

COUNCIL MEETING - 7 JULY 2015

AGENDA ITEM: 6

(C) QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

1. Councillor White to ask the Leader of the Council: Human Rights Act

A young man called Graham Gaskin was very badly treated in care for many years. He wanted to read his social services files, which were kept by Liverpool City Council. The Council refused to let him see all his files. Graham Gaskin went through the courts in the UK to try and force the Council to let him see his files, but the courts agreed with the Council. So he took his complaint to the European Court of Human Rights.

The European Court of Human Rights said the Council had breached Graham Gaskin's rights. The Court agreed he needed to see his social services files in order to try and make sense of his childhood and his treatment in care. As a result of Graham Gaskin's complaint, which was decided by the European Court in 1989, it is now much easier for people in care or in contact with social services to see information that is written about them. Councils must now keep files concerning children in care for 75 years.

The Human Rights Act has had a positive impact on many rights protections of individuals in the UK including the example given above, rape victims failed by the police, and grieving families of dead soldiers; it provides guidance for public authorities in ensuring policies are developed in line with international human rights standards. It protects us all.

Will the Leader of the council join Green Party Councillors and others to publicly express support for the Human Rights Act? Will the Leader also call on the Government to retain the Human Rights Act, the protections within it, and the UK's international obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights?

RESPONSE by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council)

I would remind Cllr. White that it was a Labour Government who introduced the Human Rights Act in 1998. Of course I condemn the Tory Government's proposals to scrap it. Indeed Harriet Harman used the 800th anniversary of the signing of the Magna Carta recently to write to David Cameron urging him to abandon his plans to repeal the Act. She invited people to add their signatures to her letter and I have done so.

2. Councillor Rodda to ask the Leader of the Council: Cuts to Tax Credits

Many residents in Katesgrove are in work but on low incomes which are topped up by working families tax credits, what impact does the council think cuts to tax credits will have on local families who are in work?

RESPONSE by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council)

If a customer is in receipt of Housing benefits and Council Tax Support, and their tax credits are cut, then under the current rules they will be entitled to additional Housing Benefit and additional Council Tax support. If they have not been in receipt Housing Benefit and or Council Tax support before, they may become entitled for the first time.

The cost of additional Council Tax support will have to be borne by the local authority as the scheme is a local scheme, unless we choose to consider changing our scheme for the next financial year.

Where families are not in receipt of Housing benefit / Council Tax support, then they will obviously see a reduction in their household income.

Customers in receipt of Tax credits also may qualify for:

- prescriptions and other health-related costs
- vitamins, milk and food if pregnant or have a child under 4
- maternity costs - a £500 payment (called a 'Sure Start Maternity Grant')
- school costs, including school meals, uniforms, transport and trips
- funeral costs
- court fees, legal costs and prison visits
- home repairs from your council
- heating and energy costs

Therefore if these are cut families may see their help with these additional costs removed or reduced.

Moving forward Tax credits will form part of the Universal Credit payment and therefore that may impact managing the family budget on a day-to-day basis as rather than receiving them in between other awards the payment will be aligned with the UC payment and form part of it.

Of course this answer is given just a day before the Chancellor's "Emergency Budget" and there has been much speculation in the press about further reductions in spending on welfare, including tax credits. It may well be that that my answer is out of date by tomorrow afternoon and people will be even worse off.

3. Councillor Maskell to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:

Improvements at Reading West Station

Could the Lead Member indicate what progress he has been made in discussions with Network Rail and First Great Western in securing commitments to improvements at Reading West Station?

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

I thank Cllr Maskell for the opportunity to up-date on this important local station. Over the years Reading West has suffered from a lack of investment from the railway industry, despite a 30% increase in passenger usage in the past five years meaning the station now has over 600,000 passenger arrivals and departures every year.

This upward trend in usage is set to continue with the provision of new trains and electrification of the route to Newbury in 2017 and Basingstoke in late 2018. In addition, greater demand is anticipated from the surrounding residential areas to use services from Reading West to interchange with Crossrail services at Reading Station from December 2019.

We have emphasised the urgent requirement for improvements to passenger facilities at Reading West to Network Rail and First Great Western. Both organisations have now agreed to

work with us to develop future proposals for the station through the development of a Masterplan which will set out a phased approach to delivery of enhancements at the station towards our vision of a fully accessible station with a greater presence on the Oxford Road.

To inform development of the Masterplan we undertook a survey of passengers at the station on 20th May in partnership with First Great Western. Initial results from the survey have confirmed our belief that customers do not feel the facilities at the station are up to an acceptable standard, with passengers rating the station 4.8 against an average score taken from surveys at other stations of 8.0.

The completed Masterplan will provide a basis to enable us to bid for funding towards delivery of improvements at the station and we are actively working with Network Rail and First Great Western to identify potential sources of funding. Initial options being considered as part of the Masterplan development include construction of a station building on the Oxford Road at street level under the railway bridge, with step free access to both platforms via either ramps or lifts. This would provide a visible presence for the station and a focal point on the Oxford Road which could act as a catalyst for further regeneration of the local area.

