

AGENDA ITEM: 5 QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

1. Adele Barnett-Ward to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:

Transport Infrastructure in Reading

I am sure the Lead Councillor would agree that there is a need for continuing investment in transport infrastructure in Reading, faced as we are with major growth in employment and housing not only in Reading but also massive increases in the Wokingham and West Berkshire areas.

As such I would like to congratulate Reading Borough Council's councillors and officers on their successful bid, along with the other five Berkshire councils, to be in a pilot scheme to retain a greater proportion of the business rates generated in Reading.

Can the Lead Councillor explain how much extra cash will be invested in transport infrastructure and how new projects will be taken forward by the Thames Valley Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership in consultation with the relevant unitary authority? Can Councillor Page also comment at this stage on whether these projects are likely to focus on major routes between towns, pinch-points within towns, or a mixture of the two?

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

I thank Ms Barnett-Ward for her question.

The Council welcomes the announcement that the cross-Berkshire Business Rates Retention Scheme has been approved by Government for 2018/19, along with nine other proposals from groups of authorities across England. This demonstrates the commitment of the six unitary authorities in Berkshire to work together for the benefit of the local area.

It is estimated that an additional £35m of business rates income will be retained within the county, rather than being returned to Whitehall as at present. This sum represents growth in the overall level of business rates income achieved since the current system of funding was introduced in 2013, and is an incentive designed to encourage local councils to invest in their local economies to encourage business growth.

Respecting this, the Berkshire authorities have committed to set aside 70% of the additional funding - about £25m - to make improvements to transport infrastructure in the Reading - Wokingham and Slough - Heathrow growth corridors. It has been agreed that a competitive bidding process will be undertaken to allocate funding to strategic transport schemes. This process will be managed by Thames Valley Berkshire LEP and the Berkshire Local Transport Body (which I Chair), and which has representation from each authority, the LEP and local businesses.

I am unable to predict the outcome of the bidding process. However as you say there is major economic and substantial housing growth planned for Reading and the surrounding area. Reading Borough Council has a strong track record of securing investment in Reading's transport infrastructure; most recently for the South and East Reading MRT schemes, Green Park Station and the new cross-Berkshire National Cycle Network 422 route.

We therefore intend to submit scheme proposals to continue this vital work to ensure that the planned growth can be managed in an effective way, by providing attractive sustainable transport options for residents and visitors in Reading.

2. David McKenzie to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:  
Consultation on Residents Parking in Park Ward

Is the Lead Councillor able to give an initial summary of the responses to the informal consultation on residents parking in the remaining parts of Park Ward which concluded recently ?

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

I thank Mr McKenzie for his question.

Officers will be submitting a report to the Traffic Management Sub-Committee (TMSC) meeting on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2018, in which they will provide the detailed summary of the results from the three informal area parking consultations that were conducted earlier this year.

The initial indication for the East Reading Study area is that a clear majority of respondents stated that they would be in favour of a Resident Permit Parking scheme as fully described in the consultation information. A road-by-road analysis will be in the report.

The TMSC will be invited to decide the next steps, which I hope will be to draw up detailed proposals for a residents' parking scheme covering the remaining area of East Reading. These proposals would obviously need to be the subject of further public consultations over the summer months.

As I have said on many occasions, the strength and effectiveness of our residents' parking schemes derives from a step-by-step approach which maximises opportunities for public engagement by the use of informal and then formal consultations. This inevitably takes time but it is preferable to implementing rushed and ill-thought out schemes.

3. David McKenzie to ask the Lead Councillor for Housing:  
Helping the Homeless

Would the Lead Councillor for Housing provide the Council with a response to the claims made by the Ark Homeless group about Reading's provision for helping the homeless ?

REPLY by Councillor Ennis (Lead Councillor for Housing)

**The Ark Bus**

GLL, the company which runs Rivermead Leisure Centre and who's lease includes the car park, have stated that "The Community Action Ark Project (CAAP) bus entered the Rivermead Leisure Centre customer car park without permission from centre staff. Believing that its residency was only short term, the bus was allowed to remain on site for approximately two weeks. Following concerns raised by local businesses, the CAAP bus was asked to leave the leisure centre customer car park."

