

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

16 DECEMBER 2019

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 1

Ann Dally to ask the Lead Councillor for Corporate and Consumer Services:

Collection of Council Tax

Could you please update us on the results of studies made on the most efficient and compassionate way of collecting monies owed to the Council by Reading residents?

REPLY by Councillor Emberson (Lead Councillor for Corporate and Consumer Services):

I thank Mrs Dally for her question.

The Revenues team have made significant progress in implementing most of the recommendations made in the Council Tax Protocol following the commitment within the local Labour Party manifesto.

The Revenues and Benefits team have this year been working much more closely with the debt advice sector to review the Council's processes, to better enable residents to maintain their council tax payments. Examples include:

- Providing Council Tax overview training to the advice sector;
- Providing Enforcement overview training to the advice sector in partnership with our Enforcement Agents;
- Promoting awareness of discounts and benefits;
- Review of policies following feedback from the advice sector;
- Working with the advice sector to review Council Tax literature.

The Revenues team have also reviewed the Money Advice Service's Supportive Council Tax Recovery guide and continue to work towards implementing the good practices identified that improve collaboration with the debt advice agencies and better support residents in financial difficulty. These include:

- Debt Advice Intervention - The Revenues team are working with Citizens Advice Reading to look to implement a referral process for customers where appropriate.
- Resident Affordability - The Revenues team support financial statements from the debt advice sector based on the Standard Financial Statement (SFS) spending guidelines and align their own internal affordability processes to the SFS.

- Payment Arrangements & Enforcement - The Revenues team apply a consistent approach to payment arrangements and pre-enforcement and apply the recommended approaches within the 'Supportive Council Tax Recovery' guide.
- Debt Advice Referral Strategies - The Revenues team continue to look at referral mechanisms with both external debt advice agencies and our own in-house debt advice team to ensure customers are referred where appropriate.

As a result of these changes the Revenues team have seen the value of court costs applied to customers' accounts decrease in comparison to last year, and in addition have seen the in-year collection improve against the same period last year. This is as a direct result of working more closely with both residents and the debt advice sector to ensure they are able to meet their current financial year council tax payments and taking different approaches to the collection of arrears.

The Customer Services team have received additional training in negotiating affordable arrangements and are more flexible in allowing customers to pay at dates convenient to them, rather than rigidly sticking to 1st of the month.

The Benefits team are currently consulting on three changes to the current Council Tax Support Scheme. One of the main scheme changes is the proposal to remove the need for customers to reapply for Council Tax Support on migration to Universal Credit. This will not only remove the burden of customers going through the application process, but will also remove the likelihood of building Council Tax arrears in the interim period.

The Revenues team have amended their Council Tax literature to include details of where customers may seek financial advice and are working with the Communications team to consider how we may seek to engage with customers earlier on in the process, where traditional letters have failed.

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16 DECEMBER 2019

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 2

Ann Dally to ask the Lead Councillor for Corporate and Consumer Services:

Council Tax Protocol

Has it been possible to set a date for Reading Borough Council to sign up to the Citizens Advice/Local Government Association Council Tax Protocol, as outlined in the local Labour Party manifesto?

REPLY by Councillor Emberson (Lead Councillor for Corporate and Consumer Services):

The Revenues team have made significant progress in implementing most of the recommendations made in the Council Tax Protocol.

Meetings have been held with Citizens Advice Reading to discuss the areas of focus and also to identify any potential resourcing concerns from both sides.

The intention is to formally adopt the protocol at February Policy Committee, but with the recognition that it will continue to evolve and flex as regulations and sources of assistance change and develop.

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PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 3

Richard Tredegett to ask the Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing and Sport:

Mental Health and Problem Debt

As you may have read, the Money and Mental Health Policy Institute recommend that signposting people to debt advice as part of the Increasing Access to Psychological Therapies programme could increase the recovery rate for people with depression and financial difficulty from 22% to 48%. Could you outline how RBC are planning to work with the NHS to develop links and initiatives on supporting those with poor mental health and with problem debt?

