

AGENDA ITEM 5

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

1. Richard Stainthorp to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport & Consumer Services:  
John Piper - Ceramic Tiles

Many councillors will remember that in the Council Chamber at the now demolished Civic Offices there was a ceramic tile mural of the Reading Coat-of Arms. This was the work of John Piper, perhaps better known for the two tapestries that were commissioned for the opening of the Civic Offices in 1974 and which for many years hung in the Kennet Room. John Piper was a founder member of the Reading Foundation for Art, was granted the freedom of Reading Borough in 1984 and is widely acknowledged as one of the most significant British artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I was pleased that following some prompting its importance was recognised and the decision was made that the tiles should be removed (albeit with some difficulty and slight damage) and retained and I understand that they are now in storage at Darwin Close. This is a major artwork - I have been unable to find any other example of John Piper making such a large-scale ceramic piece - and I wonder if there are any plans for it to put back on display so that it can be appreciated by the people of Reading and our increasing number of visitors.

I appreciate that it is a large work and that it is unlikely that space can be found in these new offices but I wonder if other alternatives such as inside Reading Station have been considered. Here it would be eminently visible in a secure environment - could the Lead Councillor please explore this option and any others that the council feel might be feasible?

**REPLY** by Councillor Hacker Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport & Consumer Services:

Thank you for your question Mr Stainthorp. As Lead Councillor I am pleased that this valuable work (as you describe above) has been retained and I completely agree that it should, if at all possible, be on public display. I'm also aware that there are a number of other 'public art' works that have, for various reasons, also been put into storage and that these too should really be fulfilling their purpose when commissioned of benefitting the public and the quality of the public realm.

Whilst there are no specific plans in place at the moment, and being extremely conscious that the Council on its own cannot afford to spend large sums on reinstating or relocating the artworks currently in storage, I will pursue this further with officers. In particular I would like to explore:

1. Whether the artworks could be incorporated in new developments or regeneration schemes in partnership with developers; and
2. A discussion with our existing businesses about whether they might be accommodated in appropriately 'public' spaces at their premises.

I would also be more than happy to provide updates to the Arts and Heritage Forum as this strand of work progresses.

2. Richard Stainthorp to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport & Consumer Services:

## Forbury Gardens - Cannon

There is an engraving of Forbury Hill dating from @1865 which shows a cannon - supposedly a Russian one captured during the Crimean War - on top of the mound. It is also shown in a later undated photo and on a postcard.

You will be aware that the cannon is no longer there but there is a mystery as to what happened to it. There are rumours that it was loaned to Southsea Castle sometime in the 1960's - can the Lead Councillor confirm if this is the case?

If it was loaned then I would suggest that it is high time that it is returned. Forbury Gardens have become a memorial to the memory of the combatants from Reading and Berkshire who fought for, and in some cases gave their lives, in the service of their country and their beliefs (the Maiwand Lion, Trooper Potts Memorial, Spanish Civil War Memorial). The cannon would be a fitting memorial to those from this area who fought and perished in the Crimean War and would be an interesting addition to the Forbury Gardens.

If the cannon is still in existence and is in Southsea or elsewhere could the Lead Councillor please take steps to have it returned and replaced in its proper home in the Forbury Gardens?

**REPLY** by Councillor Hacker Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport & Consumer Services:

Thank you for your Question Mr Stainthorp, I'm aware that you take a keen interest in the culture and heritage of our town and are also very knowledgeable. I have discussed this question with our Museum and unfortunately I cannot corroborate or confirm the rumour that the cannon was loaned to Southsea Castle. Indeed Reading Museum's collection website rather presumes that it is no longer in existence citing the following in relation to an entry for 'Sebastopol Gun, Forbury Gardens, Reading - postcard 1908':

'In June 1857 a gun from the Battle of Sebastopol during the Crimean War was placed on top of Forbury Hill, jokers fired it off at night and broke windows in nearby Abbot's Walk. As a result it was capped and placed on a stone monument on ornamental railings. In 1819 a German field gun was put beside the Sebastopol gun, but both were probably taken as scrap metal during the Second World War.'

Whilst I agree with your sentiments and the hypothetical appropriateness of Forbury Gardens as a location, without some definitive proof that it was relocated to Southsea I'm afraid there is nothing I can do. I would of course be more than happy to revisit the issue should you be able through your research establish that the gun is still in existence.

