

AGENDA ITEM 5: QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

**1. David Milne-Buckley to ask the Lead Councillor for Corporate Services and Resources
Armed Forces Act 2021**

Given the statutory “due regard” duty introduced by the Armed Forces Act 2021 - requiring local authorities to consider the needs of veterans and service families in housing, health and education decisions - will the Lead Councillor:

1. Confirm whether Reading Borough Council has commissioned any internal audit or external review of its compliance with this duty, and publish the findings if so;
2. If no such audit exists, bring forward a timetable for a formal compliance review - setting out actions, responsible officers, and milestones - with progress to be reported to the Audit and Governance Committee and the Health & Wellbeing Board?

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

The Council fully complies with the legal duty, as set out in the Armed Forces Act 2021, to consider the needs of Armed Forces veterans and service families as part of the Council's decision-making in terms of housing, health and education.

In order to ensure we comply, we have recently:

- fully embedded the Armed Forces community within our Equality Impact Assessment process which underpins all decision making; more specifically, the Armed Forces community is considered, along with those with protected characteristics, as part of the standard committee report paragraph on Equality Impact Assessment, so that the impact on this community is considered as a matter of course in decision making.
- carried out training for front-line staff on issues likely to be experienced by the Armed Forces community, to enable them to respond to the potential increase in enquires from veterans and their families as a result of the new legal duty.

In addition to the above, the Council supports the Armed Forces community more generally in a number of ways, including the signing of the Armed Forces Community Covenant in 2012, and the designation of a councillor as Armed Forces champion.

The Council's Housing Allocation Policy awards additional preference to certain members of the Armed Forces, and the Council's policy on time off for public duties includes additional leave for Reservists. The Council achieved bronze award under the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme in 2018.

Our Audit Programme is overseen by the Audit and Governance Committee, which receives regular reports and a recommended audit plan from the Chief Auditor. While we are not proposing to carry out an audit in this instance, the area will continue to be considered as part of our ongoing risk assessment process.

In the meantime, relevant updates and progress on Armed Forces Covenant commitments continue to be reported to the Health and Wellbeing Board.

2. Caroline Basden to ask the Lead Councillor for Education and Public Health
Junk Food Advertising

Junk food advertising has a real impact on the consumption of unhealthy food by both children and adults. I'm a mum of three young children myself so know how hard it is when they see an eye catching advert. I also volunteer for a couple of local children's charities and often speak to parents who feel this adds pressure to helping their children make healthy choices. Can the Lead Councillor for Education and Public Health please let me know what action the Council will take to counter this ?

REPLY by Councillor Eden Lead Councillor for Education and Public Health.

Thank you for your question and highlighting this, having a healthy diet is important not just for parents and young people but for all of us in Reading who are concerned about reaching a healthier weight – which is one of the most important things we can do to ensure our health and wellbeing.

I'm pleased to say that the council and other organisations across our town is working hard to counter this and support parents and all of us with a combination of actions both with individual policies and with a wider systemwide approach.

Some of the action already taken includes working with Reading Food Partnership to enable access to healthy and sustainable food for all communities in the borough, piloting and expanding School Breakfast Clubs; and of course promoting the national campaign messages about how healthy eating benefits us all as well as how to do that on a budget.

However, we know we need to step up and do more, the council is bringing together partners from the NHS, education as well as the voluntary and community sector to promote a Whole Systems Approach to Healthy Weight which means acting on the local food system to enable people to achieve and maintain a healthy weight. This is a social justice issue as well as a health issue.

The council will play it's part in this by promoting active travel; access to leisure and physical activity and to make healthier choices about the foods we eat and enable regular access to nutritious food.

I am also pleased to be able to share with you something that many people, including my own children, are keen to see happen which is a change to the council's advertising policy.

Next week I will be proposing that we update the council's advertising policy to prevent the advertising of foods that are high in Fat, Sugar and Salt. We won't be banning brands, but companies will need to promote their healthy options.

No one needs telling that burgers and chips exist so removing these adverts will put the power back in the hands of parents, and individuals themselves to make healthy choices and I hope all councillors on policy committee will support this measure.

