

COUNCIL MEETING - 27 JANUARY 2009

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC IN ACCORDANCE WITH STANDING ORDER NO 9

QUESTION NO. 1

Rex Hora to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture and Sport:

Huntley & Palmer Locomotive

A report on the condition of the Huntley & Palmer locomotive number one was sent to Reading Borough Council on 28 August 2008. What conclusion has the Council drawn from this report?

REPLY by Councillor Hoskin (Lead Councillor for Culture and Sport):

A report was commissioned and funded by Reading Borough Council, which was received on 28th August 2008. The report was shared with the Kenavon Trust (of which Mr Hora is a member) and the report discussed with two members of the Trust (Mr Standing and Mr Singleton) at a very useful meeting on 22nd October 2008.

This report stated that the cost of renovation, including removal of asbestos, would be in the region of £25,000 and annual maintenance costs of £750 per annum. There may be a requirement for more maintenance, which may have to be carried out by volunteers.

The Kenavon Trust has identified two potential sources of funding and officers have discussed the possibility of obtaining up to 50% of £25,000 to a maximum of £20,000 from these sources. Other sources of grant funding are being sought to fund the balance although this is likely to be difficult.

A number of challenges remain:

- Location for displaying the locomotive is required prior to any funding being forthcoming.
- The ownership of the locomotive
- The funding of any outstanding balances and ongoing maintenance

We are committed to working with the Kenavon Trust to see how these challenges might be overcome.

QUESTION NO. 2

Mark Drukker to ask the Leader of the Council:

Israeli/Palestinian Conflict

Will the Leader of the Council reassure the many Reading residents who have close family in Israel, some of whom have been called up to serve in the Defence Forces, as well as the many Israelis who live and work in Reading, that the Council opposes the demonisation and vilification of Israel, and of Jews, that is taking place in the streets and the media in Reading, and that it will not pass any ignorant or one-sided statements concerning the tragic situation in the region?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

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I attach the resolution I will be proposing to the Council later this evening, which I believe is a balanced response to the concerns raised by many residents in Reading.

“This Council shares the outrage of many Reading people of all backgrounds about the Israeli invasion of Gaza.

It thanks the Pakistani Community Centre, Reading Muslim Council, Reading Council for Racial Equality and others for organising a meeting on 6th January to discuss the local response to the crisis. This Council welcomes the determination of those present at that meeting to ensure that Reading’s response is coordinated within the spirit of the community cohesion we value so highly in Reading.

This Council therefore resolves to:

1. Instruct the Chief Executive to write to the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and Reading’s M.P.s to highlight the local condemnation of the violence and to urge them to do all they can to ensure an enduring ceasefire on both sides.
2. Welcome the action taken already by the cross-party group of M.P.s to bring pressure for an immediate ceasefire, for a long-term political solution to the situation and to win support for the condemnation of the disproportionate actions of the Israeli Government.
3. Instruct the Chief Executive to write to the region’s Euro-M.P.s asking them to oppose the extension of Israel’s trade agreement with the EU at this time and to work to stop the supply of further arms to either side in this conflict.
4. Instruct the Chief Executive to investigate what options are open to the Council in terms of its purchasing and other policies to bring pressure to bear on the Israeli government.”

QUESTION NO. 3

Graham Bennett to ask the Lead Councillor for Environment and Sustainability:

Removal of Bins from the Public Highway: Addington Road - Cardigan Gardens - Blenheim Gardens

Due to diverse mails dating back to 2007 and this issue now being raised at the last council meeting, can the Lead Councillor please advise, what steps have been taken, to ensure the removal of bins and that pavements are kept clear for pedestrians and also to ensure that a hygienic environment is maintained?

REPLY by Councillor Gittings (Lead Councillor for Environment and Sustainability):

Section 46 of the Environmental Protection Act empowers the Council to set requirements for the management of refuse or recycling containers, by Notice. If the Notice is not complied with then a Fixed Penalty Notice can be issued. We have been using this power to require (among other things) that waste containers that cause obstruction on footways are removed promptly after being emptied.

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RBC procedure is to issue warning letters to residents informing them of the councils requirements and the powers we have to enforce them. To date 570 such letters have been sent. Notices are only issued if the warnings are ignored. To date 10 have reached the stage of a issuing a Fixed Penalty Notice.

