

DERBY CITY COUNCIL

COUNCIL MEETING – 17 NOVEMBER 2010

QUESTIONS AND REPLIES UNDER PROCEDURE RULE CP25

1) Question from Councillor Bolton to Councillor Jennings

Are the council prepared to send independent health and safety assessors into inspect school kitchens to reassure Head teachers and staff that the closures were done in response to real concerns and not to make way for outsourcing?

Reply by Councillor Jennings, Leader of the Council

On Monday 7 November, as a result of gas safety concerns, the Council took the decision to close a number of school kitchens with immediate effect, pending completion of further inspection work.

This decision was taken as a precautionary measure, following the discovery of problems with gas appliances in a higher than anticipated number of schools which had been the subject of gas safety inspections.

This decision is not linked to the Council's decision to restructure the school meals service. Concerns were raised as a result of a survey process, and the Council has acted [promptly] to ensure the safety of pupils and staff.

Any problem with a gas appliance is a health and safety issue and one which the Council takes seriously.

The GasSafe inspections were undertaken by an independent company and the results have confirmed that this was the right course of action.

2) Question from Councillor Fay Winter to Councillor Jennings

Ravensdale Junior School in Mickleover were informed only two days before the summer break this year that their school kitchen was to be closed. Five months later, having had three independent checks to gas appliances, they remain closed.

Can the Cabinet Member tell me why this issue has taken so long to be resolved?

Reply by Councillor Jennings, Leader of the Council

The initial survey at Ravensdale School was undertaken on behalf of the City Council by a services design consultant to identify what issues were present around the appliances and the ventilation system.

This survey was non-intrusive visual inspection and no tests were undertaken this identified the equipment and ventilation to be in poor condition and not meeting current standards.

The second visit was by a GasSafe registered contractor to undertake tests to verify the findings of the non-intrusive inspection. This visit identified a gas leak, high Co2 levels and repairs required to the equipment.

As a result the kitchen was closed promptly to protect the safety of all school children and staff.

All kitchens continue to be visited to consider options for putting solutions in place provide meals from schools. Due to the high number of schools being inspected in a short space of time the ones where the least amount of work is required to get them operational or part operational are being dealt with first.

Unfortunately this school kitchen was the first to close but the problems are complex and not easy to resolve without significant investment.

3) Question from Councillor Hird to Councillor Jennings

In July this year Ravensdale Junior School had its kitchen closed and condemned. Since then they have had three gas safety tests resulting in one pass with every thing OK and two failed due to faulty ventilation.

During this time both the Head teacher and Chair of Governors have repeatedly asked council officers for information, so they could plan for the future, but with little success. Finally they resorted to using the freedom of information act to find out more.

I think members will agree that this is a totally unsatisfactory situation for any school to be in. What is being done to improve meaningful communication with Ravensdale School and in fact with all schools?

Reply by Councillor Jennings, Leader of the Council

Firstly, the initial survey at Ravensdale School was undertaken on behalf of the City Council by a services design consultant to identify what issues were present around the appliances and the ventilation system.

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Secondly, the Council acknowledges that both the City Council and schools are currently facing real financial difficulties that impact on our ability to sustain a school meals service. We also recognise that more needs to be done to improve meaningful consultation and engagement with all schools.

Discussions have already taken place with a small group of Headteachers. And Chairs of Governors and School Heads have been invited to two engagement meetings over the next week.

We are committed to engage schools to improve communication and to:

- provide advice and information to each other to enable schools to make informed decisions and the Council to understand what needs to be procured
- focus on maintaining nutritional standards by providing meals that parents and children want to buy
- engage parents and children because they are the ultimate customers of the school meals service; and
- strive to achieve an outcome for children that is effective, affordable and fair.

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Unfortunately this school was the first to close but is not the easiest to resolve.

4) Question from Councillor Hird to Councillor Jennings

When did the council receive the report that prompted the action taken on the 8 Nov to close the 28 school kitchens?

Reply by Councillor Jennings, Leader of the Council

At the School Meals Project Technical Group meeting held on 3 November 2010, it became clear that the issue of gas safety was far more critical than had initially been understood. A higher than anticipated number of schools were found to have problems with gas appliances which had been the subject of gas safety inspections.

Officers met with consultants Faithful and Gould the following day to take independent advice. They confirmed the officer view that independent gas safety checks should be urgently undertaken in all at-risk kitchens.

Officers prepared a report for Chief Officers who met late that afternoon of Friday 5 November and made the decision to close all of the at-risk kitchens. This decision was not taken lightly. It was taken to protect the health and safety of all school children and staff.

Affected schools and catering staff were notified first thing on Monday morning. As an interim measure the school meals service provided approximately 3,300 children who take school meals, with a cold lunch, whilst revised arrangements for the provision of hot meals are put in place. This has been a huge logistical exercise and staff involved have worked incredibly hard. Although the kitchens are still closed, by Thursday 18 November every child will have the option of hot food.