While the Council is aware of the Community Action Ark Project (CAAP) and their good intentions to help homeless people in Reading, identifying a suitable space to accommodate the bus in the borough is extremely challenging with options limited.

The potential traveller transit site on land at the junction of Cow Lane and Richfield Avenue, which has recently been the subject of public consultation, was only selected following an exhaustive assessment of 80 potential sites. These were considered against a range of criteria, including the potential effect on residents, businesses and access issues. Out of 80 sites just one was viable, which highlights just how limited suitable public land is. It is a point the Council made to Mr Longsmith at an early stage last year when we advised him to carefully consider where he intends to locate the bus. There are a range of safety and wider considerations to take into account, including the possible impact on those living and working in the area and others in the community.

The Council consulted on the proposed site for a transit pitch late last year. We are not in a position to consider any alternative use for the site until the process is complete and final decisions are made. We would, however, also suggest opening this search for a potential pitch for the Ark bus out to the wider business and faith community in Reading who might be able to offer a suitable alternative space.

The Council has been in regular contact with Mr Longsmith and other representatives of the Ark Project over the last year. We have offered advice and raised various issues for their consideration, including about safeguarding and safe service provision for individuals who are often very vulnerable. A key consideration for the Council is ensuring that the bus is operating safely and resolving concerns which have been raised with the project team.

Reading Borough Council and partner agencies do a great deal to assist rough sleepers to access accommodation and specialist support and we are committed to working positively in partnership in the best interests of homeless people. The Council has met with CAAP to discuss how we can ensure that their clients are referred to and helped to access the range of services available and will continue to encourage and facilitate this.

### **What does Reading Borough Council do to help rough sleepers?**

Reading has substantial provision and support for rough sleepers, some of which is provided through £1.25m homelessness support services funding from Reading Borough Council - this is far greater than the majority of local authorities across the country. In addition, around £1.6m is spent on drug and alcohol support and treatment services.

The Council funds St Mungo's to provide a street outreach team to support rough sleepers into treatment and accommodation throughout the year. We also fund a number of services to support and accommodate local single homeless people, including the provision of more than 200 supported accommodation beds, and a floating support service operated by homeless charity Launchpad Reading, which supports vulnerable people who need help to retain their tenancy or with resettlement.

Whilst the Council makes these services available all year round, people can be more likely to accept help during the winter months. Severe Weather Emergency Provision (SWEP) has operated in Reading for many years and is activated whenever the Met Office forecasts three nights or more with a minimum temperature of 0°C or below. During this time, extra support and advice is also available with the aim that people do not have to return to rough sleeping.

Other support is provided independently of the local authority by a range of faith and voluntary sector agencies. This includes the 'Bed for the Night' (B4N) night shelter run by a

consortium of local churches is also operating in the borough every night from the beginning of January until the end of February - this offers a total 18 bed spaces for those who are verified as homeless and that have a local connection to the borough.

In addition, a partnership between Christian Community Action, the Churches in Reading Drop In Centre (CIRDIC), Readifood/FAITH and Reading Refugee Support Group provide a range of services and support including a food bank; drop-in for homeless individuals; furniture/new home start-up packs; and other practical help to people in crisis who cannot afford to meet their basic needs. Those who are homeless are referred on as appropriate to specialist services for support and health care. The Council also provides some funding support to this partnership.

In September 2018, Homelessness Support Services will be re-commissioned with a greater focus on emergency responses to those who are rough sleeping with the aim of preventing entrenched rough sleeping lifestyles. New services will include:

- A Hub providing accommodation and support to those who are homeless or sleeping rough, including year round emergency assessment beds and hostel accommodation for those that need 24/7 on-site staffing support.
- A rough sleeper outreach service, co-located at the hub.
- A rapid response to ensure anyone sleeping rough for the first time is offered help to prevent them sleeping out for a second night - with year round provision

4. Andrea Elliott to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport and Consumer Services:  
Libraries

Has this Council sought advice from DCMS to confirm that the use of a three year old needs assessment is appropriate for the current libraries consultation, and to ensure that the plans meet the requirements of the Public libraries and Museums Act 1964 ?

