

COUNCIL MEETING - 31 MARCH 2009

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

QUESTION NO. 1

Sue Stainthorp to ask the Leader of the Council:

Council Services

What would be the impact on the services offered by Reading Borough Council if cuts of £2.8 million were required?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

In the many months it took to build the 2009-10 budget, we asked officers to look hard for "efficiency" savings which did not impact on front-line services, but which saved money by greater use of modern technology, by rationalising management structures, and so on. Managers did find substantial savings, but this process has to be properly worked through and all the effects taken into account. I think that finding another £2.8 Million as part of this year's budget would have meant cutting into real services - for example - reducing the opening hours and perhaps the number of branch libraries, closing leisure centres which are facing financial challenges because of the downturn, reducing our concessionary fares scheme, reducing the services to elderly people and those with disabilities, removing some of the Your Reading Passport concessions for residents, closing After School Clubs and holiday playschemes, ending support for Waterfest, the Children's Festival, charging for the first Residents' parking permit and so on - all the non-statutory services which make Reading a more caring council than our Tory neighbours. They don't even try to provide such services, but they do charge the same level of council tax.

QUESTION NO. 2

Lindsay Mullaney to ask the Lead Councillor for Education and Lifelong Learning:

Reading University Public Courses

Is the Council aware that the University of Reading proposes to withdraw the public programme of courses at the School of Continuing Education at the end of this summer term? These courses are open to all and have been running in their present form for the past 30 years. Their loss will leave a major gap in educational provision for the people of Reading. This decision by the University marks another regrettable stage in the distancing of the University from the town.

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

The Council is aware of the planned cuts and has recently held meetings with Reading University to discuss the likely impact should the closure be confirmed by the University Senate. The School of Continuing Education supports students studying for a Higher Education qualification that is equivalent to, or lower than, a qualification that they have already been awarded and it also applies to non-accredited provision. It is very sad that the University is once again looking to remove facilities that are valued and much used by local people, particularly at a time when informal adult learning is nationally

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very topical. I do hope that your campaign is more successful than other recent appeals to the University's sense of civic responsibility.

Should the recommendation go forward, the gap in provision will not be easy to close. However, New Directions, the RBC-supported Learning & Employment service for Reading, offers a whole raft of non-accredited adult community learning provision, which students who currently attend Reading University courses may consider. As well as RBC supporting a service that can bridge aspects of the gap it is also worth noting that, in line with a recently released white paper confirming the important role that local authorities have in supporting lifelong learning, the Council co-ordinates an active group which draws together all the various providers of Adult Learning in the town including:

TVU New Directions
WEA
Resource
SITE
Sport Reading
Reading Learning Centre

This group works together to promote a range of learning opportunities across the town and I hope that working with you and other students of the School of Continuing Education, we will be able to provide some practical assistance at this difficult time.

QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS IN ACCORDANCE WITH STANDING ORDER NO 10

QUESTION NO. 1

Councillor Singleton-White to ask the Lead Councillor for Children's Service:

Children in Care

Can the Lead Councillor please give details of the Quarter three performance figures of children in Care in Reading?

REPLY by Councillor Ennis (Lead Councillor for Children's Services):

Between April 2008 and March 2009 the Council has made significant improvements in its performance indicators for children in care.

The following performance indicators are above statistical neighbour performance as follows¹:

- The number of children in care who participated in their reviews has increased from 78% to 97% compared to 95% for statistical neighbours;
- 93.4% of looked after children were reviewed within timescales compared to 87% for statistical neighbours;
- The ratio of CIC who have cautions and convictions compared to the local police force area is 1.76 compared to 2.4 for statistical neighbours;
- 88% of children have had required health checks compared to 87% for statistical neighbours;

¹ Statistical neighbour comparisons are from 07-08 year end data from the social care data comparison tool

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- 73% of children are in stable placements compared to 67.5% for statistical neighbours;
- So far this year only 3.3% of looked after children have had three or more changes of placements compared to 16% last year and 12% for statistical neighbours;
- More children are being placed for adoption and 88.9% of children have been placed for adoption within timescales compared to 70% for statistical neighbours;
- 100% of children in care are allocated to a named qualified social worker;
- There are no permanent exclusions for children in care.

The following targets are below statistical neighbour performance:

- 15% of new children in care are currently placed more than 20 miles from home compared to 8.7% for statistical neighbours - the total number of placements within 20 miles is 84%;
- 11 out of 20 (55%) care leavers at year-end were in employment, education or training (EET) compared to 72% for statistical neighbours.

The following local indicators are exceeding local targets set:

- 97% of children in care have an up to date personal education plan;
- Numbers of children in care have fallen from 216 to 183. This has been achieved by finding safe permanent placements for these children, or making it possible for children to return home safely;
- We have currently 42% of children in in-house foster placements, which is above our target of 40%. The percentage of children in residential placement remains low at 8.2%. This means 91.8% of our children are in family based placements;
- We have reduced from 8 to 2 the number of children in care not in full time education.

