

COUNCIL MEETING - 28 MARCH 2017

AGENDA ITEM: 6

QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

1. Councillor White to ask the Leader of the Council: Workloads, Morale and Staff Absence Through Illness

With devastating cuts to public services continuing locally, this means less and less council employees are doing more and more work. A big well done and thank you to council staff.

However, increased workloads, stress and reducing morale are all taking their toll on Council staff.

In 2016 "a lack of leadership and heavy case loads" were blamed for causing "ridiculous" stress levels leading children's social workers to miss more than 1,300 days through sickness last year. Reading had the highest rate of absence through illness in the south-east.

Please can the Leader of the Council update me on levels of absence through staff sickness across the council, broken down by section and including some figures for comparison with the national average? Can she update me on any sections of the council that are of particular concern? And can she update me on work to bring down workloads, stress and staff sickness?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock Leader of the Council.

The Council's sickness rates are listed in the table below. The figures are provided based on working days lost per full time equivalent (FTE) and are shown on a rolling 12 month basis. The figures are provided on a Directorate basis and also across the whole Council.

WDL per FTE	Feb 15 -	Mar 15 -	Apr 15 -	April	Jun 15 -	Jul 15 -	Aug 15 -	Sep 15 -	Oct 15 -	Nov 15 -	Dec 15 -	Jan 16 -
	Jan 16	Feb 16	Mar 16	16	May 16	Jun 16	Jul 16	Aug 16	Sep 16	Oct 16	Nov 16	Dec 16
Corporate Support Services	4.18	5.10	5.97	5.88	5.75	6.16	6.32	5.89	5.76	5.55	5.49	4.55
Directorate of Adult Care & Health Services	9.60	11.26	12.34	12.91	13.78	13.89	14.00	13.46	13.11	12.47	12.42	12.71
Directorate of Children, Education & Early Help Services	9.36	10.54	11.45	10.25	10.00	10.17	11.06	11.35	11.27	10.62	10.48	9.02
Directorate of Environment & Neighbourhood Services	7.27	9.21	9.76	9.41	9.78	9.74	10.12	10.31	10.46	10.11	10.79	10.46
Council	7.56	9.13	9.94	9.62	9.83	9.94	10.36	10.32	10.29	10.01	10.09	9.51

In comparison, the most recent published data from the LGA gives a national average amongst single/upper tier councils of 9.0 days per annum. It should be noted that the LGA's figures are from 2014/15.

Sickness rates are reported to DMTs where hotspots of concern are highlighted and remedial action taken. Heads of Service are encouraged to discuss absence with line managers and take support from HR to address issues where appropriate. In some areas there are some long term absences that can distort the statistics. These are being addressed through formal absence management processes.

HR are also undertaking absence management workshops for managers in Children's and Adults' Services in early April with a view to improving managers understanding of sickness in their teams and what they can do to manage absence.

2. Councillor Rodda to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport: Affordable Housing

Could the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport update Councillors on Reading Borough Council's efforts to ensure that developers make a meaningful contribution to paying for affordable housing in Reading.

REPLY by Councillor Page Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport.

I thank Cllr Rodda for his question.

As colleagues will be aware, the Council has two main planning policies that seek the provision of affordable housing as part of all developments of one dwelling or more in the Borough.

Policy CS16 in the Core Strategy seeks the provision of 30% of dwellings on sites of 15 dwellings or more in the form of affordable housing. Policy DM6 seeks provision of varying amounts on sites of less than 15 dwellings. Both policies are subject to considerations of viability which may reduce the amounts provided on sites compared to the target requirement.

Colleagues will also be aware that Reading Borough Council along with West Berkshire Council successfully challenged a Written Ministerial Statement that sought to prevent the seeking of affordable housing on sites of 10 or less dwellings in the High Court in 2015. The judgement was overturned in 2016 by the Court of Appeal.

Nevertheless, the Court of Appeal highlighted the fact that the Written Ministerial Statement can be outweighed in decisions on a planning application by a local plan policy where it can be shown that there are exceptional circumstances.

As a result, the Council's Strategic Environment Planning and Transport Committee resolved at its meeting in July 2016 to continue to apply policy DM6 to sites of 10 or less dwellings.

The Council has since been successful in defending its policy in 7 appeals, albeit there have been a few appeals where inspectors have dismissed appeals and not supported the Council's case. Arising from these the Council has complained formally to the Planning Inspectorate and reply is awaited.

It can be seen, therefore, that Reading Borough Council is making strenuous efforts to maintain its policy position on maximising affordable housing contributions.

The amount of affordable housing completions during 2015/16 totalled only 54 dwellings. In addition, financial contributions totalling £591,000 were received towards the provision of affordable housing in the Borough. This represents a significant decline on the figure of 145 in 2014/15, and is below historic levels.

