

COUNCIL MEETING - 21 FEBRUARY 2017

(5) QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

1. Peter Burt to ask the Leader of the Council: Equal Pay

Please will the Leader of the Council tell me:

With how many of the workers with whom the Council is in legal dispute with over equal pay claims has a settlement been reached ?

How much has been paid to these workers ?

How many claims remain outstanding ?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock Leader of the Council

The process of resolving the equal pay claims has now reached an advanced stage.

When equal value has been established for the claimants, the claimants' solicitors then have to produce schedules of loss to the Council, which includes the number of hours worked, overtime, tax, National Insurance and Pension contributions. The Council then needs to check its records so that agreement on the amount due to each claimant can be reached.

To date equal value comparators have been identified for 32 claimants, and the process to agree individual claims is being worked on.

Before each counter schedule is produced by the Council a number of steps are required, though not all steps will apply to all claimants. The steps may include:

- Confirmation of employment dates and claim periods as schedules are not all corresponding with fact
- Determine agreement on the hourly rates for claimants and comparators
- Ascertain whether any low pay supplements have been paid and how this then raises the claimant's hourly rate
- Calculate absences for maternity leave
- Term time only working for some school based staff
- Check pay data on either a month by month basis or annual cumulative basis covering the period of the claim and up to 30 April 2011. Calculate any additional hours (overtime) and determine this level of loss
- Drafting counter schedules of loss to correspond with claimant's solicitor's schedule.

To date a total of £59,730 has been paid as interim payments to 5 of the claimants and it is the intention to progress as many of the other claims as possible over the coming months.

182 workers currently have claims outstanding, which is a total of 258 claim forms outstanding.

2. Peter Burt to ask the Leader of the Council: Legal Fees

During the year 2016, how much did Reading Borough Council spend on legal fees?

Please provide a list of cases in which the Council has been a party and the amount spend on fees for each case.

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock Leader of the Council

From 1st January 2016 to 31st December 2016 the Council spent £817,592 on legal fees. This fee is broken down as follows:-

Dee Park Regeneration	£ 1,022
Equal Pay	£88,086
HSE Prosecution/Willows Care Home	£15,013
Local Strategic Transport Fund	£ 4,259
Mapledurham Playing Fields	£18,424
(money spent by the Council as trustees of Mapledurham Playing Fields)	
Counsel Fees for Litigation cases	£82,164
Court Fees for Litigation cases	£16,250
Court Enforcement agents	£ 9,235
Berkshire Joint Legal Team	£583,139

From 1st January 2016 to 31st December 2016 the Berkshire Joint Legal Team spent £598,195 on legal fees for 172 individual social care cases in Reading. Of these, 156 were Children's Social Care cases, at a total cost of £583,139 The remaining 16 (£15,056) were Adult Social Care and Education cases.

3. Adele Barnett-Ward to ask the Lead Councillor for Education:
School Funding

I am a parent with children at Caversham Primary and Highdown schools.

At the end of January I received an email from Caversham Primary explaining the financial challenges facing the school. It said they were facing a serious deficit in their budget in the coming years and asked for voluntary contributions from parents to reduce that deficit.

The amount suggested in the email was £1 per school day, which is £190 per year per child. Some parents will be able to afford this, but others will not. According to the SchoolCuts.org website, Highdown is losing even more per pupil per year than Caversham Primary: £484 per pupil, compared to £412 at Caversham Primary, so I and fellow Highdown parents are wondering if a similar request will arrive from them.

Can the Lead Councillor tell me what he thinks of schools being forced to ask parents to help with their school budget ?

Can he also tell me what the Government is doing to ensure schools are adequately funded?

REPLY by Councillor Jones Lead Councillor for Education

No school should have to hold out a begging bowl in order to undertake the normal enactment of school life.

While I have great sympathy with the predicament that Caversham Primary School now finds itself, I disagree with the decision of their Governing Body to request direct contributions from parents, albeit in a voluntary capacity. This may lead to unease by some parents in feeling they have to contribute, even if they cannot afford to. This may also be felt by pupils.