Addington Road and Blenheim Gardens have been identified along with numerous other streets and roads throughout the borough for this type of action.

Cardigan Gardens because of the particular problems that have been experienced with access are being dealt with in accordance to the answer given to question 4.

QUESTION NO. 4

Graham Bennett to ask the Lead Councillor for Environment and Sustainability:

Removal of Bins from the Public Highway: Traffic Congestion - Cardigan Gardens

At the last council meeting, Mr. P. Butler of the Streetcare department had stated, "*that due to traffic congestion and cars parking on yellow lines, refuse vehicles had a lot of difficulty in negotiating the street corners and were therefore not able to collect refuse on the given days. And this being the reason why residents left their bins on the pavements*".

As refuse collectors are obliged to return bins to their respective properties, the statement from Mr. Butler has no bearing, as bins will be collected from the properties, irrespective of whatever day of the week it is.

Does this therefore mean, that since I have been requesting the removal of these bins for the last year, diverse emails c/o Streetcare Department, that the residents concerned have not been previously informed to remove bins from the highway due to incorrect information?

REPLY by Councillor Gittings (Lead Councillor for Environment and Sustainability):

The access problems in this area have eased considerably in recent months probably due to the enforcement of the recently laid double yellow lines and the procurement of a small vehicle that is able to respond to such problems at short notice.

Our refuse collection teams in normal circumstances are instructed to return bins to the location where they were presented; this is because some residents prefer not to allow our collectors on to their properties. However in some cases in streets where bins if left on pavements cause a particular nuisance instructions are given to return bins on to the property regardless of where they are presented.

Following discussions with the Operational Teams managers it has been agreed that Cardigan Gardens will be added to the exception list and bins in this street will be collected and returned to the property.

If residents then persist in returning the bins to the pavement we will take action under the Environmental Protection Act section 46.

QUESTION NO. 5

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Graham Bennett to ask the Lead Councillor for Environment and Sustainability:

Fixed Penalties for Non-Removal of Bins

Statement from Reading Borough Council Spokesman Oscar Mortali:

"the council is using powers available to it to issue fixed penalties for people who regularly block streets with bins, and will continue to do so." "It is unacceptable for pedestrians to have to negotiate their way past bins left on pavements, sometimes days after collections have taken place, and the council will take appropriate action where necessary."

How many fixed penalties have therefore been issued by Reading Council and what percentage of these were for the Redlands area?

REPLY by Councillor Gittings (Lead Councillor for Environment and Sustainability):

Section 46 of the Environmental Protection Act empowers the Council to set requirements for the management of refuse or recycling containers, by Notice. If the Notice is not complied with then a Fixed Penalty Notice can be issued. We have been using this power to require (among other things) that waste containers that cause obstruction on footways are removed promptly after being emptied.

RBC procedure is to issue warning letters to residents informing them of the councils requirements and the powers we have to enforce them. To date 570 such letters have been sent. Notices are only issued if the warnings are ignored. To date 6 have reached the stage of a issuing a Fixed Penalty Notice.

Of the 570 letters approximately 45 were issued to properties in Redlands Ward. To date 6 Fixed Penalties have been issued, none in Redlands.

QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS IN ACCORDANCE WITH STANDING ORDER NO 10

QUESTION NO. 1

Councillor Bayes to ask the Leader of the Council:

Child Protection - Frequency of Key Worker Contact

Where a decision is made that a child should be the subject of a Child Protection Plan, a qualified social worker is named to fulfil the role of Key Worker for the child. An essential responsibility of the Key Worker is to ensure that they see the child at the required frequency.

What proportion of children currently with a Child Protection Plan have been seen by their Key Worker at a frequency greater than or equal to the frequency given in the relevant Child Protection Plan and in any event no less than once every 10 days (as required by section 9.4.2 of the Berkshire Child Protection Procedures)?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

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All children subject to a protection plan need to be visited regularly in their home to check they are safe. A successful visit requires not only that the social worker goes to the home but also that someone opens the door, allows the social worker to enter, and allows the social worker to see the child alone, at intervals specified in the child's plan, including on occasions in the child's bedroom.

