

MEETING OF THE CITY COUNCIL – 2ND OCTOBER , 2019

MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

ANSWERS WHERE CABINET MEMBERS HAD UNDERTAKEN TO PROVIDE WRITTEN RESPONSES TO BE PUBLISHED ON THE COUNCIL'S WEBSITE

Questions of Councillor Martin Phipps to Councillor Terry Fox (Cabinet Member for Finance, Resources and Governance) – answers were supplied at the November meeting of the Council as follows:-

Q.1 How many applications for committal to prison have Sheffield City Council made for non-payment of Council Tax over the last financial year (2018/19), and how many have been made by the Council on a yearly basis since 2011 (including 2011)?

A.1 2011/12 – 100
2012/13 – 160
2013/14 – 229
2014/15 – 233
2015/16 – 200
2016/17 – 200
2017/18 – 128
2018/19 – 0
2019/20 – 0

Q.2 How many people out of the above were, or are being, committed to prison?

A.2 2017/18 – 2
2018/19 – 0
2019/20 – 0

Q.3 How many times were bailiffs instructed in the above periods for reclamation of non-payment of Council Tax?

A.3

Year	Equita	Rossendales	Total
2017/2018	6,649	3,328	9,977
2018/2019	4,848	4,829	9,677
2019/2020	2,053	2,275	4,328

Q.4 How many times out of the above was the option taken by the Council to “levy distress on goods” (taking of the debtor's property for debt recovery - as per the “Council Tax and Business Rates Recovery Policy”)?

A.4 2017/18 – 43
2018/19 – 35
2019/20 – 0

Q.5 How many applications for bankruptcy have Sheffield City Council made for non-payment of Council Tax each year since 2011 (including 2011)?

A.5 2017/18 – 4
2018/19 – 2
2019/20 – 2

Q.6 How many bankruptcy orders from the above were granted in each of those years?

A.6 2018/19 – 1
2019/20 - 0

Q.7 How has the debt recovery for Council Tax arrears and Business tax arrears policy and other debt recovery policies been influenced on a general level by suicide prevention work?

A.7 By ensuring that a debtor's circumstances are taken into account when deciding the most appropriate form of recovery action, one of the main intentions of the Council's recovery policy is to operate sensitive debt recovery procedures which do not place the individual in hardship. A key element of this is to quickly identify whether an individual may be vulnerable by following the recovery policy's vulnerability criteria (below). The aim is to ensure that by taking appropriate recovery action an individual's wellbeing and health, including their mental health, is not jeopardised.

Vulnerability Criteria

A failure to maximise collection of Council Tax and Business Rates will potentially put Council services at risk and increase the likelihood that Council Taxpayers and Ratepayers who do pay on time will have to subsidise non-payers through future increases in the level of Council Tax.

The Council recognises that some taxpayers and ratepayers will, due to their individual personal and financial circumstances, have extreme difficulty in paying their Council Tax and Business Rates, and recovery action, may not be appropriate where these suggest the taxpayer, ratepayer or other household members may be vulnerable in some way.

When considering any of the advanced recovery options referred to Section 6 of this Recovery Policy the Council's Recovery Officers will make checks with other Council departments (Children and Families Social Services: Adult Social Services: Housing Services) to establish whether those services have identified that the charge payer or any member of their household may be vulnerable in some way.

The Council will ensure processes are in place to ensure that due regard is given to this group of taxpayers' and ratepayers.

A person may be considered vulnerable in the following circumstances. The list is not exhaustive and each case will be decided on its own merits:

- > The person is elderly*
- > The person is seriously ill or mentally or physically disabled*
- > The person has communication or learning difficulties*
- > The person has young children and where there is severe deprivation*
- > The person has recently experienced a recent marital break up*
- > The person has recently been bereaved or made unemployed*
- > The person has difficulty in understanding written or spoken English.*

Falling into one of these categories does not automatically mean that recovery action is not appropriate. The Council will make individual decisions based upon the individual circumstances of the taxpayer or ratepayer to identify if recovery action is appropriate and, if so, what action to take.

Different recovery proceedings cannot be applied simultaneously to one customer, but can be applied subsequently if a debt remains outstanding. The choice of recovery action is made at the discretion of the Council's Recovery Officer and will take into account the taxpayers and ratepayers circumstances on a case by case basis and the guidance within this Policy.