**3. Terry Dixon to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport & Consumer Services:**  
**Tourist Information Centre in Reading**

I believe there is an increasing need for a Tourist Information Centre in Reading, especially considering that it is the largest town in the UK.

In my capacity of leading not-for-profit guided walks around Reading in my retirement, I have met a large number of residents and tourists, and often receive feedback on the difficulty they experience in finding hard copies of Reading's tourist information and in addition they comment that there is no place in Reading to ask questions (I often provide that service on an informal basis).

Reading has spare capacity in Hotels (especially at the W/Es), Restaurants and I'm sure Reading's shops would enjoy more trade as would the museums and other attractions.

The majority of Reading's neighbours (Newbury/Bracknell/Maidenhead/Henley/Windsor/Oxford /Fleet etc.) have important Tourist Information Centres that I'm sure they find these invaluable and pay for themselves in several ways by attracting more visitors, providing a focal point and raising the profile of their towns or city.

I believe Reading Borough Council should investigate re-opening a Tourist Information Centre, especially with the Abbey Ruins re-opening next year. I believe Reading is missing out on substantial lucrative tourist income as I know some tourists and work visitors would not have spent as much time in Reading while staying in Reading hotels if they had not spoken to me in the absence of a Tourist Information Centre to visit/ring/email.

**REPLY** by Councillor Hacker (Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport and Consumer Services):

Many thanks for your question Mr Dixon and before I answer that directly I would just like to publicly commend the guided walks that you offer - they are both informative and entertaining and your knowledge about the town is impressive.

With regards to your question I know you are aware of linked conversations we have recently been having at the Arts & Heritage Forum that I Chair and that you are now attending on a regular basis. Accepting the many benefits to the town that you refer to, and notably the increasing profile of the town's cultural and heritage offer, I agree that having a better offer for tourists / visitors is highly desirable. Unfortunately though I must draw attention to the Council's difficult budget position and that an all singing / dancing Tourist Information Centre funded by the Council is simply not affordable at this point in time.

That said though we are pursuing two avenues to dramatically improve the information available to visitors and to provide a dedicated destination where visitors can get information and advice. We are currently in the process of re-designing the use of space at the Town Hall & Museum and over the next 9 months or so and will be making a significant investment in improving facilities. As part of this it is the intention to remodel the reception area and to incorporate providing tourist information as a function from this reconfigured space and then to build awareness of this so that visitors know where they can go to get information. At this stage it is difficult to judge the level of demand and resources needed to support this but we will also potentially look at volunteers to supplement core staff and provide additional capacity if needed.

The second area we are exploring is a partnership with Reading Buses who have been very co-operative and have agreed in principle to hold and distribute some visitor information from their 'shop' in Broad Street Mall as far as limited space will allow. They are also going to work with a sub-group of the Arts & Heritage Forum to develop a visitor attractions map of Reading with linked information on bus routes to get to the various locations identified. This can then be promoted and made available for people to pick-up at a range of locations, including local hotels, as well as being accessible via the web.

I hope this demonstrates that we are collectively looking to improve the information available for visitors and, hopefully, in increasing numbers following the re-opening of the Abbey Ruins and a range of other cultural and heritage initiatives including the new Reading-on-Thames Festival.

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

Please will you provide me with an update on progress in dealing with claims against Reading Borough Council over equal pay. Please will you 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 ?

How much has been spent in total to date on legal fees relating to this matter ?

**REPLY** by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

Settlement with payment has been reached with 87 claimants. This includes John Madejski Academy claims.

£3,159,590 including JMA although the Council does not know the percentage of the compensation retained by the no win no fee Solicitors Doran Law.

There are 94 claimants with outstanding claims, this includes claimants at George Palmer Academy. 70 are represented by Doran Law.

To date the Council has spent £1,574,754.77 on legal fees.

5. Peter Burt to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport & Consumer Services:  
Sport and Leisure Forum

Given the public concerns that have been generated by the Council's handling of the closure of Arthur Hill swimming pool, closure of the Central Swimming Pool, closure of the LeaderBoard golf centre, and temporary closure of the South Reading Leisure Centre, will the Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport and Consumer Services re-establish a Council forum on sport and leisure to allow consultation on sport and leisure issues and to work with sporting and community groups to preserve services which the Council no longer wishes to fund.

**REPLY** by Councillor Hacker (Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport and Consumer Services):

Thank you for your question Mr Burt, although its phrasing indicates that you are a little confused in conflating a range of very disparate issues.