One important factor here is that around 34% of new completions during the year came from the permitted development right to convert offices to residential. As no planning permission is required, these developments avoid the requirement to provide affordable housing. Planning permission was granted during 2015/16 for schemes that, under Section 106 agreements, include financial contributions towards the provision of affordable housing amounting to more than £4.6 million.

3. Councillor Rodda to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:
Air Pollution

Could the lead member for strategic planning, environment and transport update councillors on attempts to tackle the menace of air pollution, which poses a serious threat to the health of local residents ?

REPLY by Councillor Page Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport.

I thank Cllr Rodda for his question.

Under the Environment Act 1995, Reading Borough Council has a duty to constantly review and assess the air quality within its borough, and compare pollution concentrations against a set of European and National air quality standards. Monitoring has shown that Reading has areas where concentrations of Nitrogen Dioxide (NO₂) are exceeding both European and national standards, and as such Reading Borough Council has declared an Air Quality Management Area (AQMA) and implemented an Action Plan.

As stated at the full Council meeting in January, our aim, as set out in our Air Quality Action Plan, is to improve air quality in Reading given the serious threat to health posed by poor air quality. Reading Borough Council has a role to play in this challenge but so too has central government, especially as the main source of air pollution relates to emissions from transport.

Colleagues will be aware that following legal action by the EU, as well as defeats in the UK courts, the Government has a commitment set out by the High Court to publish a new plan to bring the UK into compliance with NO₂ limits, in the shortest possible time.

This new plan must be published by 24 April and I very much hope that the Government will commit to extend the five Clean Air Zones (CAZs) to include Reading and other towns and cities where NO₂ concentrations are above the legal limit.

I note that in para 5.11 (entitled Air Quality) on page 48 of the Chancellor's Spring Budget he said:

"The Government will consult on a detailed draft plan in the spring, which will set out how the UK's air quality goals will be achieved."

I await with keen interest the details of this plan, as the problem of poor air quality is a national one with many urban areas, including parts of Reading, being blighted by air pollution.

We need the Government to act soon, and support and fund initiatives that will complement the local actions being delivered by the Council, Reading Buses and many private individuals and companies.

4. Councillor Josh Williams to ask the Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods:

Fly-tipping

Recent changes to the use of the tip, bin collections, recycling, household waste, and controversial new charges for green bins, have caused residents to worry that fly-tipping will be on the increase. Could the Lead Councillor let us know if incidences of fly-tipping have increased in the last three years, up to the most available figures, and if they have increased, what the additional cost of clean-up has been ?

REPLY by Councillor Terry Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods.

Fly-tipping is a national problem and Reading is not alone in having to deal with this environmental blight which is caused by an irresponsible minority of residents. It must also be recognised that fly-tipping does not respect authority boundaries and that those who regularly fly-tip remove all evidence linking them to the dumped material, thus making prosecution impossible.

	Reports	Cost of Clearance
2014 - 2015	2521	£125,174
2015 - 2016	2214	£117,253
2016 - 2017	2213 (to Dec)	£99,423

Whilst a concern and not something the Council takes lightly these figures bear favourable comparison with towns and cities with a similar make up to Reading, for example, Southampton had 8,100 reported incidents and Milton Keynes 4,282. The figures may appear high in comparison to neighbouring authorities but Reading Borough Council does make it easy to report fly-tipping using a special app, called Love Clean Reading, which other councils do not operate.

Anyone caught fly-tipping in Reading can be issued with a fixed penalty notice with a £300 fine or face court in more serious cases.

Two new Environmental Enforcement Officers will begin work on the 1st April and they will take over the investigation of serious fly-tipping in the borough from the Neighbourhood Officers. Where evidence is found Officers will take the appropriate action, which can result in prison and fines of up to £20,000 for larger scale offences.

As previously mentioned, we encourage residents to report incidents of fly-tipping on the Love Clean Reading app which can be downloaded from:

<http://loveclean.reading.gov.uk/reports>

5. Councillor Hopper to ask the Leader of the Council:
Relocation Allowances

Could the Leader of the Council please provide details of the total amount paid by RBC in relocation allowances/expenses for new Council employees by year since May 2011.

Could the Leader of the Council also please provide me with information as to RBCs policy on reclaiming money which has been paid in relocation allowances where new employees leave the Authority within 6, 12 & 24 months (commonly called "claw back")?

Could the Leader of the Council also let me know whether anyone paid a relocation allowance has left within 12 months of starting work and, if so, whether their relocation allowances were reimbursed to RBC?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock Leader of the Council.

The total amounts paid in relocation allowances/expenses in each year is as follows:

2011/12 £2239.46 [to 2 people]

2012/13 £3864.85 [3]

2013/14 £7436.48 [2]

2014/15 £2971.55 [3]

2015/16 £2766.70 [2]

2016/17 £19107.66 [13]

With regards to repayments, within the Relocation scheme agreement there is a condition whereby in the event of an individual ceasing employment with the Council or being terminated for any reason whatsoever within the said three year period, a repayment to the Council will be applied. The employee agrees that the amount to be repaid shall be proportionate to the number of weeks by which the employment by the Council falls short of the said three year period. They also agree that any part of a week shall count as a full week for the purpose of this calculation.