This performance improvement has been achieved by the Protection, Planning and Throughcare team, in the context of understaffing in the last 6 months due to vacancies, and so represents a considerable achievement by staff and managers. I would like to express my thanks for their continued commitment to better outcomes for these children. I would also like to inform colleagues of their duty as corporate parents and would ask them to continue to look out for their needs in their various roles as Cabinet colleagues and Lead Spokespeople, Scrutiny Members and Governors and Members of the Corporate Parenting Panel.

QUESTION NO. 2

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

The Big Switch Off

Could the Lead Councillor for Environment please update me on the results of the "Big Switch Off" which the Council recently promoted?

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

The Big Switch off took place on the weekend beginning 30th January and involved council employees switching off all unnecessary equipment on Friday evening before leaving for the weekend. This year, in addition, the challenge was opened to businesses to join in, and 15 local businesses took part, many of them making significant energy savings.

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The event gained greater coverage due to support from the radio station Reading 107.

The Big Switch Off served as a reminder to council staff to turn off equipment for the weekend. Staff at the Civic Centre and the Hexagon achieved a 13% drop in out of hours electricity, and there was an average 20% drop in electricity use in leisure centres.

Businesses were asked to take meter readings before and after the weekend, which meant they and we were able to monitor success. For example, local company Designation used 23% less electricity over the weekend than usual by turning off computers, printers and other equipment on Friday night.

Since the last Big Turn Off two years ago, when the council achieved 22% savings in electricity use in the Civic Centre, an ongoing series of energy efficiency measures have been put in place with the result that our out of hours drop in use was smaller in the 2009 initiative.

In order to keep up the momentum the council challenged businesses and individuals to switch off for Earth Hour on 28th March for one hour to send a message to global leaders to take action on climate change. The council repeated the Big Switch Off that weekend in addition. More information about this event can be found on the website www.reading.gov.uk/earthhour

QUESTION NO. 3

Councillor Hanley to ask the Leader of the Council:

Diamonds for Growth

Could the Leader please explain the advantage of Reading being one of the "Diamonds for Growth " in the South East?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

Reading was designated as one of eight 'Diamonds for Investment & Growth' in SEEDA's 2006 Regional Economic Strategy (RES). Within the RES, the Diamonds are identified as having the potential to stimulate prosperity across wider areas, offering scope for further sustainable growth backed by infrastructure investment.

This recognition of Reading's potential and importance to the region has brought a number of advantages. The recently published 2009 Regional Funding Advice, prepared for government by SEERA and SEEDA, identifies the eight Diamonds as focal points for targeting future infrastructure investment. Reading itself is highlighted as a spatial priority in the document. The Regional Funding Advice informs the Regional Funding Allocation by government, through which finance for the Junction 11 improvements were previously obtained.

Beyond the financing of infrastructure, Diamond status has brought wider benefits to Reading, and will continue to do so. These include:

- Hosting one of the 8 new Innovation and Growth Teams, to be based at the University of Reading. Financed by SEEDA, these teams will support businesses with high growth potential in the wider Reading area.

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- Joint bidding with other Diamond areas for European Social Fund and European Regional Development Funding, where funding specifications require co-operation across the region.
- Dedicated and regular dialogue with the Chief Executive of SEEDA and senior management of GOSE, as well as recognition by CLG of the Diamonds as 'a good concept and good practice'.
- Working with SEEDA to comprehensively understand and baseline the ecological footprint of Reading and produce a 'no-nonsense' guide to help to drive future improvement against National Indicators 185 and 186.
- Working with the other major urban centres of the south east, through the Diamonds partnership, to develop joint responses to consultations on the South East Plan, Sub National Review, SEEDA Corporate Plan and SEEDA Innovation Teams, ensuring that the voice of the urban south east is heard.

QUESTION NO. 4

WITHDRAWN

QUESTION NO. 5

Councillor Ayub to ask the Leader of the Council:

Business Improvement District (BID)

What improvements can we hope to see in the town now that the BID has been approved for another five years?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

In November 2005, central Reading businesses voted to back the first Reading Business Improvement District (BID), beginning the momentum that has seen nearly £1 million of additional investment in the town centre. This was the first BID in the South East (outside London), and remains the only one in the Thames Valley; it helped Reading regain its status as one of the top shopping centres in the UK.

Reading BID2 is intended to continue this momentum and maximise the positive impact of private sector investment into the public realm, by providing services to the town centre that are above and beyond the service levels currently provided by Reading Borough Council and Thames Valley Police.

The case for BID2 is clear:

- Businesses and property owners in central Reading expect the public realm to be kept to the very highest standards, thus ensuring a seamless transition for customers between the centre's different 'quarters', such as Broad Street Mall, The Oracle, Broad Street, Friar Street, etc.
- Reading town centre must increase its marketing activity to maintain its competitive edge. A BID contributes towards that competitive edge and is in itself the ideal mechanism to fund such activity.