We will continue to work with our railway industry colleagues to deliver passenger improvements at Reading West. This commitment to work in partnership is highlighted by the recent, and welcome, withdrawal by Network Rail of their proposal to rebuild the passenger footbridge at the station as part of the electrification works, which they have agreed to review to ensure compatibility with our wider aspirations for the station. We are awaiting further details from them and I will ensure that Cllr Maskell and colleagues are kept informed of progress.

4. Councillor Rodda to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:
A33 Works - Progress

Could the lead member for transport update the council on the progress of works on the section of the A33 nearest the IDR and also on the junction with Rose Kiln Lane?

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

I thank Cllr Rodda for the opportunity to up-date on this important scheme. Implementation of the A33 pinch point scheme started in December 2014, following the award of over £1.4m funding from the Department for Transport. The scheme comprises a range of measures to improve journey time reliability and reduce congestion on the A33 corridor, including extending the left-turn filter lanes for exiting the A33 onto Rose Kiln Lane (north and southbound); providing more direct pedestrian and cycle links alongside the A33 crossing of the Kennet and providing an alternative pedestrian and cycle route to negotiate seasonal flooding along the A33 between Rose Kiln Lane and Bennet Road.

The substantive works on the northbound approach to the A33/Rose Kiln Lane junction (Matalan gyratory) were completed in April, creating additional left turn capacity and improvements to the overall operation of the gyratory. A small amount of finishing work is still required including adjustments to the signals installation.

Works on the southbound approach to the A33/Rose Kiln Lane junction (Brunel Retail Park junction) are on-going including widening works to increase junction capacity which are being undertaken during off-peak lane restrictions. Final surfacing and lining work is scheduled for the end of July with scheme completion in early August.

In addition, works to upgrade the traffic signals at the A33 junction with the IDR are nearing completion with testing schedule in late July to maximise the performance of the junction.

5. Councillor Rose Williams to ask the Lead Councillor for Adult Social Care: Independent Living Fund

Could the Lead Councillor for Adult Social Care, please update me on the impact that the closure of the Independent Living fund will have on disabled residents in Reading?

RESPONSE by Councillor Eden (Lead Councillor for Adult Social Care)

Across the country many disabled people are very concerned about the closure of the independent living fund. Local authorities have been given discretion about how they support people who were benefiting from this fund. Because of this and in many cases because of the pressures on councils budgets and capacity there has been wide variation across the country. I believe it is a scandal that the government has unnecessarily created a post code lottery in something that had enabled many disabled people to live more fulfilling independent lives.

In Reading 21 people were in receipt of ILF. I am pleased to say that officers have worked extremely hard to ensure that all have been assessed and had care and support plans completed, which according to reports is not the case in many local authorities. Some people have chosen to extend current Direct Payment arrangements, some people have chosen to move to Direct Payment arrangements and some have continued to have commissioned services.

In Reading at least, transition from independent living fund to Council funded services have not resulted in any reduction of service for any individual.

6. Councillor Pearce to ask the Lead Councillor for Health: Beat the Street

Could the lead councillor for Health please give the council an update on how successful the recent Beat the Street initiative has been?

RESPONSE by Councillor Hoskin (Lead Councillor for Health)

Together, the communities of Reading, Burghfield, Mortimer, Pangbourne and Theale travelled over 300,000 miles in eight weeks playing Beat the Street, the walking and cycling challenge.

The Beat the Street campaign was funded by Reading Borough Council and Reading's two NHS Clinical Commissioning Groups. The campaign aims to promote healthier lifestyles for people of all ages through increased levels of walking and cycling.

The 2015 Beat the Street competition ended at midnight on Wednesday 24 June. 23,992 players (11% of the population) travelled a grand total of 306,599.2 miles. This is a 63% increase in participants from 2014, when 15,074 people took part.

Initial data for Beat the Street 2015:

- 23 992 participants took part
- No of children participating: 10,831 (2014 = 8416)

- No of adults participating: 13,161 (2014 = 6658)
- There were 202 beat boxes, across Reading town and the surrounding villages
- 84 teams signed up to the challenge including schools, GP practices and businesses
- Almost 20% of adults who played (2538 people) joined through their GP surgery
- Beat the Street supported many local events including Children's Meadow Madness, Thames Amateur Regatta, Waterfest, East Reading Community Festival and Open for Art
- The Hill Primary in Caversham topped the table for most points and Yoga Reading won Highest Average per team member table. Yoga Reading are using their prize money to provide free yoga lessons to Beat the Street teams.
- Players and teams in Reading have led the way in innovative ways to get moving, whether it is a school holding an outdoor learning week, a walking bus or evening walks for teams.
- Bonus Beat Boxes were added across all parks during the final weekend to encourage people into Reading and villages green spaces.
- RBC's Health Walks leader has organised a walking bus and a GP practice walk during the competition.
- Our quit smoking and Eat for Health services created a number of teams for their participants.
- The campaign worked with Readybike to promote our bike hiring scheme.