The Revenues Service may become aware of vulnerable ratepayers and taxpayers following contact from the taxpayer, ratepayer or their representative or once recovery action is instigated. Alternatively, this information may become available from other internal systems used by the Council, from other service lines or from other support agencies.

Where the enforcement agent on visiting the taxpayer or ratepayer has vulnerability concerns, he is required to return the Liability Order instruction to the Council in order for the Council to decide upon the most appropriate recovery action.

Questions of Councillor Mohammed Mahroof to Councillor Abtisam Mohamed (Cabinet Member for Education and Skills)

Q.3. How do we rank in relation to other cities for unauthorised absences from schools?

Q.4 In the autumn term of 2018, the latest available published data, Sheffield ranked 141 of 152 authorities for primary unauthorised absence and 143 of 151 for secondary unauthorised absence. However, our authorised absence rates are comparatively low and our overall rankings (all absence) are 121 of 152 for primary and 117 of 151 for secondary.

Although Sheffield ranking is a challenge, there are a number of factors that we believe contribute to this low ranking position:

1. We work closely with schools to ensure that there is challenge to authorising absence on the basis of parental reason e.g. illness. Schools are advised to agree authorisation in line with health and medical guidance and on occasions the use of the GP protocol which enables schools to apply for medical evidence before authorising the absence. We believe that these factors lead to accurate recording of authorised and unauthorised absence in comparison to other LA's.
2. Our transient population (which includes university students from abroad and an ethnic mix in our general population) means that a significant number of children return to their home country for a period of time. Due to the regulations relating to this, if a return date is not provided, schools must record the initial 20 days of absence before the child is a Child Missing from Education, again impacting on the attendance rates for the city. This is seen particularly in half term 6, the summer period.

The welfare of our children in the city will remain our clear focus and the robust safeguarding approach that we take as a city is reflected in the levels of authorised absence.

In addition to these factors, and to support improved attendance rates in the city overall, we work with schools in the following ways:

1. In Sheffield the responsibility for school attendance is devolved to the schools themselves rather than a separate Education Welfare Service. The LA Attendance and Inclusion team then provide support and challenge to the schools, including managing the legal process when required.
2. The Attendance and Inclusion team work closely with schools to ensure accurate coding of children on the school register. They provide support and challenge to the schools, using child level data to identify those children who are persistently absent and or regularly coded as educated off site activity or authorised absence.
3. The Attendance and Inclusion team provide advice and guidance to schools to support them to maximise children's access to education. This includes supporting assessments to identify additional needs and support available.
4. The Attendance and Inclusion team work closely with other partners to highlight the importance of attendance and ensure this is factored into any plans. This includes consultations with MAST and social care staff on school attendance and removing barriers for a child to access education.

There continue to be challenges in improving school attendance, and ensuring that this is a priority for those services working with children and families. The Attendance strategy for the city is due to be refreshed and will reflect these challenges and the key actions required from all services involved.

Q.4 How many parents have been prosecuted in the last three years for their children's absence from school?

A.4 Figures for last financial year are not complete, but as of May 2019, 332 parents have been prosecuted.

332 refers to those in the last academic year (September 2018– May 2019) and includes parents / carers who have received a fine for both term time leave and irregular attendance. Data is not usually produced at financial year level. The data does not include the penalty notice letter issues that are issued, as this is not classified as prosecution.

As a city we have identified that issuing a penalty notice letter has the greatest impact and is precedes court action when this is a first time offence. Prosecution therefore only occurs if we believe that this is beneficial to the child/ren. Where other options are available, these are considered. This includes:

1. Linking children to transition pathways to offer a keyworking approach to supporting attendance.
2. The Attendance and Inclusion team identifying their priorities based on individual child level attendance rather than overall school level attendance information.

In line with the legislative requirements, the funding raised from the fining of parents is used to employ staff that then offer support to schools in improving attendance.

Question of Councillor Roger Davison to Councillor Paul Wood (Cabinet Member for Neighbourhoods and Community Safety)

Could I have the accounts of all the Ward pots?

My office has contacted you to find out exactly what information you are seeking. Once you have responded, I shall provide an answer.

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