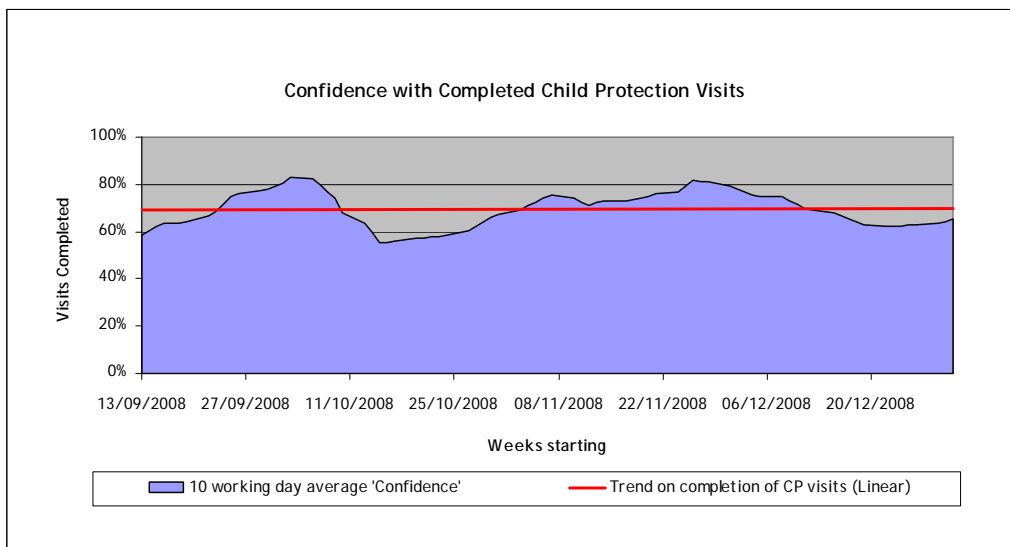
There are of course valid reasons for an a child not being at home when the social worker calls, like some other family emergency, but it has also to be understood that the families of children subject to child protection plans often live fairly volatile lives. 66% have issues of substance abuse, 52% have issues of domestic abuse, 10% have issues of mental health. Not all are good at keeping appointments or at co-operation with the authorities, some move frequently, and in one current case one child on a protection plan has been taken back to her home country. Because there are cases where visits are unsuccessful the Berkshire Child Protection Procedures also require Managers to be informed if the social worker has difficulty obtaining access to a child and for a Child Protection review conference to be considered.

Reciprocally, a key task of managers is checking that required visits are being made to children subject to protection plans through conversations with staff and reviewing the case notes stored in our computer system, and this is now supported by an enhancement of Reading's RAISE computer system developed last year.

All practitioners now complete a "key worker visit" record in addition to the case notes. This record includes the date, the name of the worker and, most importantly, the success or failure of the completion of the visit as above. Team managers then get a daily schedule from RAISE, based on the last recorded visit showing:

- A list of specific children grouped by the outcome of the last visit
- The overall picture of how many successful visits there have been recently.

They use the daily list to focus initial supervision concern on cases where the recording suggests unsuccessful or missed visits on an ongoing basis. At the present time, about 70% of children are successfully visited in line with their protection plan, and the management resource is targeted to the other 30%, to ensure that these individually identified children are seen as a priority. The new reporting system and management focus means that officers would hope, as the trend line on the graph below shows, to reach an 85% level during 2009-10, which means an even greater focus on the cases where access visits are not achieved. Managers have daily access to data showing where social workers are failing to get access to a child on a regular basis, and can convene a Child Protection review conference as required.



QUESTION NO. 2

Councillor Bayes to ask the Leader of the Council:

Child Protection - Chronology of Incidents

A chronology describing key incidents in a child's life including incidents, injuries, family changes is an important tool for ensuring that everyone involved in a child protection case is aware of the background to the case. It is required for legal proceedings.

What proportion of cases for children currently with a Child Protection Plan have an up to date and complete chronology (as required by section 9.4.7 of the Berkshire Child Protection Procedures)?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

A chronology is indeed a fundamental element of good social work case management practice, a particularly valuable and necessary tool when social workers and managers are required to intervene in the lives of the most vulnerable children who are in need of protection. These children's needs are invariably significant, complex and enduring. This practice can be evidenced through the most recently commissioned independent audit of 121 child protection cases in Targeted Services, the audit found that 87.1% cases had chronologies, of these 84.5% were satisfactory or better. These figures show an improvement from a partial audit undertaken in June 2007 where of 12 child protection case audited only 25% had a detailed and updated chronology.

A further independent audit is being commissioned for April 2009 and officers expect that audit will find satisfactory chronologies in all files.