The aims

- 1 Entice more customers into Reading town centre

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- 2 Further improve the quality of experience for customers, staff and business visitors
- 3 Provide business support services leading out of economic downturn to the 2012 Olympics and beyond
- 4 Position Reading town centre for continued regional growth in the creative, retail and hospitality sectors

The objectives

- 1 **More attractive** environment for customers, staff and business visitors through continued additional cleaning and environmental services
- 2 **More secure** central business district with continued additional police resources
- 3 **More customers** from co-ordinated regional marketing, town centre events and targeted promotions; an enhanced retail service experience and facilitation of business support services
- 4 **Direct representation** of business priorities to local authority and police on operational and strategic issues
- 5 **Additional voluntary** property owner investment and regional corporate sponsorship support

The full detail can be found in the BID2 Business Plan at www.livingreading.co.uk.

QUESTION NO. 6

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

Waste and Recycling Collections

Could the Lead Councillor please update me on the recycling and waste collection operations over the Christmas and New Year period?

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

The collection of residual and recycling waste over the Christmas period just past went on without any major problems. The decision to suspend the collection of green garden waste ensured that resources were on hand to cover every eventuality.

As is usual over such holiday periods there were some minor problems of access in certain parts of the borough due to many residents being on holiday, consequently there was a proliferation of parked cars in residential areas. However this was overcome using the small vehicle recently purchased.

Tonnages of both types of waste collected did reduce over this period by:

Residual waste by	9.0%
Recyclable waste by	8.6%

A number of factors can affect this but undoubtedly the current financial situation felt by many residents would have an effect. In addition to this it is hoped that pressures felt by retailers to reduce packaging contributed to this.

This reduction in waste tonnages should be seen as a positive, as one of the government targets for waste authorities is to reduce waste.

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Note this is about kerbside collected waste and recycling; waste taken through the HWRC and recycling banks is not included, as the tonnages are not yet available.

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

Councillor Willis to ask the Leader of the Council:

Vacant and Temporary Posts

Could the Leader of the Council inform me of the number of posts that have been vacant and the number of posts that have been filled by temporary or agency staff for three months or more as at 1 March 2009? Please provide a breakdown by Directorate and Department.

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

There is no central database of the number of vacant posts or posts filled by temporary/agency staff. The Council's financial management is based on allocated budgets (cost centres) rather than staffing establishment, with service managers having flexibility, within the overall budget guidelines, to vary their staffing requirements to meet changes in service needs, so long as they keep within the overall allocated budget. This is standard practice within local government, and offers greater flexibility. The consequence, however, is that the Council does not have a fixed establishment of posts and hours, and therefore cannot state the complete number of vacancies at any one time.

As an indicator, however, the number of posts being advertised or recruited to at the beginning of March was:

Chief Executive's/Resources = 6

ENCAS = 22

H&CC = 31

DECS = 32

Total = 91

The Council's Corporate Management Team and Personnel Committee have recently reintroduced vacancy management procedures. Recruitment is restricted within a corporately agreed framework - allowing for continued recruitment of essential staff, but achieving staffing budget savings and creating redeployment opportunities by holding ('freezing') appropriate vacancies. Figures show that the Council advertises approximately 500 vacancies in a 12 month period (including casual and temporary positions), so there is scope for managing recruitment in this way. The default position is that a vacancy is not automatically/immediately advertised/filled. Service managers must request authorisation to fill a vacant post. This is made via a pro-forma which requires key information before authorisation. This process must be used for every post managers want to fill, and applies to all permanent, temporary and fixed term posts, posts funded from external sources, and posts to be covered in other ways e.g. with agency staff, consultants, contractors or interim managers. Individual requests must be signed off by the Head of Service and the Director. All requests must then be approved by the full CMT.

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As well as filling temporary positions, agency staff are also used to cover sickness and annual leave in front line services which require a minimum level of staffing. They are also used at peak/seasonal times. Examples of this include the processing of postal votes for elections and holiday play-schemes.

QUESTION NO. 8

Councillor Ruhemann to ask the Lead Councillor for Communities and Neighbourhoods:

Street Drinking Restrictions

Street Drinking restrictions have been newly introduced in some areas of East Reading, Tilehurst and Southcote. Can the Lead Councillor tell me how effective these measures have been in dealing with drink-related anti-social behaviour in areas where they have been in force for some time?

REPLY by Councillor Tickner (Lead Councillor for Communities and Neighbourhoods):

The second street drinking restriction zone came into place in 2006² and was the first to impact on any main residential area. Since then the number of anti-social behaviour reports relating to street drinking in this area has increased:

08/09 (to Dec 2008)	07/08	06/07	05/06
178	158	102	40

Whilst this may give an indication that the order has not worked, when reading through the actual reports it suggest that that this increase is due to public knowledge that the orders are in place. Reports have increased because people are reporting people consuming alcohol within the area, this would not have been reported previously. With the increased number of reports coming into the police, the Neighbourhood Police Team has a better idea of the areas that are being affected and are able to manage the situation more effectively.