They further agree that any such sum owing by them to the Council may be deducted by the Council from salary/wages.

Two staff have left within the payback period.

One was in 2013/14 and there is still £83.33 outstanding. The other was in 2016/17 and Financial Assistance was reclaimed in full from the employee's final pay.

6. Councillor Dennis to ask the Leader of the Council:
Benefit Cap

What is the effect of the Benefit Cap on Reading residents and what does the Council aim to do to help these residents ?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock Leader of the Council.

There are currently 381 residents in Reading who are affected by the Benefit Cap with a loss on their Housing Benefit ranging from £0.08 per week up to £313.93 per week. The average loss of Housing Benefit per household due to the Cap in Reading is £54.84 per week.

Reading Borough Council's Housing department were successful in securing a Flexible Support Fund Grant from the DWP which was match funded by the Council's Housing Revenue Account to help the residents of Reading manage the effects of the Benefit Cap.

This money has been used to create a team of three, comprising a Senior Welfare Reform Officer and two Benefit Cap Coordinators, whose job it is to support the residents of Reading to manage and minimise the effects of the Cap.

Every resident who was identified as potentially being affected by the Cap was written to before it was implemented in Reading offering the team's support. Since the Cap was applied to residents' Housing Benefit claims the team has ensured that they have initiated contact with all affected residents to offer support and assistance.

The team works closely with both internal departments (especially the Debt Advice Team, Children's Services and Troubled Families teams, Revenues and Benefits, Housing Advice and Customer Services) and external organisations (the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and Job Centre Plus, National Careers Service, Elevate Reading, Smart Works, New Directions as well as many others) to ensure a holistic and joined up approach to help residents mitigate the effects of the cap. The Cap coordinators are working across the Civic Centre and the Job Centre to maximise their accessibility to residents.

The team currently has 308 open cases and have so far successfully helped 95 clients to move away from the Cap, made up of:

57 who have started paid employment

21 claiming exempt benefits

9 have been helped to budget to pay the shortfall

8 have moved to cheaper accommodation or out of the borough avoiding the Cap

The team has found that there is a lack of awareness amongst those affected of what childcare provision and funding is available so we have updated the information held on our benefit cap website pages to include this.

The coordinators have identified a lack of awareness and support for those affected with low level mental health issues (depression and anxiety) and we are currently working with colleagues in Health to address this.

The funding for this team ends in November this year but we are currently looking at opportunities to bid for additional funding to continue with this work.

I'd like to thank the staff involved for their dedication and resourcefulness in helping some of the most vulnerable residents in Reading who have been affected by one of the most pernicious benefit cuts brought in by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government and continued by the Conservative Government.

7. Councillor Dennis to ask the Leader of the Council:
Business Rates Retention

Has the Council heard anything further from the Government in relation to Business Rates Retention proposal and do we know what effect it may have on Reading ?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock Leader of the Council.

Whilst the Council has not received any direct communication on the likely impact of the proposed changes to the Local Government Finance regime more information has become available since updates were provided to Council meetings in October (when we agreed the 4 year plan to 2019/20) that fixed the grant at least at the levels published initially in December 2015.

The Government has published its Local Government Finance Bill; this sets out the broad framework for the arrangements, largely, as in the present system providing powers to Ministers to introduce "full localisation" of business rates to local government as a whole.

In introducing the bill Ministers have stated that 2019/20 will be the first year of the new arrangements, leaving some questions as to whether they intent to fully honour the final year of the 4 year deal

The bill also

- (i) gives government the power to meet the cost of valuation appeals, but the government has not yet (as we understand the position) confirmed they will use this new power.
- (ii) gives mayoral authorities the power to raise business rates supplements, but this power wouldn't be available in Reading.
- (iii) provides the Secretary of State the power to require authorities to participate in business rate pools, but it is unclear how this would be used.
- (iv) The Government is currently consulting on the structure of the system, and will, we are told, shortly be consulting on assessing local authority needs.

It is this latter consultation that will ultimately inform a revised local authority needs formula, that will determine how all the business rates collected nationally will be distributed amongst local authorities and hence the impact on individual authorities including Reading will then become clearer.

The final position is not expected to be known until just before Christmas in 2018, with a "technical consultation" expected in the summer of 2018 which will give some preliminary indications. Over the next year or so the ideas on the revised needs formula will be developed.

There is also no clarity about whether there will be further "pilots" such as the secret deal done in Surrey. As you will recall all six Berkshire Leaders wrote offering to be a pilot - so far there has been a reply from the Secretary of State vaguely saying that there might be further pilots and Berkshire will be considered then. We await developments!