As an additional impetus to this, managers are undertaking audits of 30 cases a month.

QUESTION NO. 3

Councillor Bayes to ask the Leader of the Council:

Berkshire Child Protection Procedures - Staff Training

The manual, "Berkshire Local Safeguarding Children Board Child Protection Procedures, 2006" or the Berkshire Child Protection Procedures manual is an essential reference document for Child Protection in Reading. The contents of these procedures have been developed from, and are consistent with:

- Relevant law, regulation and statutory and non-statutory government guidance (as at 01.04.06)
- Information and advice supplied by staff in agencies represented on what were the Area Child Protection Committees (ACPCs) of Slough, the Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead, Reading, Bracknell Forest, West Berkshire and Wokingham
- Best practice as agreed by the steering group overseeing the manual's development

What proportion of staff working on Child Protection have received training within the last 12 months on the Berkshire Child Protection Procedures?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

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The 'Berkshire Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) Child Protection Procedures' constitute the bedrock procedural guidance for safe practice. These procedures comprise 415 pages, in turn reflecting the complexity and exacting nature of child protection work.

Whilst procedures alone do not protect children, the disciplined application of procedures does help to ensure that the potential for children to be well -protected is maximised.

During the last 12 months, I am able to report that only 5 new members of staff have not yet accessed child protection training but they will of course be attending the relevant child protection course following their induction.

Familiarisation with the procedures is further advanced in formal staff supervision and consultation meetings and at other bespoke training and development events. With procedures of this size and complexity, the focus is not so much on knowing all the detail by heart but on referring to the procedures, which are available on-line, in any case of uncertainty.

The auditing of child protection cases mentioned in response to the previous question takes place within the framework of the child protection procedures and provides an opportunity for workers' misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the procedures to be identified and corrected.

QUESTION NO. 4

Councillor Epps to ask the Lead Councillor for Planning and Transport:

Heathrow Airport

What assessment has the Lead Councillor made of the numbers of complaints from Reading residents about aircraft noise from Heathrow Airport in 2008 based against findings for previous years, and will he make a statement on whether the Council's policy is either for or against the proposal for a third runway at Heathrow, in contrast to the fence-sitting position of the Council prior to May 2008?

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

I am advised that Council records show three complaints about aircraft noise were received during 2008. This is comparable to the number of complaints received for the three previous years which show the following number of complaints recorded:

2007	3
2006	4
2005	1

However, it may be that a number of people have complained directly to the Civil Aviation Authority as the Borough Council has no powers to deal with commercial aircraft noise and we also refer any complainants to the CAA.

Officers have made enquiries of the CAA who have advised that they are unable to disaggregate complaints received from the Reading Borough area.

On the broader policy issue raised by Cllr Epps to the best of my knowledge this Authority has not taken a collective position on the proposal for a third runway.

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However, I can tell him the position I would invite the Authority to adopt and am happy to bring forward a resolution along these lines to a future meeting of the Council.

I believe it is premature to take a decision "in principle" to promote further expansion at Heathrow Airport until a satisfactory solution has been identified to:

- a) the extent to which an increase in CO2 emissions arising from expansion can be consistent with the Government's commitment to address issues of climate change;
- b) the extent to which the increase in noise disturbance arising from any expansion might have an adverse impact on the quality of life for nearby residents;
- c) the extent to which further expansion is dependent on the introduction of access improvements as a means of reducing the environmental impact of movements on the transport networks in and around the airport.

Last Friday I attended a meeting of the South East England Regional Assembly's Executive Committee and spoke and voted in favour of a resolution calling for:

The Government to put its case for the expansion of Heathrow Airport beyond its current limits (ie two-runway, 5 terminals) to the Committee on Climate Change. To call on the Committee on Climate Change to undertake a review of the Government's policy on the expansion of Heathrow Airport and report its conclusion within 12 months. To call for the Government and BAA to commit to making additional investment in improved public transport services to support airport operations within current planning limits.

The review proposed by the Regional Assembly would provide an independent assessment of the extent to which further expansion of Heathrow Airport is the most appropriate solution to ensuring that it remains a successful 'International Hub' airport. It will provide, for example, the opportunity to test whether a commitment to develop the "Heathrow Hub" transport proposal - which would see a step change in public transport accessibility to the rest of the UK and mainland Europe - might enable a reallocation of existing runway capacity at Heathrow that might negate the need for further runway expansion.