I grew up at a time when children entitled to free school meals were called to the front of the class to claim them. Let's not return to those days of stigma and social division - or even "just about managing".

However, schools are permitted under the DfE guidelines to seek voluntary donations from parents, but must make it clear that there is no obligation on any parent to contribute.

The School Admissions Code is clear that schools must not request financial contributions - whether voluntary or compulsory - as any part of the admissions process, including when offering a place.

1. Highdown is an Academy and would have the same responsibilities to set a balanced budget as any other school and has to follow the same guidelines as provided by the Department for Education.
2. All schools are provided with a budget based on a funding formula. This is supplemented by additional funding through other streams, including Pupil Premium and Special Educational Needs. The governing body of a school, whether it is maintained or an academy (including free schools) are required to set a balanced budget, where their projected expenses do not exceed their projected income.

As far as what the government is doing?

Well they are currently undertaking a consultation of the Schools National Funding Formula.

In this consultation they:

- Confirm that they will introduce national funding formulae for schools, high needs and local authority services for schools in 2018-19
- Confirm the design of the funding system. Where they will split the dedicated schools grant (DSG) into 4 blocks - for schools, high needs, early years (on which there has been a separate consultation) and central school services;
- Confirm that they will have a school-level ('hard') formula for the schools block from 2019-20. In the interim, schools will still be funded according to a local formula. The schools block will be ring-fenced for spending on schools, but there will be some limited scope for movement before 2019-20, and some continuing local flexibility from 2019-20;

Frankly I have no faith that the current challenges and hardship increasingly faced by schools in Reading will be lifted by the new funding formula arrangements.

We are looking at a bleak future.

4. Roger Lightfoot to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport & Consumer Services:
Free Swimming

Now that plans for the demountable pool at Rivermead have been released, I see that current members of RSL are being invited to transfer to Greenwich Leisure Limited at the same cost. Will those younger and older members of RSL who currently get swimming free continue to enjoy it on the same basis ?

REPLY by Councillor Gittings (Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport & Consumer Services):

Yes. While the details of the opening times and swimming programme are still to be agreed with Greenwich Leisure, the pricing schedule for the demountable pool will be in line with other RSL facilities.

5. Neil Adams to ask the Leader of the Council:
Budget Cuts

Council members may be aware of a recent article by Matthew Turner in the Independent. This article puts forward the position that my party the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) have had from the very start that cuts are a political choice and can be opposed. It points out that cuts to Labour controlled Councils are up to five times higher than Councils controlled by the Tories. When faced with such an unfair playing field how can Labour controlled Councils, such as Reading, justify carrying out Tory cuts ?

The recent deal between the Tory Government and Surrey County Council is a clear example of this, where the referendum around raising council tax by 15% was scrapped and the funding for social care suddenly made available.

The decision to continue funding for Reading Your Way is to be welcomed as this is a vital service for vulnerable adults suffering from mental health issues. No doubt this decision was influenced by the determined campaign and successful petition against cutting this essential service. There is, however, a burning need to protect all services and an understanding of this amongst the service users of Reading Your Way.

This being the case, will the Council commit to setting a legal and balanced no cuts or 'people's budget' for Reading ? This would require the use of available reserves and prudential borrowing powers to prevent the need for any cuts in the current budget period. The reason given for carrying out Tory cuts until now has been that commissioners would be brought in to take over control of the Council. Can the Council explain how this will be possible if a balanced and legal budget is formulated within the powers divested under the Localism Agenda devolving more powers to local Councils ?

Of course, this would only be a solution to prevent cuts for the current budget period. There would be a need to then build a mass campaign in Reading to demand the funding from central government to meet the future needs of the people of Reading.