REPLY by Councillor Hoskin (Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing and Sport):

The link between debt and mental health has been recognised by Reading Borough Council and is being addressed through various areas of partnership working.

This is a priority issue within the Berkshire Suicide Prevention Strategy Group, chaired by RBC and attended by NHS and other partners. This was identified as a local priority from the Berkshire Suicide Audit 2014-18 overseen by the Berkshire Strategy Group, as well as noted from national data. Work has now started on including questions about problem debt as part of the risk assessment processes carried out by various NHS partners as well as third sector services commissioned to facilitate support for mental wellbeing.

Compass Recovery College for Mental Wellbeing is part of the Council's Public Health & Wellbeing Service and delivers courses to support self-management and mental health recovery as part of its curriculum. The Compass prospectus now includes a course on 'Money Worries' in recognition of the link between debt and mental health, and this has proved to be very popular. Compass works with a range of partners to develop, deliver and promote its courses, including various NHS services - Increasing Access to Psychological Therapies and others. Compass has seen a rise in referrals from GPs, in particular, since the start of the current academic year.

The Council's Revenues team has also made significant progress in implementing many recommendations from the Citizens Advice / Local Government Association Council Tax Protocol. This includes encouraging residents to seek support from other agencies as appropriate, including those which assist with benefit claims and support to mental wellbeing. The

Revenues Team delivers the 'Money Worries' course for Compass as described above.

In addition anyone who presents to Adult Social Care, be that through the 'front-door' or 'Talking Points' in the community, who is found to have issues or concerns with debt will be fully assessed. Once these issues are understood then the appropriate support is provided. This could be in the form of welfare benefits advice and referral to the third sector. If the issues are related to safeguarding concerns, i.e. suspected financial abuse, then this is taken down the safeguarding pathway with a concern/enquiry investigation.

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16 DECEMBER 2019

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 4

Michael Sage to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation:

Grounds Maintenance

In June this year, Reading Borough Council said that Grounds Maintenance Services were not “geared up” to protect a wild orchid that was thought to be extinct but was found growing on a roadside verge in the Borough. When it was pointed out that the Council could be prosecuted under the Countryside and Wildlife Act if they destroyed it, you said you would “seek to protect it”.

In October this year, discussions that took place and the agreement made with the volunteer managers regarding the mowing of the meadow at Fobney Island Nature Reserve were disregarded. It was only good fortune that prevented a hibernaculum (a shelter for animals - in this case principally for reptiles) being destroyed and the wildlife decimated as had happened the year before.

In November this year, it was reported that 800 trees were accidentally chopped down in Palmer Park drawing condemnation from all sides and a high profile celebrity.

In these times of climate and ecological emergency, nature is under extreme pressure and the existence of many species is threatened. We depend on the ecology of the earth to sustain us. What has the Council learned from the failures described (and others) and what measures have and will you put in place to ensure they do not reoccur?

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

Thank you for your question, Mr Sage, that the Council take seriously its custodianship of the biodiversity of our public land. This is a concern that I can assure you we share.

The Council has a wide and varied estate with parks, green verges, marshland, rivers, streams, over 36 hectares of conservation grasslands, allotments and more. We value all of this variety and have at times struggled with a team that has been reduced due to the savage cuts to our budget by central government since 2010. Still I take pride in a team that, in spite of this, manages to do a remarkable job and I support their day-in and day-out professionalism and dedication. The climate emergency has

caused us to continue to look at ways to improve and enhance our resourcing and abilities and we have recently taken on a full-time sustainability manager.

While mistakes can be made in the maintenance of an estate of such complexity and size, each of the incidents you cite in your query, are situations that are far more complex than a soundbite or a tweet, and the team's ethos is always to walk away with lessons learned in the event of error. I am proud to say that each situation you raised was dealt as quickly and effectively as possible, and I commend my team for their efforts in each of the situations.