Notwithstanding the debate about an additional runway, there is an urgent need to address access issues at Heathrow Airport right now. Additional investment in high quality public transport services is required in order to retain its attractiveness as an airport and reduce its impact on the environment.

I therefore applaud the Secretary of State's decision to publish the document High Speed Two which sets out a challenging agenda to consider additional high-speed rail links within the UK. The High Speed Two Company now established under the Chairmanship of Sir David Rowlands is charged amongst other things with looking at the costs and benefits of options for a Heathrow International Inter-change Station on the Great Western Mainline with an interchange also with Crossrail, as well as options for access to central London and other cities. The Company is also charged with looking at

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linking with the current high-speed line to the Channel Tunnel and the existing rail network including the potential for services to continental Europe.

I also would draw to the Council's attention another document published by the Secretary of State at the same time as the Heathrow statement, entitled Motorways and Major Trunk Roads. This indicates a very welcome reduction in proposed road widening of the motorway network and a greater focus on making better use of existing capacity, through measures such as hard-shoulder running and managing the motorway network in a more environmentally acceptable way.

QUESTION NO. 5

WITHDRAWN

QUESTION NO. 6

Councillor Stanway to ask the Lead Councillor for Education and Lifelong Learning:

Berkshire Maestros

Would the Lead Councillor advise what contribution did the borough make to Berkshire Maestros this year?

REPLY by Councillor Hartley (Lead Councillor for Education and Lifelong Learning):

Reading Council will pay £188,000 to Berkshire Maestros this financial year. This paid for:

- music tuition subsidy to 1250 pupils in 38 schools
- purchasing additional instruments, which remain the property of RBC
- a demonstration concert in each primary school each year by a group of professional musicians to give pupils a taste of live music, four schools with steel pan tuition and five schools had workshops with an American Jazz musician
- four events through the year at The Hexagon involving 9 schools, 12 schools, 18 schools and 30 Reading schools and three locally based ensembles around Reading.

QUESTION NO. 7 in accordance with Standing Order No.10

Councillor Stanway to ask the Lead Councillor for Environment and Sustainability:

Farmers Markets

Could the lead councillor please advise the council of the support we give to farmers markets and other local 'home grown' schemes to demonstrate the Council's commitment to reducing food miles?

REPLY by Councillor Gittings (Lead Councillor for Environment and Sustainability):

Farmers' Market

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A former member of staff set up the Farmers Market in 1999 and continued to support it until it had become established as a Co-operative.

Until April 2007, RBC supported the market by providing printed materials and design of the annual farmers market leaflet and also distributed it to libraries and community centres. RBC initially provided 3000 A5 leaflets. This support was no longer provided in 2008 as it was no longer requested by the Co-operative.

RBC provided support for advertising in Vue magazine in 2006 and The Volunteer in 2007.

RBC have always invited the Cooperative to have a presence at Forbury Fever but historically this has not occurred as it clashed with the Reading market day.

The markets are listed in the 'What's On' section on the RBC website, they also continue to be featured in the listings of 'Live Reading' (the local council publication).

Local Food

RBC also support the Berkshire Food Group every year as do most of the Local Authorities in the area.

The council aims to use local caterers where possible and favours those who source food locally - e.g. catering for the Local Strategic Partnership Conference was provided by a local company - Organic Buffet which also sources locally where possible.

Allotments and Community Gardening

RBC have been working hard to support allotment users over the past 3 years, in particular. This has led to a 70% increase in the number of allotments let in over this period, re-introducing 136 areas for tenancy between Scours Lane and Bulmershe allotments that have not been used for many years. In addition to this, smaller areas of fallow land at Waterloo Meadows, Goddards Farm and Henley Road allotment sites have also been brought back into use.

RBC are working together with RISC (Reading International Solidarity Centre) to develop community gardening project in up to 15 schools across the Borough.

True Food

RBC advertise True Food on our website. True Food focus on fair trade and locally grown fresh produce and using a van run on waste oil to distribute.

QUESTION NO. 8

Councillor Watson to ask the Lead Councillor for Environment and Sustainability:

Home Energy Week

Would the Lead Councillor for the Environment please update me on the activities of the Home Energy Week held in October 2008?