By reaching the target, £4,000 will be donated to The Royal Berks Charity. The Loyal Royal Berkshire Oddfellows will donate £2,000 to go to the Berkshire Cancer Centre, where adults receive treatment while £2,000 will go to support children's cancer services at the Royal Berkshire Hospital NHS Foundation Trust.

Beat the Street 2015 has, of course, only just ended. Our provider, Intelligent Health, will now start analysing the end of competition data for the evaluation report and we will share this as soon as available. The report will include self-reported baselines and a 6 month follow-up survey on physical activity levels; changes in how people are choosing to travel, the number of participants as well as an exit survey of participants' experiences of Beat the Street and analysis of walking patterns from beat box data.

7. Councillor D Edwards to ask the Lead Councillor for Adult Social Care:
New Care Home Framework

I ask that the Lead Councillor for Adult Social Care please update me on the progress of the Council's New Home Care Framework and what impact it will have on the quality of care in Reading for some of our most vulnerable residents?

RESPONSE by Councillor Eden (Lead Councillor for Adult Social)

The home care framework is an part of improving quality of care for many of our residents.

12 Providers have been chosen for the Home Care Framework following a competitive procurement exercise. The Providers have been selected on both quality and price. The new contract gives greater emphasis to quality than the previous list and incorporates delivery of the requirements of the Ethical Care Charter. For example; providers allow adequate time between calls for travel and payment of travel time and costs; and the Council's Dignity in Care Charter is compulsory for all providers.

The framework Contract started on 1st June 2015 for a period of four years.

Officers have reported that they are encouraged by a very positive start to the new Framework. There are regular forums with the providers where officers will continue to work with them on and there are monitoring arrangements in place that will check on the providers' implementation of the contract including the ethical care charter.

Additionally there are plans for a drop in for care staff, where Officers hold sessions at community venues, enabling care workers to speak to them directly and anonymously to raise any concerns. This also fulfils some of the requirements of the Ethical Care Charter and ensures any concerns are reported.

I am proud that in these very challenging times that Reading Council and this Labour group remain committed to working with our local trade unions, service users and home care workers to ensure dignity for the workforce and enable people to live fulfilled lives in their own community.

8. Councillor Livingston to ask the Leader of the Council:
Universal Credit

Following on from my question to the Council Leader at our last meeting, I should like to ask the following: in view of the uncertainty that timescales for the roll out of Universal Credit would be met, please could I have an update regarding the current situation. Do we now have a clarity of process and timetable?

RESPONSE by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council)

The Government has told Reading Borough Council that Universal Credit is to be rolled out in Reading on the 21st September 2015; we are advised that in this tranche they will only be considering single claimants under 25 with no housing costs.

We are advised that the timetable will be accelerated moving forward however there is still little information regarding this and the speed the government anticipate the project being completed.

The latest press release advises the following:

"Universal Credit - which will be available in all jobcentres across the country by next spring 2016".

However, as of the 11th May, 2016, Universal Credit will be available at over 260 jobcentres across the country, but primarily for single customers only.

There has been no other information released since I last updated you other than it will be accelerated.

Therefore the position remains the same:

New claims for Housing benefit are due to end between May 2016 and December 2017 rolling out on a geographical basis. The migration of existing benefit claims onto Universal Credit will not begin until January 2018. The migration of employment and support allowance and tax credits cases (along with associated Housing Benefit claims) will occur 'at some point'.

There has been no further information released.

9. Councillor McElligott to ask the Lead Councillor for Children's Services and Families:
MASH Update

Would the lead member for Children's Services and Families please update me on progress towards the opening of a MASH in Reading?

RESPONSE by Councillor Gavin (Lead Councillor for Children's Services and Families)

The Multi - Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) consists of a multi - agency team of professionals from RBC and partner agencies dedicated to safeguarding children and young people. The aim of the MASH is to ensure that information is shared between professionals in a timely manner and within a confidential setting in order to make informed decisions and speedy interventions.

The MASH commenced in August 2012 with workers from children's social care and health. Subsequently the team were joined by a Domestic Violence Risk assessor from Thames Valley Police.

Following a successful 6 month project the co - located MASH went live in the week beginning the 29th June 2015 with social care staff, the early help coordinator and NHS staff moving into bespoke offices on the ground floor of the civic centre on Monday 30th June and members of Thames Valley Police joining them on the 30st June 2015.

The social work team screen all the 150+ contacts into the service each week and determine next action.

Where a contact reaches the threshold for MASH information sharing this takes place within the secure environment of the MASH room, which facilitates confidential information sharing. This information is recorded on a bespoke document which is also confidential and only available to social work staff on a need to know basis.

Where families who do not need a social work assessment the early help coordinator assists the referrer link with appropriate early help or universal services if required.

The team has already seen the benefits of the co - location and the MASH process. These include:

- Improved working relationships
- Better information sharing
- Increased face to face dialogue.
- Enhanced decision making leading to better outcomes for children and young people

The team hope to be joined by adult safeguarding services towards the end of 2015