Importantly prior to the order coming into place, there were a number of hotspot areas for street drinking. The order, coupled with dispersal orders and more recently the introduction of Section 27 of the Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006 has seen these hotspots almost disappear. Whilst the problem of street drinking has not gone away in this area, we no longer have a daily problem of large groups of habitual street drinkers gathering in specific locations and causing unrest to the community in the area covered by the 2006 order.

The order on its own will not eradicate the issues of persistent street drinking, however it does provide the police with an additional tool to require individuals to stop drinking in a public place where there is anti-social behaviour or risk of anti-social behaviour taking place in the area.

QUESTION NO. 9

Councillor Townend to ask the Lead Councillor for Communities and Neighbourhoods:

² The first street drinking restriction was for the Town Centre and as such did not impact greatly on residential areas.

Voluntary and Community Organisations: CRB Checks

For those voluntary and community organisations funded wholly or in part by Reading Borough Council, what procedures and safeguards are in place to ensure that employees and volunteers of these organisations are CRB checked and regularly audited to ensure full compliance?

REPLY by Councillor Tickner (Lead Councillor for Communities and Neighbourhoods):

Each grant recipient receives a service level agreement that states whether or not CRB checks are applicable. CRB checks are required if an organisation is dealing with vulnerable adults or children and young people.

As part of the annual grant application process, the Voluntary Sector Support Unit [VSSU] asks for evidence that there is a CRB procedure in place. Groups are asked to provide a list of names; CRB reference numbers and date that the check was made. In addition, Grant Liaison Officers [GLOs] may visit groups as part of the monitoring process and check that appropriate arrangements are in place. The VSSU will ask the GLO to make contact with the group if there were any issues about the provision of CRB procedural information.

For groups that need help with the process, the VSSU will refer those working with children and young people to Reading Children & Voluntary Youth Service who act as an umbrella organisation and who can assist small groups in getting checks completed. There are a number of different routes for those working with vulnerable adults, and Reading Voluntary Action can advise.

As part of the wider commissioning process:

- In Sports and Leisure - as a minimum, any sports club working with the Borough Council would have to provide evidence of CRB checks, insurance, qualifications and sign up to our child protection/ vulnerable adults protection policy. In addition, when individual volunteers are recruited to support programme delivery, they have to go through an application process, interview, references, CRB check, basis training package, mentor and activity site supervisory qualification.
- In Arts Development CRB checks are required when voluntary sector arts organisations and individual artists are commissioned to work on relevant projects outside of the grants process.

In Community Care and Children's Services CRB checks are required routinely as part of the commissioning process and are checked by commissioning officers.

QUESTION NO. 10

Councillor Townend to ask the Leader of the Council:

Postal and Delivery Firms

In the last seven years under Labour, government departments have spent £47m on private postal and delivery firms. How much did Reading Borough Council spend on

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private postal and delivery firms last year, and what criteria are used to decide to use private firms instead of Royal Mail services?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

In the financial year to 31 March 2009 the Council spent £38,500 on courier services provided by Jade Security.

Of this sum, £28,000 is paid to Jade Security to carry out a daily delivery to 27 sites around Reading. They also deliver twice weekly to 52 schools in the Reading area; 2-3 times weekly to 21 sites and once a week to 16 other sites. Jade Security is used because the Royal Mail do not provide a courier service and don't do same day deliveries. Jade Security has worked with the Council for a number of years and provide a flexible, efficient and reliable service; this, along with their goodwill, is more cost effective than running an in-house service which, for example, would need to be covered during periods of leave or sickness. As Jade is a larger operation cover is easily arranged with them.

We also pay £10,500 each year to Jade Security to provide the twice-weekly delivery of councillors' post. This sum compares favourably with the cost of posting out mail to councillors and ensures a same day delivery service to all councillors. The level of security when delivering mail which is offered by Jade Security is also very important given that the Royal Mail can only guarantee deliveries sent by their Special Delivery service which is not a sustainable cost given their minimum charge of £4.45 per item.

In addition TNT is used throughout the Council to transport documents to Docs-on-Line, who provide scanning services to the Council for services including Housing, Planning, Revenues and Benefits. The cost of this contract this financial year has been £5,000. Security and cost are the key reasons for choosing TNT.

Courier services are used by Marketing & PR for same day delivery of urgent correspondence which may include design work, adverts to achieve publication deadlines. Also the transportation of goods i.e. chairs, tables and other equipment for events as this is the most efficient method of delivery. The total annual cost is around £1,200.

The Museum Service also use a courier service, City Sprint, for the specialist transportation of museum exhibits (e.g. for the museum loans scheme to schools) on efficiency grounds at a cost of £13,200.

QUESTION NO. 11

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

Carers

Could the Lead Councillor for Community Care and Health please let me know:
How many Carers that RBC currently employs;
How many vacancies that there are for carers in total;
How many Agency workers that are employed in social care?

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

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The word "carers" is normally used to refer to relatives and friends who are supporting people in the community, not people employed by the Council.