REPLY by Councillor Gittings (Lead Councillor for Environment and Sustainability):

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At least 1000 residents attended our events to learn more about home energy efficiency and to receive free energy efficient light bulbs and anti-standby devices.

Displays offering practical information and advice were staffed by council officers. Events were held in Broad Street, the Civic Centre, Central Library, Age Concern Drop in and the Royal Berkshire Hospital. Partners from the Heatseekers Insulation Scheme, The Energy Saving Trust and Reading's Home Improvement Agency also attended.

Reading Borough Council took the opportunity of Energy Week to launch a revolutionary new home energy efficiency scheme for Reading residents who own their own home or live in private rented property:

'Heatseekers' Insulation Offer

Working in partnership with Reading Borough Council

- FREE Cavity & Loft Insulation for those on an income related/disability benefit or over 70 years of age.
- DISCOUNTED Insulation for all other private householders.

Thermal imaging technology is being used over the next 3 years to identify Reading homes that would benefit from installing insulation. But residents don't have to wait until the image of their home is produced to take up the insulation offer. They can simply call the Heatseekers phone line and arrange an energy survey and insulation installation. 200 residents have already booked surveys this way.

Pioneering thermal imaging has commenced and over 10,000 images of Reading households have been captured and follow up home visits by surveyors will start shortly. The scheme providers intend to recruit 2 energy assessors in Reading.

Further Home Energy Advice:

Warm Front Central Heating Grant

The Warm Front scheme was also promoted at the events. Residents in receipt of certain benefits may be eligible for a grant of up to £2700 for improvements such as central heating installation that increase the warmth and comfort of their home.

Fuel Poverty

Residents struggling to pay fuel bills were also offered advice on accessing Social Tariffs and Energy Supplier Trust Funds.

Home Energy Tips

Residents were encouraged to reduce energy use in their homes through a series of 'Energy Tips' that were broadcast by 107fm throughout the week.

Advice on all of the issues above was available on the Council website.

Event Attendance and Publicity:

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The events were extremely well attended by residents, the majority of which were concerned about rising fuel bills although some were also very interested in cutting carbon emissions. The thermal imaging element of the Heatseekers scheme proved very successful in generating interest both amongst Reading residents and the national media.

QUESTION NO. 9

Councillor Byrne to ask the Lead Councillor for Housing:

Assistance for Home Buyers and Owners

Could the Lead Councillor for Housing please tell me what use Reading Borough Council has made so far of the assistance packages announced by central government to assist first time buyers and to help those with mortgage problems to continue as property owners?

REPLY by Councillor Ennis (Lead Councillor for Housing):

I would like to thank Councillor Byrne for the question that is of high importance to mortgage owners that may experience financial difficulty and to first time buyers trying to get onto the housing ladder.

The Government has developed a comprehensive set of measures to assist both first time buyers and those with mortgage difficulties. These include:

1. Help for first time buyers

In addition to the existing range of options, there is a new shared-equity scheme in partnership with housing developers. The properties on offer will be new build homes, available with a 5-year interest free equity share funded jointly by the government and the developers. Local developers were unsuccessful in recent bids for this scheme but are likely to apply again later in the year.

Additional measures include one-year Stamp Duty holiday for all houses costing up to £175,000.

2. The mortgage pre-action protocol

This is a legal agreement to ensure that lenders will only use repossession as a last resort. They have 17 options at their disposal, with the Mortgage Rescue Scheme adding an 18th.

The Council's Housing Advice service are fully trained in this protocol and are ensuring it is put to full use in cases of mortgage difficulties presented to the Council.

3. Development of mortgage rescue schemes (MRS)

Reading Borough Council is working closely with CLG, and with our local CAB and Catalyst Housing Group to deliver Mortgage Rescue as a meaningful option for people encountering mortgage difficulties. The official launch of the scheme in Reading is anticipated in early February. There are 2 options within MRS.

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1. Rent and Buy Back is a scheme which enables the owner-occupier to sell their property to a Registered Social Landlord (via Catalyst) and rent it back at a below market rent from that organisation. This scheme differs from those operating in the private sector, which offer little security of tenure and rents that are often above market values.
2. Equity share - this option provides for a Registered Social Landlord to take a share in the property, enabling owners to reduce their share, and therefore mortgage, on their home. This scheme differs from shared ownership as no rent is paid on the RSL share. There is also flexibility to increase the share when the person's circumstance has changed.