The discovery of a rare orchid on an urban grass verge was something that is outside the general daily experience of any highways grass cutting operation. However, this Council went into over-drive to ensure its protection directly upon discovery and the measures taken protected the orchid, and it will again be protected ahead of next year's grass cutting season. Sadly, dealing with the social media hype consumed far more time than dealing with the simple protection of the rare orchid and took away precious staff time when other work could have been progressed for the benefit of the environment.

Fobney Island Nature Reserve is a key and protected portion of our town's precious bio-diversity range. As you say, the hibernaculum was not destroyed; in fact, in the absence of any prior agreement with volunteers, the Council mowed the area that was historically set aside for annual mowing. The management plan for Fobney Island is currently being revised by a stakeholder group for the site in conjunction with Council officers. Further tasks to purge dense areas of invasive willow and create areas of open water in sight of the viewing screens are being planned by this collaborative working group.

I am also delighted to report that we are in the early stages of working with volunteers and the Environment Agency proactively to enhance and protect the Kennet Meadows area, just to the north of the Fobney Island Nature Reserve. As you are aware, wetlands are some of the most important ecosystems in the response strategy to climate change, because of their performance as natural "carbon sinks". The biodiversity in terms of plant, bird and river life in the area is an important asset to our town and we look forward to enhancing the area as a vital component of our town's eco-system.

The Council has already expressed regret over the recent mowing of the area in Palmer Park where volunteers, in good faith, felt they had planted 800 whips that were destined to survive to maturity back in 2016 and 2017. I will repeat that apology now for the public record. I will also note that the story inflated itself to the point where we asked for and received formal apology from BBC News for amplifying the actual story. Such negative media focus was deleterious not only to Council officers' energies and time but to all the positive efforts that the Council does make on behalf of the

environment. It also strained our valuable and critical relationship with volunteers that we work with, which are an essential component in fighting climate change.

It was key to work immediately to re-establish that trust and in an emergency meeting held one week after the incident with volunteers and cross-party Councillors we looked to learn those lessons that would together allow us to move forward. As a result, we will on this Wednesday, the 18th December, and on Saturday the 21st, come together with volunteers to replant the 800 whips in Palmer Park. This is a positive activity, that, given your interest, I do hope that you will attend. The area will be designated within the Park as the Cultivation Field Biodiversity Area and will be maintained by volunteers in an effort to ensure this time the whips are given a proper chance at reaching maturity. Additionally, six semi-mature trees will also be planted to further enhance the Park.

In 2010 we set ourselves the target of increasing the number of trees planted on public land by 10%, a target we are close to meeting after a decade of planting: more than 2,000 trees in ten years. A careful maintenance regime means that, with the exception of the very dry summer of 2018, around 98% of these have survived. The new Tree Strategy, that will be available for consultation in the Spring, sets out even more ambitious targets in response to our climate emergency motion.

The Council focuses on many other aspects of our natural environment. It observes legislation on bats and nesting birds, and manages its sites with high habitat value, to ensure that there is always cover and food for fauna. Grounds staff are aware of biodiversity priorities in the carrying out of their grounds maintenance tasks and as we look to enhance our apprenticeship programme these will be lessons that will be further ingrained in their instruction.

The Council is participating in the Reading Climate Action Network and is actively supporting initiatives on public land that will attempt to link up wildlife corridors and better provide for nature in the urban context.

So Mr. Sage, I will draw to a conclusion what the Council has learned in these situations as you asked. That emergency meeting that I called with volunteers a week to the day from the mowing of the area in Palmer Park was designed to reflect on just that and on lessons that could be learned on both sides. The big take-away from that meeting and from each of these situations was this: just how much volunteers, officers, myself and my fellow Councillors alike are focused on meeting the climate emergency and just how much we need to support each other and work together in being the change that must happen. The inflating of the story in Palmer Park about the environment showed just how damaging the media and social media can be as we lost days of officers' and Council time to deal with the fall-out, when indeed that time needed to be focused on delivering our tree strategy, our open spaces strategy and daily forward actions at a critical time of the year.