3. Oliver White to ask the Lead Councillor for Education and Public Health
Primary Schools in Emmer Green

Emmer Green has some fantastic Primary Schools in the area, notably Micklands, Caversham Park Primary, and, the school I personally attended, Emmer Green Primary. But, given falling local, and indeed national birth rates, according to the Joint Strategic Needs Assessments, can the Council inform us what is being done to protect the future of these Primary Schools ?

REPLY by Councillor Eden Lead Councillor for Education and Public Health

We are very proud of the strong community of primary schools which we have in Reading. The Council works hard to support schools in Reading to be sustainable, so that we can be sure that we give every Reading child the best possible start in life.

On an annual basis, officers share with school leaders data on the demand for school places so that we can agree shared actions to protect sustainability of our schools. The results of last academic years discussions can be seen in the papers being considered by ACE Committee at this meeting, with proposed consultations on reductions in Published Admission Numbers in three schools. This action is proposed to help rebalance the total surplus of current school places to better match the projected numbers of primary school places which we will need over the coming years.

The enquirer is quite right to note that the national birth rate decline, which has been evident for the past three years, is now becoming evident as a trend for Reading too. Officers are doing further work with school leaders to identify further options to support schools to be sustainable. As well as looking at further options to reduce the surplus of primary school places by further reducing Published Admission Numbers, we are also exploring opportunities to use the excellence in our schools to develop more early years education provision and more education provision for disadvantaged children at risk of not being included.

4. Shuet Han Tsui and Breege Brennan to ask the Lead Councillor for Climate Strategy and Transport

Deterioration of Route 10 Bus Service

Until recently, the No. 10 offered a fast and dependable link for commuters and residents alike. The revised timetable, however, represents a serious decline in service quality.

These changes have had a real impact. As a small business based in Kennet Island, we've already seen fewer customers arriving by bus. More importantly, the reduced frequency is increasing social isolation for those who depend on public transport - especially older and disabled residents. Safety concerns have also grown, with more people now running across the A33 to catch the inbound bus at Kennet Island Turn.

While we understand the value of connecting to the Royal Berkshire Hospital, this cannot come at the expense of a usable, everyday service for Kennet Island. Nor should route viability be judged solely by financial performance - a regular, seven-day service provides vital social and environmental value.

We appreciate the efforts of the Whitley Ward Councillors in taking concerns of local residents to Reading Buses. Could the Council please outline how it is supporting these efforts, and what improvements Kennet Island residents can expect in the near future?

REPLY by Councillor Ennis Lead Councillor for Climate Strategy and Transport

I would like to thank you for the question regarding the removal of the route 10 serving Kennet Island and we understand and sympathise with the issues you have raised over the loss of this service.

The majority of bus services across Reading are operated by Reading Buses on a commercial basis, in line with current restrictive legislation around loss making routes.

Over recent years and particularly since the pandemic, bus services have been affected by rising costs of fuel, driver wages and other supporting costs along with a decline in passenger numbers and revenue taken. This has resulted in some services becoming less financially viable and therefore harder to operate. In this case it has led to Reading Buses making a commercial decision to reduce the timetable and service offered on the route 10.

Reading Buses are currently undertaking an analysis of the initial results of the service changes implemented in September, to review the impacts both in terms of patronage levels and journey times. This analysis includes considering the overall level of bus services currently offered in south Reading, including to Kennet Island, with a view to considering any changes that may be suitable and financially viable for the commercial bus network for the next service changes which are due in January.

While we do not direct the bus company, the Council is a majority shareholder, officers meet regularly with them on a range of issues including service routes, upcoming changes and any operational impacts of route changes. We will feed back your observations and can ask that they consider those alongside the monitoring and data they collect on usage and route viability, I know Whitley Ward Councillors are keen for Officers to highlight Social Value, pre-empting any forthcoming legislation.

It should be noted that both the bus company and Council are facing significant financial challenges at the current time, and difficult decisions do need to be taken to provide the best possible range of services for residents within the limited funding that is available. I can assure you that all bus companies are very aware of the impact that service reductions have on the communities serviced by each route, however this does need to be balanced against the financial viability of the services they offer.