4. Homeowner Mortgage Support Scheme

This scheme will enable households that experience a significant and temporary loss of income as a result of the economic downturn to defer a proportion of the interest payments on their mortgage for up to two years. The scheme is being urgently developed by Government with lenders.

In addition, homeowners who lose their jobs now start to receive help with interest payments after 13 weeks.

5. Court Desks and Debt Advice

The Government has increased funding to improve advice services at Court. This enables agencies such as CAB to represent people at Court and prevent homelessness. The Court desk at Reading is represented by both Wokingham and Reading CAB.

Reading Borough Council has a strong relationship with the CAB and information is shared at the earliest possible stage to allow those who are at risk of homelessness to explore all options for either keeping their home or securing suitable alternative accommodation.

As of yet there have been a small number of enquiries but not mortgage owners who were eligible for the above assistance.

We are confident that partnerships are in place to make the most of the new schemes as they become available. We are preparing promotional material to help those who are worried about their situation to be aware of and understand what the options might be and where to get help.

QUESTION NO. 10

Councillor C Harris to ask the Leader of the Council:

Child Protection Teams - First Line Supervisor

The first line supervisor in Child Protection Teams plays a key role in safeguarding children by ensuring objectivity. What mechanisms exist beyond direct line supervisions to ensure that they are auditing the work of front line social workers, and directing the progress of cases?

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REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

The role of the first line supervisor in child protection cases is just one of the many checks and balances that help to afford a measure of objectivity in the management of child protection cases. Indeed, research tells us that independent 'challenge' and 'critique' comprise necessary ingredients of effective social work supervision.

Other mechanisms that are employed involve case file audits. Service and team Managers in Targeted Services, as contrasted to first line supervisors who are typically Assistant Team Managers, now ensure that they audit a total of 30 case files and records each month. Independently commissioned audits are also undertaken. In December 2008 the Directorate of Education and Children's Services commissioned an independent audit of all child protection cases.

The progress of such cases is determined within the framework of the 'Berkshire Local Safeguarding Children Board Child Protection Procedures'. Independent Child Protection Conference Chairs and multi-agency child protection conference members also contribute to the overall scrutiny and direction of a case.

QUESTION NO. 11

Councillor C Harris to ask the Leader of the Council:

Social Worker Appraisals and Targets

The performance management of front line social workers in child protection and their supervisors is key to assuring the safeguarding of children. What proportions of these staff i) have had completed appraisals that included a discussion of their casework performance in the last 12 months, and ii) have current written goals with clear targets that include one or more goals related to casework performance?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

I am able to report that 40 of the 45 staff engaged in Child Protection in Targeted Services have up-to-date appraisals the remaining 5 appraisals are booked to be completed before the end of January. As these appraisals are stored as Word documents it is not really possible to derive statistical measures of the type sought, but the expectation would be that all appraisals of social work practitioners would include reference to and consideration of casework performance and for this to be reflected in written goals and clear targets. We now have in place a self-assessment of each appraisal which is passed to the next line manager that checks if targets are in place.

QUESTION NO. 12

Councillor C Harris to ask the Leader of the Council:

Child Protection Enquiries

If there is reasonable cause to suspect a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer significant harm, A Children's Social Care should convene a strategy discussion. This may take place following a referral or at any other time if concerns about significant harm

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emerge. For those children with a current Child Protection Plan, what proportion of Section 47 enquiries (Child Protection Enquiry) have:

i) had an initial strategy discussion completed within one working day of referral or concerns of significant harm emerging (as required by section 7.8.23 of the Berkshire Child Protection Procedures)

ii) have had an initial child protection conference completed within 15 days of the initial strategy discussion (7.8.27 of the BCPP)?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

Prescribed multi-agency processes that are detailed in the 'Berkshire Local Safeguarding Children Board Child Protection Procedures' inform and help to determine the passage and journey of a referral.

There are currently 126 children who are subject to child protection plans. Each of those children will have been subject to Section 47 enquiries (i.e. child protection enquiries). Furthermore, 97.86% of those children had an initial child protection conference completed within 15 days of the initial strategy discussion. Timescales for initial strategy discussions, which are frequently conducted by phone - typically between DECS Referral & Assessment & Thames Valley Police - are not collected electronically: an individual check of each case would be needed to retrieve this data.