Naturally, we all aim for no errors, but to make them is inevitable on every side. Our estate is complex and enormous - very much why the public and the Council must hold hands together on this. We can all play our part and the Council is a busy machine in this with many tasks to hand. Likewise, the public can play their part in not fanning the flames and conflating issues that only leads to lost time for the Council fire-fighting and not allowing essential action to progress.

Mr. Sage, you said it yourself: we are in a climate emergency and to hope to meet that, we have not got a day, or an hour to lose. We are all on this earth together and progressing forward on practical policies and actions is our only option. Meeting that challenge can only possibly be achieved by all of us working together as one.

I would be delighted to meet with you one-on-one to discuss your thoughts and how together we can move forward positively together, and I do hope to see you this Wednesday and Saturday in Palmer Park.

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16 DECEMBER 2019

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 5

Michael Sage to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:

Climate Emergency Action Framework

At the Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport Committee on 9th July this year, Councillor Page stated that "The Council has started the process of embedding the climate emergency actions across all departments and services" and "This work will develop over coming months and be captured in a Climate Emergency Action Framework to be formally adopted later in the year."

The recent Climate Change Action report dated 20.11.19 states in para 1.7:

"The Council is currently developing a suite of new strategies and programmes which will be incorporated into the third Climate Change Strategy. A Climate Action Board is proposed. A new post of Head of Climate Strategy has been established alongside a new revenue budget. The Council has launched a number of additional initiatives and projects. Processes have also been put in place for all Committees to report on environmental implications and climate impacts."

We welcome the Council's proposals, however it is essential for the Council to act now and for the plans to be an exemplar for other institutions and enterprises. We therefore we have the following questions/requests:

- Please provide a progress report on the new Climate Emergency Action Framework.
- When will it commence?
- Will it have a set of milestones that will enable progress to be monitored and the feedback taken into account for future action?
- It is important for the public to be fully informed about the Climate and Ecological Emergency and the consequential action required. Will the Councils' Climate Emergency Action Framework be published in a form that will be widely publicised and explained simply?

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

I thank Mr Sage for his question. The development of the Council's climate emergency action framework is already underway. As the name suggests,

and as indicated in the report considered by the Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport Committee on 20th November, this 'framework' is not a single document but encompasses a range of Council strategies and plans which will take forward the Council's response to the climate emergency.

A major element in this context is the Reading Climate Change Strategy. Work to review the current strategy (Reading Means Business on Climate Change 2013 - 2020) has been brought forward by six months to reflect the need for urgency and is led by the Reading Climate Change Partnership in which the Borough Council plays a full and active role. Discussions have been taking place with key stakeholders in recent months and drafting of the revised strategy is on course to be issued for public consultation early in the New Year, for final publication in the spring.

Reading Borough Council is reviewing its own Carbon Plan, previous iterations of which have driven a 63% reduction in emissions from the Council's own estate since 2008, to a timetable which aligns with that outlined for the Reading Climate Change Strategy.

In addition, there are a number of other strategies and plans produced by the Council for the whole of Reading, such as the Local Plan, the Local Transport Plan and Housing Strategy, which can be considered part of our overall climate action framework. Progress with these is inevitably at varying stages (for example, the Local Plan was adopted in November 2019 and includes pioneering net zero carbon standards for new development) but in each case taking forward action in relation to climate change will be a key consideration in the process of review.

The Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport Committee meeting in November also accepted a recommendation to establish a Climate Action Programme Board within the Council, and this is expected to convene early in the New Year. Once established, the Board will drive forward and co-ordinate the Council's activities in response to the climate emergency.

In summary, I can therefore confirm that:

- Development of the Council's climate action framework, including the Reading Climate Change Strategy and the Council's own Carbon Plan, is well underway.
- The Reading Climate Change Strategy and the Council's own Carbon Plan will include milestones against which progress can be monitored.
- Key elements of the framework will be widely communicated and publicised (for example, there will be a period of public consultation on the Reading Climate Change Strategy early in 2020).