As you are well aware the Council's strategic approach to leisure facilities is to replace outdated, uneconomic and poor quality facilities with new ones and this position has been fully endorsed by key independent external stakeholders such as the Sports Council. You also conveniently fail to mention that the Council has mitigated the short-term impact of closures at Central and Arthur Hill Pools by developing the demountable pool at Rivermead that opened last week prior to Central Pool's closure.

Interestingly, the temporary closure of South Reading Leisure Centre also reflects this strategic approach as the closure is to enable significant investment to improve the facilities and to protect the asset longer term as this facility will be retained.

The Leaderboard golf centre was not closed by the Council. The site was leased by a private operator who deemed that the business was no longer viable.

In relation to the only substantive part of your question, the Council is actively looking to establish a 'Sports and Physical Activity Partnership' and has done some work with Get Berkshire Active to take this forward. The purpose of such a partnership would not though be '*to preserve services which the Council no longer wishes to fund*' as the Council has made a very clear commitment to the delivery of excellent leisure services through the procurement of a new operator to build new and manage existing facilities. Rather the purpose of the partnership would be to build positive relationships, secure additional investment and to increase participation in sport and physical activity for the benefit and well-being of Reading's people and communities.

6. Roger Lightfoot to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport & Consumer Services: Arthur Hill Pool Site

On what date does the Council intend to put the Arthur Hill Pool site on the market, and on what criteria will the Council be assessing bids for the site ?

**REPLY** by Councillor Hacker (Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport and Consumer Services):

Thank you for your timely question Mr Lightfoot. The marketing of the Arthur Hill Pool site commenced yesterday (22<sup>nd</sup> January) with a closing date for offers of the 21<sup>st</sup> March. This will allow 8 weeks for any voluntary sector organisations to submit bids should they wish as per our community lettings policy. Reading Voluntary Action has also been informed and will be publicising the opportunity via their newsletter this week.

The criteria for assessing bids for the site are varied but linked to ensuring that the Council secures 'best value' including taking account of any community benefit as well as the monetary value and factors such as the robustness of proposals and deliverability. Any assessment will also need to be mindful of relevant planning policy, including Policy ERR1h of the emerging draft local plan which supports residential development of the site with the retention of the frontage of the building.

7. Roger Lightfoot to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport & Consumer Services: Palmer Park Swimming Pool

In October 2016 Policy Committee accepted a report which gave a target date of January 2020 for opening a new swimming pool in Palmer Park. What actions have been completed and what project milestones have been achieved towards construction of a Palmer Park pool over the 15 months since the report was accepted ?

**REPLY** by Councillor Hacker (Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport and Consumer Services):

Thank you for your question Mr Lightfoot. Firstly, to be open and honest there has been slippage on the timetable envisaged and set out in the October 2016 Policy Committee Report. This largely relates to the complexity of the procurement process, the need to have much of the documentation prepared in advance of even advertising the opportunity and the need to resolve underlying financial and legal requirements that has taken longer than anticipated.

That said, there has been significant progress in developing the detailed specifications and the Council anticipates that it will have a new operator in place by the Summer of 2019. For the avoidance of doubt, a new pool at Palmer Park Stadium forms part of the Council's minimum requirements.

8. John Mullaney to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:  
East Reading MRT

The East Reading MRT scheme has now been shown to have no support from residents in East Reading and a catastrophic effect on the riverside and woodland environments, with serious objections from various RBC departments, The Environment Agency, The Berks Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust and even Tesco. Meanwhile the Council's own traffic modelling shows that the scheme will have no impact on reducing either congestion or air pollution in East Reading.

Given the overwhelming evidence that now proves this to be a massively unprogressive solution to East Reading's transport problems, has the scheme now been dropped? Or does the Council intend to blindly press on - regardless of residents' and professionals' recommendations - and stubbornly choosing not to listen to the growing tide of opinion against this outdated, sloppily-conceived and crippling-expensive folly?

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

I thank Mr Mullaney for his question. I totally reject the assertions made in his question.

The proposed East Reading MRT scheme is a public transport, pedestrian and cycle route between the A3290, (and the separate Wokingham Borough Council promoted new park & ride facility), to Napier Road, Reading town centre and the railway station.

The MRT scheme is a key element of the wider sustainable transport strategy for Reading and the A329 corridor, and is adopted policy of both Reading and Wokingham Borough Councils. The scheme will provide substantial benefits to Reading and the wider area by providing an attractive sustainable alternative to the private car, helping to manage the significant levels of development planned to provide new jobs and homes for residents in Reading and Wokingham.