The Council currently directly employs 442 full time equivalent posts in providing care. There were 56 vacancies at the end of the third quarter. In this context, workers from Employment Agencies are used to provide cover for vacancies and sickness etc. where it is necessary to ensure that services continue to be provided at the expected level. They are not Council employees. Sometimes the use of a care worker from an Employment Agency can be for a few hours only. This is recorded on an hourly and costs basis, not the number of individual people, as these can vary.

QUESTION NO. 12

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

Impact of a Reduction in Agency Staff

After the last Council meeting it was agreed with the Liberal Democrats and Labour that Reading Borough Council would work to reduce their reliance on agency workers significantly. Can the Lead Councillor for Community Care and Health please tell me what impact would a decrease in agency staff have on social care in Reading?

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

"The statement in the first sentence of Cllr T Harris's question is not exactly correct. The Council has agreed, "The Chief Executive to report to the Budget Review Group ... for recommendation to Cabinet, on potential savings, with a minimum target of £200k, over and above those already integrated into the budget, on Marketing and PR, agency staff, consultants, management, home to school transport and other areas that do not have adverse impact on front line services."

Cllr Harris should recall that the Labour Group would not accept a Liberal Democrat proposal to make cuts without knowing their impact. It is a key point in Labour's position that reductions in these items, including agency staff do not have an adverse impact on front line services.

There is not a specific budget for agency staff in social care. Agency staff are used only to cover vacant posts and absences where essential services require the same level of cover. (To provide a full picture, consultants are used for specific projects in community care in the transforming services project where specific expertise is required.)

If a resolution had been passed without saying reductions should not have an adverse effect on front line services, unspecified reductions could indeed have had an adverse effect. Due to Labour insistence on including this phrase, the Chief Executive was not asked to report back on reductions to reduce services.

Savings in agency staff costs can be made if there is less need for them to cover sickness and vacancies etc. They could also be made by reducing the price paid to agencies. Unlike the possibilities from the initial Liberal Democrat proposal, savings should not be brought forward if they would reduce the service given. Measures that are successful in reducing the reliance on, and costs of, Agency staff should be taken where they provide more efficiency but no reductions in service."

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QUESTION NO. 13

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

Dog Fouling

What is the Council doing to tackle the problem of dog fouling in the Borough, and how many fixed penalty notices have been issued for this offence?

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

Currently the 1 full time and 1 part time dog wardens are reactive and have to prioritise enquiries received borough wide. The immediate danger that stray and uncontrolled dogs present to the safety of members of the public account for the vast majority of enquiries received.

The work undertaken by the officers to fulfil the council's statutory stray duties is very labour intensive and time consuming. More recently there has been additional demands on the service due to the transfer of all duties for strays from the police to the council; 24 hour stray cover; loss of a stray acceptance and collection point; loss of town centre holding kennels and difficulties in re-homing unclaimed dogs. There have been an additional 200 enquiries in 08/09.

Enquiries relating to dog fouling make up about 10% of those dealt with by the Dog Wardens. Over the last 15/20 years there have been 25 prosecutions for fouling offences and wherever possible pro-active initiatives are taken by the wardens to promote responsible dog ownership and deter fouling. For example: 'Poop-scoop' signs are displayed on lampposts; flyers are distributed to raise awareness of the problem; surveillance is carried out where possible; fouling literature and worming advice are included with all letters to dog owners.

All offences witnessed by the public are investigated but complainants are often reluctant to supply written statements of evidence and so in most cases warning letters are sent to dog owners, as there is insufficient evidence to prosecute.

One fixed penalty notice has been served when dog fouling was witnessed on a neighbourhood walk about.

QUESTION NO. 14

Councillor Stainthorp to ask the Leader of the Council:

CRB Checks

Could I please be told how many councillors do not currently have a current CRB check verified by Reading Borough Council?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

A CRB (Criminal Records Bureau) check is not required by law for a person to be elected as a Councillor (although a number of local authorities do now require CRB checks for all Councillors and co-opted members). However, if a Reading Borough Council Councillor is appointed to a post involving substantial unsupervised access to children or vulnerable

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adults (e.g. Parenting Panel) then a CRB check is carried out to comply with advice on good practice from the national local government associations. These checks are organised through the relevant Directorates. Central records currently indicate seven CRB checks relating to Councillors.

However, in October last year Personnel Committee also agreed the introduction of a policy to implement a complete programme of retrospective and 3-yearly renewal checks for all school and non-school based employees and others. Councillors will be brought within this re-check regime. In accordance with this each elected position will be risk-assessed to determine the level of contact with children and vulnerable adults. Risk assessment will take place to see which Councillors will need to be CRB checked or re-checked, and they will then be processed as required. Improvements will also be made to the central database for this information to ensure that we are capturing details from all Directorates processing Councillor CRB checks.

QUESTION NO. 15

Councillor Benson to ask the Lead Councillor for Housing:

Guideline Rent

What does the Lead Councillor estimate the total cost will be to the Council of the government's decision to reduce average guideline rent for 2009/10, after Council previously agreed the rent increase in January of 4.9%, taking into account the cost of re-issuing rent notifications to tenants and also in terms of lost revenue?