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

16 DECEMBER 2019

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 6

Michael Sage to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:

Engagement With The Business Community

If Reading Borough is to achieve Net Zero Carbon Emissions by 2030 it will require the coordinated best effort of everyone not least the large corporate enterprises that have offices and facilities here. We are pleased to note that a new business forum 'BusinessCAN' has been created by the Reading Climate Change Partnership that will build and share best practice amongst private sector organisations. We were pleased to see the strap line and link to the declaration of the Climate and Ecological Emergency on the front page of the Council website but as we Extinction Rebellion have reported previously only 16 out of 214 Reading residents questioned in Broad Street knew that the Council had declared climate emergency. One can imagine even less people know what the consequences of that declaration will be.

It is our opinion that the lack of engagement with the business community to date makes it unlikely that Reading Borough will achieve Net Zero Carbon Emissions by 2030. The Council are in a unique position to act as a catalyst for change. It is the responsibility of the Council to do all within its power to provide an environment where businesses thrive, are sustainable and are cutting Carbon Emissions.

Would a Council representative be available to meet to discuss ideas that would encourage businesses to meet and support the objective of Net Zero Carbon Emissions by 2030?

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

I thank Mr Sage for his question. The Borough Council recognises the need to ensure that Reading's business community is fully engaged in, and making its contribution to, the overall aim of achieving a net zero carbon Reading by 2030. In this spirit the Council's recently appointed Head of Climate Strategy would be happy to meet Mr Sage to discuss business action on climate change.

I note Mr Sage mentions the setting up of BCAN. This idea, emerging from the Climate Change strategy workshop, was developed jointly with Ethical Reading and Connect Reading, which are both business facing organisations, and Reading UK (the Council's economic development and marketing

company led by businesses in the town). Reading UK manages the two business improvement districts (BIDs) servicing 800 business customers in the town centre. Reading UK is therefore active in BusinessCAN and alerting the BID businesses to the work of BusinessCAN through newsletters and meetings/events. Reading UK also mails its E monthly newsletter, 'Reading City Vision' to an additional 800 businesses across Reading which alerts readers to key issues in the town.

Reading UK, in partnership with Barton Willmore and the University and now supported by Reading Borough Council, also developed the Reading 2050 Vision which was launched in 2017. This was a business-led vision to create a smart and sustainable Reading - a City of Green Technology, Culture and Diversity and Rivers and Parks.

The Reading 2050 Vision was subjected to a refresh exercise in November and will now include the commitment to Reading becoming a net zero carbon (or carbon neutral) City by 2030. Actions working in partnership with the business community will now be initiated in 2020 to address this, through the 2050 Vision partners, working closely with the Climate Change Partnership.

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16 DECEMBER 2019

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 1

Councillor White to ask the Leader of the Council:

Fair Tax Declaration

I have been contacted by Global Justice Now on tax. Will Reading Borough Council sign the Councils for Fair Tax Declaration? The Fair Tax Declaration commits cities, towns and districts to pursuing exemplary tax conduct in their affairs, requires greater transparency from suppliers and calls on the EU and UK Governments to review legislation and support greater powers for the exclusion of tax dodgers from public procurement. Will the Council sign up?

REPLY by Councillor Brock (Leader of the Council):

As a Council, we absolutely support the closedown of tax havens and the call for greater powers to ensure contractors are paying their proper share of tax. As the declaration itself recognises, we have to work within the law in terms of actions that we are able to take and the current legislation only gives very limited powers to public sector buyers. Our ability to exclude bidders is limited to the actual bidding organisations, including those individuals who have significant control over the bidding organisation. This ability does not extend to the parent companies. This means, a UK based company ultimately either owned by a company based in a tax haven and/or owned by a company that, for example, makes use of marketed schemes requiring disclosure under the Disclosure Of Tax Avoidance Schemes, can only be excluded on the basis of the records of the UK based company. In other words, the location (or actions) of the parent company cannot be used to exclude a UK subsidiary who have not themselves breached any of the relevant obligations.