The planning application for the scheme is currently being considered by the planning authorities for Reading and Wokingham. As part of this process the proposal is being refined in response to concerns raised during the consultation period, including provision of suitable mitigation measures relating to flooding, biodiversity and landscaping. This is a normal part of the statutory planning process.

The business case for the scheme was approved by the Berkshire Local Transport Body last November. As part of this process the business case was independently scrutinised, confirming that the scheme represents high value for money in accordance with central Government guidance.

The modelling undertaken to inform development of the business case demonstrates that forecast congestion will be reduced and air quality will be improved with the scheme in place, in comparison to forecast future conditions without the scheme in place. This is due to

the provision of significantly enhanced public transport services which is the primary objective of the scheme.

The Council has secured over £19m of funding from central Government for the scheme with further contributions from the private sector to be provided through the planning process. The Council will continue to progress the scheme alongside the programme of major transport schemes that are currently being delivered to help achieve the objectives set out in our planning, climate change and transport strategies.

9. Tony Warrell to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:  
Reading Roads Bus Effect

Reading has proportionately an ever increasing road maintenance program to finance, which is most noticeable where the bus routes can be seen to produce extra repairs due to broken and sunken surfaces. How does the Council retrieve the financial loss from bus companies for such wear and tear ?

At the December Reading School meeting; Councillor Page and Martjin Gilbert's statements fell short of the true facts I believe. Independent data showed that bus use has flat lined over recent years. This seems to be the trend. The analysts statistical knowledge he said; was up to date - unlike the Councils. (London Public Transport announces that bus use has dropped 6% and will have major implications in London.) Do you agree with me after updating your data ?

Almost 9,000 drivers have been sent fines by the Council after being caught on camera driving in the bus lane, as it is revealed the town has more bus lanes per mile than anywhere else in the country. The authority received a total of £2,480,157 in fines in 2016/17, compared to £2,743,700 in 2015/16. (Figures published 11.1.18).

Minster penalty rewards - £8927. Will this money go towards the repair of the infamous Minster and Gun Street or is this high finance attracted elsewhere ?

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

I thank Mr Warrell for his questions.

Buses generally use the Borough's strategic routes, along with many other HGV vehicles. There are many factors, besides HGV/bus traffic, which can affect the residual life and structural integrity of roads and contribute to deterioration. Vehicular traffic in general, weather, ground conditions, underground utilities/services, trenches/reinstatements as well as ground water are just a few examples of other factors which can affect road condition and the rate of deterioration. Roads, over time, naturally deteriorate through general wear and tear and use, irrespective of whether or not they are used by buses.

All of the Borough's public highway roads receive a condition assessment each year. As far as category 1 and 2 roads (mainly Class A and Class B roads including roads with high volumes of commercial traffic and many bus routes) are concerned, these are assessed externally using nationally accepted technical assessment processes as well as visual engineering assessments. The results are used to formulate a priority listing of roads suitable and appropriate for

including in the annual major road resurfacing programme; the number of roads/sections of roads which can be treated each year depends on the available budget.

I am not aware of any legal mechanism to charge private companies for public highway road maintenance. The statutory responsibility rests with the Council, in its capacity as the local highway authority.

With regard to your question about bus use in recent years, UK government statistic BUS0109 'Passenger journeys on local bus services by local authority - England' is clear:

For bus services in Reading Borough passenger journeys increased from 16.0m in 2011/12 to 21.4m in 2016/17. This is an increase of 5.4m or 33% over 5 years:

2011/12 16.0m

2012/13 16.1m

2013/14 17.7m

2014/14 19.2m

2015/16 20.4m

2016/17 21.4m

Several leading transport authorities show similar increases in local bus use, notably Brighton and Nottingham. Reading Borough Council has the third highest bus use per head of population in England (outside London) at 131.3 trips per year per head of population, behind Brighton at 171.8 and Nottingham at 149.4. The national trend has been one of declining bus use which makes Reading's achievements even more noteworthy.

I do wish that anti-public transport campaigners, whether failed LibDem candidates or our Green Party councillors, would at least get their facts right and acknowledge Reading's successes!

With regard to bus lane fines paid to the Council there is no direct correlation between money received for a particular road and its maintenance or repair budget.

10. James Berrie to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:  
Reading Buses Route 22

Does the Lead Councillor agree the 30 minute peak time frequency promised for the 22 bus service should be delivered at a 30 minute frequency and not at 65, 50, 48 minute frequencies.

