as I outlined just now. However, it should be noted that although the Council endeavours to know the backgrounds of those companies with whom we contract, we cannot know all their funding sources or affiliations.