In the context of the above and for major competitive procurements, we do ask for details of both the bidding company, the immediate parent company and the ultimate parent company, where applicable, as part of our general financial due diligence. In the vast majority of cases, the companies that bid for Reading Council contracts are UK based with a few based in other EU countries or the USA. Any bidders for Reading Council contracts are expected to declare details of certain tax-related and other criminal convictions which can lead to disqualification, as can the failure to declare such matters. Where we access framework agreements let by organisations such as the Crown Commercial Service or one of the large public sector buying organisations, these checks are carried out by the framework agreement operator and we do not have any direct input into this part of

the process. However, such bodies will be working to the same qualification criteria in line with public body procurement best practice.

The Council also recognises the importance of citizens and businesses paying their right and fair level of tax - be that to the Council in the form of Council Tax and Business Rates, or to central government through personal and corporate taxation. We actively take measures to ensure local taxation is properly assessed and collected. Liability for business rates is checked against national databases to identify any commercial property owners are not inappropriately claiming small business rate relief across two or more local authorities for example.

Similarly, the Council recognises its influence in terms of its investments, including those made as part of our Treasury management. A significant element of our external investments is with the Royal Berkshire Pension Fund. The Fund and its Investment Managers already have a number of ethical investment statements and policies, with assurance being sought as to relevant policies being in place to support fair tax principles.

In summary, we are actively considering adopting the declaration and it is under review.

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

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16 DECEMBER 2019

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 2

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Corporate and Consumer Services:

Council tax arrears

Over the last four years the number of households falling into arrears with council tax payments has remained between 20,000 and 21,000.

The council has a responsibility to provide support to these residents to pay the money they owe and I would hope that it is possible to bring the number of people falling into council tax arrears down further. Can the council explain what practical provisions are in place to help these residents avoid falling into arrears in the first place, and has the Council considered providing financial education through its community hubs in order to help residents avoid council tax arrears in the future?

REPLY by Councillor Emberson (Lead Councillor for Corporate and Consumer Services):

The Revenues and Benefits team have this year been working much more closely with the debt advice sector to review the Council's processes, to better enable residents to maintain their council tax payments (see PQ01).

The Revenues team have made significant progress in implementing most of the recommendations made in the Council Tax Protocol.

This has resulted in the following changes:

- Reviewing on a case-by-case basis how arrears are collected, whilst ensuring customers are able to maintain their current financial year Council Tax payments;
- Ensuring customers are claiming all benefits to which they are entitled;
- Promoting both Discretionary Council Tax Support and Section 13a Discretionary payments, when communicating with customers in need of financial assistance;
- Encouraging customers to seek assistance from the debt advice sector where appropriate;
- Amending Council Tax literature to include information on where to seek advice if experiencing financial difficulty;

- Allowing customer online access to manage their own arrangements and payment dates;
- Greater flexibility in payment dates to allow customers to align payments to when they receive income, rather than enforcing all payments be due on the 1st of each month and risk unnecessary recovery action.

The Revenues team are also working with the Web team to review the Council's web pages, to encourage early engagement from customers that may struggle to meet their liabilities. In addition they are reviewing the forms of communication with the Communications team, to seek to engage with customers through social media.

The Revenues team have seen the value of court costs applied to customers' accounts decrease in comparison to last year, and in addition have seen the in-year collection improve against the same period last year. This is as a direct result of working more closely with both customers and the debt advice sector to ensure they are able to meet their current financial year liabilities and taking different approaches to the collection of arrears.

The Council's Narrowing the Gap contract with Citizens Advice Reading, Reading Community Welfare Rights and Communicare includes preventative programmes including financial education and capability to raise money management skills and awareness of alternatives to loan sharks. A separate Narrowing the Gap contract with Berkshire West Your Way facilitates support for people facing mental health challenges and includes support to access debt advice as appropriate.

The Compass Recovery College for Mental Wellbeing is part of the Council's Public Health & Wellbeing Service and delivers courses at a range of community venues, including libraries, to support self-management and mental health recovery as part of its curriculum. The Compass prospectus now includes a course on 'Money Worries' in recognition of the link between debt and mental health.