In the announcement of the changes to all Stakeholders Reading Buses confirmed on 11 January:

"Route 22 - Caversham Heights



- This will continue to operate every 30 minutes during weekday peak times to provide the same level of commuting service to/from Reading Station and Town centre as today, as well as in the afternoon school day peak period from c.15:30 onwards"

Do you agree Reading buses have been disingenuous in sliding these frequencies through to the regulator despite their assurance to the community there would be a bus every 30 minutes?

With the removal of six buses in am and pm peak service it will be affecting the commuting choices of many, and this will cause great problems to the service in the future with revenue massively reduced.

I would ask you to please request Reading Buses reinstate the six missing buses, to ensure the 30 minute frequency at peak time, as promised.

Current	Time until the next bus	New	Time until the next bus
AM		05:25	30
05:50	30	05:55	30
06:20	21	06:25	35
06:41	22		
07:03	27	07:00	40
07:30	34	07:40	40
08:04	31		
08:35	30	08:20	40
09:05	30	09:00	60
09:35	25		
10:00	30	10:00	60

Note an earlier bus has been put on at 5:25am we are unaware of such demand for an even earlier bus and skews the number of buses Reading Buses is putting on during peak hours. It is clear there are three gaps in the schedule where buses are very much needed by the commuting residents of the 22

PM			
15:15	30	15:15	30
15:45	30	15:45	30
16:15	30	16:15	35
16:45	30	16:50	20
17:15	30	17:10	48
17:45	30		
18:15	30	17:58	65
18:45	30		
19:15	20	19:03	50
19:35	30		
20:05		19:53	

Again three buses clearly missing from the peak schedule, necessary for the commuting residents for returning home

It needs to be noted residents living on the 22 are not asking for preferential treatment, or even equal to that of their neighbours, even with the 30 minute peak frequency it will be considerably less. They do however ask to be treated fairly and receive what Reading Buses said they will deliver, a 30 minute frequency in peak time.

**REPLY** by Councillor Page (Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport):

I thank Mr Berrie for his question.

Reading Buses has faced a difficult situation with the performance of its Caversham Bus routes. It has been left with no option other than to revise times and resource levels to better match demand in an attempt to minimise financial losses and be able to sustain these services for the longer term.

The changes to route 22 in Caversham Heights have sought to preserve the current 'near half hourly' service that is provided today during the peak weekday morning and afternoon periods.

Because the exact times of buses fluctuate in response to the prevailing traffic conditions and resulting journey times during these busy times of day, the current peak timetable is not an exact half hourly service.

The new timetable will continue to maintain exactly the same level of driver and vehicle resources, and therefore cost, in these peak periods. This two buses per hour service has revised times, slightly extending some intervals purely as a result of the bus operator seeking to improve the reliability of these journeys based on its current on-time performance trends and its data.

The bus company has already, following further stakeholder dialogue after the consultation period, agreed to drop its planned withdrawal of the Sunday service. Also the two buses per hour evening peak service will now start earlier in the afternoon to accommodate school times, again responding to stakeholder feedback.

Between the start of service and the end of the morning peak at 09:00 the current timetable offers eight departures from Caversham Heights. The new timetable also offers eight. During the evening peak between 15:15 and 18:00 there will be one less journey than today because of the need to extend running times with a more realistic timetable to improve the reliability of the service.

Following representations from you and others, the bus company has now been able to devise a creative solution adding an extra weekday bus for an 09:30 journey from Caversham Heights, ideal for concessionary pass holders, and an 18:30 journey back from Friar Street.

In addition to planning timescales, any changes to bus routes have to be registered with the Traffic Commissioner with at least 56 days' advance notice. Bus operators tend to start work on publicising their changes only once confirmation has been received that their registration has been successful.

However, given the community need the Council has supported Reading Buses' application for a late notice variation to its route registration with the Office of the Traffic Commissioner. I

am hopeful that consent will be given for these additional journeys to operate from the 19<sup>th</sup> February.

Beyond this there is no more that Reading Buses can do under the current usage levels and financial performance to provide any more services to Caversham Heights, especially in the face of continuing declining passenger numbers.

The end result of the consultation process and final timetable for Caversham Heights is still vastly better than the level of services received by many comparable areas across the UK. Where local authorities choose to financially support bus services, due to a particular local need, such services are generally two-hourly or hourly at best and many have been cut completely in recent years.