Will Reading Council commit to building such a campaign amongst local trade union branches and those that work in and depend on the services provided by the Council ? If such a lead was shown and a movement built locally, imagine the support this would create amongst people that do not want to see their services decimated ! If similar campaigns were co-ordinated amongst other Labour controlled Councils, then the cuts agenda of a weak and divided Tory government could be defeated.

The Green Party councillors have so far been the only group on the Council to have come out in opposition to cuts which is to be commended. There is now an urgent need to put forward a real alternative to Tory cuts. Hopefully this need will be fully recognised by the councillors here that were elected by the people of Reading to represent their interests.

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

If Mr. Adams has read the budget report he will understand just how difficult the budget situation is and how it is sadly not possible to set a legal budget without cuts. Labour Councils have been disproportionately hit by Government cuts to their grant and Reading has had the worst deal in Berkshire.

I would urge Mr Adams to lobby the local Conservative M.P.s and ask them to stand up for a fair deal for Reading rather than voting for the Tory Government cuts.

6. Heather Johnston to ask the Lead Councillor for Housing:

Homelessness

Homelessness has risen in Reading by over 700% in recent years how will the 17% cut in the council's budget for homelessness support services impact on people who find themselves homeless ?

REPLY by Councillor Davies (Lead Councillor for Housing):

Ms Johnston is right to draw attention to the huge rise in homelessness since 2011. The problem is a national one and is particularly bad here in Reading and across the South East. Fundamentally the issue is caused by an insufficient supply of decent and affordable housing over a number of years, rising costs of renting or buying a home in a buoyant market pricing many people on low incomes out of the market and a programme of Welfare Reform and caps on Housing Benefit payable.

In fact the 700% rise that Ms Johnston refers to is mainly in the number of homeless families and our commissioned Homeless Support Services largely meet the needs of single homeless households (although floating support also helps families to sustain tenancies).

There has been a limited pipeline of new affordable housing; reducing social housing stock through Right to Buy (RTB) sales; high land prices and reduced Government grants have made developing affordable homes very difficult in the area for housing associations. The Council's planned programme of new Council housing has reduced as a direct result of Government mandated rent reductions in social housing for four successive years from 2016, with circa 200 fewer homes being developed over the coming 5 years.

As I'm sure Ms Johnston knows, the Council is currently under severe financial pressure with tens of millions of pounds being cut from our annual government grant which is effectively being removed at a time of rising demand for services especially in adult and children's social care. The continuing cuts now mean that even the most important services like homelessness support are having to find savings.

The Council currently commissions a range of homelessness support services to a total value of £1,489,149 per annum currently and proposes to reconfigure and recommission services within a reduced budget of circa £1.25m. Services currently include:

- Homelessness Pathway accommodation which provides 217 rooms for individuals/couples who are homeless in a range of schemes to help them to achieve independence
- Street outreach services to support rough sleepers into treatment and accommodation throughout the year or to help reconnect them to their area of origin
- Cross-tenure floating support enables individuals, couples and families to sustain their tenancies and supports homelessness prevention

A more flexible model of support services is proposed to better meet the needs of individuals, in line with current best practice and to allow savings to be achieved.

The Council is currently consulting stakeholders about this new model and details will come forward in the future but we now have less money to spend in this area as on other vital services delivered by the Council.

Due to the complex nature of homelessness it is hard to predict the impact that reduced resources in any area will have on this client group however, there are likely to be some impacts of the reduction.

There is likely to be a reduction in the number of beds commissioned in the homeless pathway and there could therefore be an increase in statutory homelessness and the use of B&B or temporary accommodation for single homeless households or longer waits for appropriate accommodation. A reduction in floating support which helps people to sustain their tenancies could have a further impact on statutory homelessness.

Effective partnership working with our providers, statutory services and the wider voluntary, community and faith sector will be key to mitigating the impacts of the reduction and making the best and most creative use of our resources.

Council officers work extremely hard to provide options on behalf of anyone in danger of homelessness, both families and single people and this Labour administration remains, despite reducing central government resources, committed to fighting homelessness in our town.