QUESTION NO. 13

Councillor T Harris to ask the Lead Councillor for Community Care & Health:

CSCI Rating

Can the Lead Councillor for Community Care and Health please explain why Reading Borough Council believes a 1 star CSCI rating is acceptable?

REPLY by Councillor Orton (Lead Councillor for Community Care and Health):

Cllr T Harris knows full well that Reading Borough Council has not said a 1 star CSCI rating is acceptable. His question is based on a false statement.

Cllr Harris was present at the Housing, Health and Community Care Scrutiny Panel on 9 December 2008. The Director and other senior officers answered questions and discussed the issue in great length and detail. Cllr Harris was told what has been achieved, what more needs doing and what is being done, including the details of reports that have been considered by Cabinet to drive the programme of improvements. The Scrutiny Panel will receive a further report on performance in the current year. Officers have previously reported to the Cabinet on 1 December.

Cllr T Harris should recall that at the Scrutiny Panel Reading Borough Council officers clearly and publicly expressed their surprise and "disappointment" at the CSCI rating, because so much improvement had been achieved across a range of performance indicators. They are working to a very clear set of political policies, priorities and ambitions and did deliver improvements in performance which they believed would shift

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the formal rating of the service. The commitment they gave at the Scrutiny Panel was intense, as Cllr Harris knows.

I have also stated publicly my commitment to continuous improvement of the services offered and to protecting services against the cuts that have been made in many other councils. I repeat this now. Mr Mayor, I would continue to relate in detail all that the Council is doing to improve service delivery and protect the level of services but this has been said publicly in Cllr Harris's presence already. He can get a full briefing from the Director at any time if he wishes to increase his level of knowledge, interest and involvement.

QUESTION NO. 14

Councillor Epps to ask the Leader of the Council:

Travel Expenses

Will the Leader list the budget figures for the current and previous financial year for travel expenses by a) air, b) taxi, c) other non-car transport, and will she explain why it appears to be so difficult to bring such figures forward?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

Travel expenses for 2007/8 totalled £166,000 and expenditure for the current year to date is £147,000. Expenses for travel by air, taxi etc. are not separately coded and hence it is not possible to provide this detailed information without significant manual effort and therefore staff time.

QUESTION NO. 15

Councillor Swaine to ask the Leader of the Council:

Council Tax Arrears

For the years 2006, 2007 and 2008, can you please tell me:

- How many people in the borough have fallen into arrears with their Council Tax?
- Out of that number, how many have had fines added to their Council Tax bill?
- Out of that number, how many people in the borough were allowed to negotiate an arrangement instead of fines being added to their Council Tax bill?
- How much money has the fines raised in general income?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

The Council does not keep records on an on-going basis of how many Council Tax accounts were historically in arrears. However, I suggest that the numbers of reminders issued for each financial year is a reasonably proxy, and the figures for the last three financial years are:

2006/7	45,993
2007/8	27,328

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2008/9 to date 39,343

The Council does not have the power to fine people in arrears; however we are able to charge costs arising on accounts that remain unpaid after issue of a reminder, and I can advise the number of accounts that were subject to summons costs for each of the last three financial years are:

2006/7	12,564
2007/8	9,865
2008/9 to date	6,690

We do not record the information requested in the third bullet above; however I can advise that the number of arrangements agreed in the last three financial years are:

2006/7	6,794
2007/8	5,368
2008/9 to date	4,545

As indicated above the Council does not have the power to fine people but I can advise that in appropriate cases we have raised both summons and liability order costs for non payment of Council Tax. The costs collected each year as follows:

2006/7	£490k
2007/8	£549k
2008/9 to date	£389k

In general we would prefer not to be raising these additional costs, but it would not be fair for other council tax payers to pay the costs of non-payers. I would encourage all residents to pay their Council Tax on time, preferably by direct debit. Where household circumstances change (particularly in the current economic climate) people should contact us promptly so we can make sure their tax continues to be calculated correctly and they can receive any benefit that is due.

Unfortunately, most of the Council Tax Team's time has to be spent chasing arrears, and in fairness to the vast majority of residents who pay on time we pursue unpaid tax using various recognised reasonable means; including in a few selected cases (where the problem appears to be that people have the means to pay, but are not doing so) pursuing bankruptcy proceedings though to date only 2 people this financial year and 3 last year (after a 4th was annulled following payment of arrears) been made bankrupt directly from these actions.