REPLY by Councillor Edwards (Lead Councillor for Housing):

We are delighted that the Government has taken the step of enabling us to reduce the rent increase - this will be welcomed by all tenants.

As the report to Council makes clear, we are now in the middle of a consultation process about how the scheme will work but broadly speaking the Government is indicating that the changes in subsidy will match the rent reduction so there will be no loss of revenue.

There will be some opportunity costs associated with the scheme. We estimate that this will be within the region of £10,000 and will cover staff time, stationery and postage. This will be met from within existing budgets.

QUESTION NO. 16

Councillor Benson to ask the Lead Councillor for Housing:

Sub-letting

Experts estimate that 5% of social housing properties in inner city areas could be being unlawfully sub-let.

- a) How many Council properties is the Lead Councillor aware are currently unlawfully occupied within the Borough?
- b) What investigations have been carried out by the Council into the extent of the problem of illegal sub-letting of Council properties?
- c) How many properties has the Council successfully recovered from unlawful occupancy in the past 12 months?

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REPLY by Councillor Edwards (Lead Councillor for Housing):

Unlawful occupation, whether by illegal sub-letting or by squatting, is a matter we take very seriously. The consequences of unlawful occupation can be anti-social behaviour, criminality and loss of rental income. The statistic quoted (of 5%) is probably true in large inner city conurbations like London, Manchester, Birmingham and Liverpool, etc. Historically, however, unlawful sub-letting has not been a major problem in Reading's Council housing stock and this continues to be the case.

The Council's tenancy agreement clearly states that

" If you are a secure tenant and you wish to exercise your right to sub-let part of your home you must get the Council's agreement in writing first. We cannot refuse permission unless there is a good reason - if we refuse we will explain why. You must not sub-let the whole of your home."

At present the Housing team are investigating 4 cases of suspected sub-letting. A further 2 cases are with the Legal services team for legal action to regain possession of the property.

As noted above the issue of illegal sub-letting of Council properties has historically not been identified as a major problem. Suspected cases of illegal sub-letting are brought to Housing's attention primarily through notification from the Housing Benefit Fraud team and through information received from neighbours. In addition, cases of suspected illegal sub-letting are identified (very occasionally) through the work of the Rents team and Neighbourhood Officers' visits to Council properties. These mechanisms work well and enable us to identify cases and deal with them swiftly. As a robust system is in place, drawing on information from a number of sources, we will not be putting additional and much needed resources into investigation of a matter that we do not believe to be a problem in the first place.

There have been no cases of properties recovered from illegal occupancy in the past 12 months, which is a reflection of the fact that the issue is not a great cause for concern. The issue of abandoned properties and those in occupation of a property who are not entitled to succeed to the tenancy occupy a far greater amount of Officers' time and more properties are successfully recovered through these routes than through dealing with illegal sub-letting. A monitoring system is now in place to track the numbers of abandoned properties so that they can be brought back into use as swiftly as possible.

QUESTION NO. 17

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

Free School Meals

How many pupils in Reading currently receive free school meals (as a number, and % of total number of pupils)? How has this changed year on year over the last 3 years?

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

The number of all pupils in Reading that are currently eligible to receive free school meals as of January 2009 is 2483 eligible/19.3% of pupils on roll. This is a 0.2% decrease

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from 2008 which saw 19.5%/2454 pupils eligible for free school meals. This is an increase in actual eligibility of 29 children from these 2008 figures. Looking at the third year in question 2007, 20.3%/2418 children were eligible. This is a difference of 36 children eligible and a 0.8% decrease from 2008 due to changes in numbers on roll.

Turning to the Reading School Meals Contract, this has 42 schools within it [made up of 37 Primary Schools, 1 Secondary School, 3 Special Schools and 1 Nursery].

Free School Meal uptake is calculated over the academic year and use one set of figures for the whole year (Census) within the terms of the Contract. Based on the October 2008 Census the current number eligible for FSM (Free School Meals) is:

1698 children are eligible = 16% of pupil numbers within the contract roll numbers. 2008-9 shows that of this 16% eligibility, 85% of those entitled are accessing their entitlement to date from Sep 08 - Feb 09 equalling 1443 children. This is a significant increase on 2007-2008 when 1748 children were eligible - 17.5% of numbers on roll (within the contract). Of this 17.5%, 78% or 1363 of children accessed their entitlement. This shows that we have seen a positive impact of 7% increase in take up of free school meals across our contract in the last 3 academic years.

QUESTION NO. 18

Councillor Duveen to ask the Lead Councillor for Community Care and Health:

Care Places

What levels of increase has this town seen over the last year in council funded care places and what provision is being made in the 2009-10 budget to cope with any further increases?

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

In 2007/2008 the expenditure on Council funded care places was £18,440k and to the end of February it was £19,227k, reflecting an increase in numbers.

The Council's approach is to support and provide measures to enable independent living at home for as long as possible, so the aim is to keep the use of care places outside the person's home as low as possible, subject, of course, to ensuring the person receives the care they require and are assessed to need.

The Council's budget for 2009/2010 incorporates an increase for community care provision of £2.3m, after allowing for £1.3m of efficiency savings. This has been set to cater for forecast demand for services at home and in care home places as appropriate for the person.

QUESTION NO. 19

Councillor Duveen to ask the Leader of the Council:

Council Tax Benefit

What levels of increase has this town seen in Council Tax Benefits and what provision is being made in the 2009-10 budget to cope with any further increases?

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REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

There has been a 6.6% increase in the number of live Council Tax benefit claims over the period 01 April 08 to March 09. The overall caseload of all Housing and Council Tax Benefit claims have risen from 12,074 in April 2008 to 12,999 in March 2009. The steepest increase has been over the last 2 months. We continue to receive on average the same number of new claims to benefit on a monthly basis although this has increased over the last month indicating that the economic downturn has started to feed through. More customers who apply for benefit qualifying can explain the rise in caseload and less customers being able to find employment where their income would mean that they no longer qualify. The direct budget for the service in 09/10 is £822,500. Managers are monitoring workload to ensure the service is maintained and have not, at this stage, flagged up a need for an increase in the budget over and above the inflation costs which are built into the above figure.

QUESTION NO. 20

Councillor Epps to ask the Leader of the Council:

Security and Disciplinary Procedures

Will the Leader of the Council hold an investigation into the Council's security procedures or ensure that changes are made into disciplinary procedures concerning the rights of staff under disciplinary investigation to retain their building passes, following the recent revelations that staff on 'long term leave' in the Children's Services department accessed the Council buildings over a recent weekend and shredded substantial numbers of documents?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

I can confirm that, following an investigation into the incident referred to in the question, there have been no identified breaches of security, nor staff under disciplinary investigation, as a result of this.

However, because there was initially some misunderstanding about what had happened, procedures have been amended regarding access to buildings in given circumstances, to make them clearer for managers and staff.

Group Leaders and members of the Personnel Committee have been briefed on the sensitive and complex personnel and related matters surrounding this incident, which it is not appropriate to discuss in public.

QUESTION NO. 21

Councillor Bayes to ask the Leader of the Council:

Council Tax benefit and Housing benefit

How have the numbers of claims for i) Council Tax benefit, and ii) Housing benefit changed over the last 24 months? Given that demand for these benefits is likely to increase over the next 12 months what measures are being put in place to anticipate this?

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REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

For the year 07/08 the live caseload figure for Housing and Council Tax Benefit remained relatively steady at 12,000 varying slightly throughout the year. In April 2008 the caseload stood at 12,401; during the 08/09 year to date this has reached 12,999 and has risen consistently each month and continues to do so. The number of enquires concerning benefit received over the telephone by the customer service team has increased from a figure of 2,349 in December 2008 to 3,222 in January 2009 and this trend continues. In March to date we have received 255 requests for benefit forms and 450 applications. Whilst the number of applications has not varied much the number of people qualifying for benefit has increased. The service situation is monitored closely, and resource adjustments will be made if it appears that the necessary standard of service cannot be maintained.

QUESTION NO. 22

Councillor Goodall to ask the Lead Councillor for Communities and Neighbourhoods:

Acquisitive Crime

How have levels of acquisitive crime, in particular i) Burglary, and ii) Street Robbery changed over the last 24 months? What measures is the Council taking to work with partners to reduce the numbers of these serious crimes?

REPLY by Councillor Tickner (Lead Councillor for Communities and Neighbourhoods):

Overall levels of serious acquisitive crime³ have fallen by 12.66% based on April - February 2008/09 when compared to April - February 2006/07 figures. Over all this represents 726 fewer victims of serious acquisitive crime. Burglary and robbery figures are up when comparing the same period by, 3.9% and 36% respectively. The increase in robbery is significant it should however be remembered that this includes a range of offences including incidents between school children. There is anecdotal evidence of high levels of false reporting. Detection rates for robbery are also high.

The Council, working through Reading's Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP) have made burglary and robbery its top priority with a change in resource allocation to reflect this. Current and future work includes:

- Re-organisation of the offender management scheme, focus on those priority offenders known to commit substantial numbers of these crime types;
- Improved management structure within the offender management scheme;
- Increased resources within the offender management scheme;
- Neighbourhood police team focus on those offenders believed to be committing these crime types;
- Increasing public awareness of how to protect property including, radio adverts, priority street briefings in known hotspot areas and streets, newspaper articles and other publicity material;
- Specific campaign aimed at those vulnerable to robbery, Get home safely campaign over the Christmas period;

³ For the purposes of this report serious acquisitive crime includes Theft from Vehicle, burglary, theft from the person, robbery, theft of a vehicle as reflected in the LAA target

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- Joint working between police and Youth Services (including Youth Offending Service) to reduce young person on young person robbery;
- Increasing expertise in crime reduction advise within the Council through training, including supporting people workers;
- Introduction of vulnerable property scheme that builds on the success of the vulnerable vehicle scheme;
- Target hardening measure both through existing schemes such as Safer Reading Capital Projects and identifying commonality in hotspot areas where target hardening would reduce the risks;
- Introduction of Landlords accreditation scheme for student housing
- Work to improve links and support to Neighbourhood Watch in hotspot areas;
- Work to improve links and support to those Neighbourhood Action Groups who have burglary as a priority;
- Working in partnership with Crime Stoppers to prevent the onward sale of stolen goods, including increasing property marking.

QUESTION NO. 23

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

Rat and Mice Infestation

Where are the specific rat/mice infestation hotspots in Reading? Per ward or road, do the collected statistics show any trends, up or down, over the last 4 years? (Please could this data be supplied).

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

The Public Health Team deals with rats/mice in domestic premises and there are no particular ward or road "hot spots" with enquiries coming in from across the Borough. The number of infestations treated to deal with rats and mice are as follows:

2004/5 - April to Nov - 696 [figures only available for first 2 Quarters and part of 3rd Qtr due changeover of computer systems].

2005/6 - April to April - 1255

2006/7 - April to April - 596

2007/8- April to April - 686

2008/9 - April to January 2009 - 570.

The drop in requests for service in 2006/7 was as a result of the introduction of charges for the service with concessions only for residents with "Your Reading" passports. Overall taking this into account there do not appear to be any particularly large trends up or down for rats/mice in domestic situations.

Looking at Commercial Premises the list of addresses below indicates where complaints have been made of rodent activity in or near commercial premises. Usually it is alleged that the rodents are seen outside of the premises.

In 2008 there were 13 complaints: West Street; Reading Gate Retail Park (5 complaints); Greyfriars Road; Wokingham Road; Whitley Wood Lane; Caversham Road (2 complaints in different areas); Oxford Road; Northumberland Avenue;

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In 2007 there were 15 complaints: Wokingham Road (2 complaints same area); Oxford Road (7 complaints in total - 2 complaints in one area and 3 complaints in other area, 2 are in other parts of Oxford Road); West Street; Kings Road; Friar Street; London Road (2 complaints different areas); Reading Train Station;.

In 2006 there were 6 complaints: Friar Street; Southampton Street; Oxford Road (4 complaints different areas); West Street; Chatham Street.

In 2005 there were 6 complaints: Friar Street (2 complaints different parts of Friar Street); Church Street, Caversham (2 complaints); Erleigh Road; Caversham Road.

In 2004 there were 8 complaints: School Road; Shooters Way; Bennet Road; Bridge Street, Caversham; Union Street; London Road; Reading Gate Retail Park; Church Street, Caversham.

QUESTION NO. 24

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

Redlands Ward Road Resurfacing

When does the Lead Councillor anticipate, given the current level of funding made available to the Council for highways maintenance work via central government grant, the following roads in Redlands ward will be resurfaced: Blenheim Road, Donnington Road, Donnington Gardens, Carnarvon Road, De Beauvoir Road, Hatherley Road and Hexham Road?

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

Each road in Reading will receive a condition inspection, depending upon its classification, but as a minimum annually. If during this inspection the Highways Inspector considers that the road condition is poor then he/she will add this road to the list for detailed engineering investigation and assessment. An annual resurfacing programme is then produced based on the relative conditions of the roads. As you might expect with limited funds available, it is not possible to resurface all roads assessed and in this instance the Highways Department will prioritise those roads in the worst condition.

It is not possible to say when these roads would be resurfaced however I will ensure that this list is passed to them so that they are aware of your concerns.

QUESTION NO. 25

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

Electronics Waste Reprocessing

In reference to the "Briefing note on recycling and current market for recyclables" circulated at the last Council meeting, would the Lead Councillor be able to confirm that consumer electronics waste (sent to third parties) is reprocessed under full COSHH, REACH or H&S regulations either in this country or abroad? Can he also confirm that these third parties do not send these items to further agents in India or China, where H&S regulations are often disregarded?

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

WEEE (Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment) waste is sent for reprocessing through an agreement with ERP (European Recycling Platform). ERP was chosen by the council partnership as our preferred WEEE partner as required by the WEEE Regulations. ERP manage, in collaboration with our PFI contractor, the collection of WEEE waste, which is delivered by residents to Smallmead and to Longshot Lane in Bracknell. Collected WEEE is sent to an AATF (Approved Authority Treatment Facility) where the waste is processed. All AATFs are EA (Environment Agency) licensed and therefore inspected by the EA for compliance, which includes health and safety elements.

We cannot confirm what they do with the raw elements and components of goods once they have been initially reprocessed in the UK, as these companies may export some elements abroad. This is especially true where further reprocessing facilities in the UK are limited. ERP prohibits the export of any unprocessed WEEE outside of the EU, Norway or Switzerland. At present, economic and environmental efficiencies mean that treatment takes place within the UK and Ireland.

re3 Limited can however confirm that no electronic waste is exported without some sort of initial reprocessing/treatment in the UK. We are ISO 14001 certified, demonstrating our commitment to a sustainable organisation.