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

The needs assessment for the current library proposal is based on the latest data and information acquired by the Council. While the Council has considered the data on library use obtained in 2015/16, it is not relying on this three year old needs assessment, to assess the needs which the library service should meet today.

By way of background, a substantial public consultation was carried out as part of the 2015/16 service review, looking at how people used libraries and what residents wanted to see from the library service. Phase one of the review was completed in Autumn 2015 and phase two of the review was completed in Spring 2016. Phase one of the review included a six week period of public consultation and a review and statistical analysis of library usage, costs and the demography of identified catchment areas in order to build an understanding of the needs and aspirations of the diverse communities living, working and studying in the Borough in relation to library services. This provided a context for the development of the library proposals at that time and the future service model.

Phase two subsequently sought views from the public on a number of *specific changes* to Reading's Library Service and included a further study and analysis of visits data in order to inform future opening hours. Following this consultation, Policy Committee approved the recommendations for the reconfiguration of the Library Service in July 2016 with the agreed changes being implemented from 1 April 2017.

The current needs analysis, which incorporates data on library use and the demographic needs of the branch catchment populations, is fully updated with the latest information available. This has been used to inform these latest options. As service usage has changed following the implementation of a new service offer in April 2017, updated data for library usage has been extrapolated from the first half year of 2017/18.

The proposals have therefore been informed by current data and will be informed by the consultation responses received alongside a robust equality assessment. Proposals in respect of future opening hours will take into account current patterns and levels of activity as well as community views.

Community engagement formed a key part of the last Libraries Review and the service model adopted took into account the views of circa 3,000 respondents.

As before, community engagement is key to establish the views of customers and other stakeholders in respect of these new proposals. A 4 week consultation has been launched and the Council is seeking to encourage the public to contribute through actively promoting this by sending the consultation link to over 10,000 recent borrowers, posters and flyers in branches, publicity via local media and the Council's social media channels, as well as a number of drop-in sessions and discussions.

In the interests of transparency, the Council intends to inform the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport of the current library proposals.

5. Andrea Elliott to ask the (Lead Councillor for Health: Public Health

A supplementary paper submitted to Policy Committee in February 2018 includes a proposal to take further savings of £717,000 in 2018/19 from the Public Health budget. The proposal outlines a number of serious risks, including; shortened life expectancy, an increase in drug related deaths, risks to vulnerable groups, an increase in teenage pregnancies and an increase in sexually transmitted diseases. Many of which may put a further strain on Adult Social Care budgets. Does this Council believe that this is a price worth paying ?

**REPLY** by Councillor Hoskin (Lead Councillor for Health):

I completely agree with you and with David Buck, the chief health economist of the independent health think tank, the King's Fund, who said cutting public health budgets is "the falsest of false economies and is storing up problems for the future."

Unfortunately, but typically, the Conservative government isn't listening to the experts and has targeted public health funds for particularly large cuts. Reading public health budget has been cut by national government by approximately 10% since 2015/16 and by a further £258,000 for 2018/19.

The council has been working hard to ensure that frontline public health services have been protected despite these government cuts and we are defining public health in its widest sense. That is why services for children have been funded to the same level as for last year, and why services such as Winter Watch, which is aimed at ensuring that people living in fuel poverty receive the support they need to maintain warmth in their homes, will remain at the same level.

The government cuts to public health budgets are drastic. Government cuts to Reading Council's budgets are horrendous. Our government grant cut from £58million per year in 2010

to zero in 2020. As a lot of the services provided by the council out of its general budget deliver vital public health outcomes and meet the health needs identified in our Joint Strategic Needs Assessment it is essential we review how we spend our public health budget in order to protect vital services. For example I for one would not want to see homelessness services cut to the levels seen in our neighbouring council areas just because of the budget area they sit in. This review is about avoiding just such an outcome.

It is correct that there are some services which have been reduced, both over the past few years and for the coming year: however, in all cases we will be working hard to make sure that the risks are reduced as far as they can be. This will mean looking at different ways of carrying out the work, and learning from other areas which have already done so.

There is no planned significant reduction in sexual health funding and no reduction at all expected in open access drug treatment.

The process of planning changes to public health spend is taking into account the potential effect on other parts of council services including adult social care, which is why the neighbourhood focus for prevention will be retained at its current level.

Your Labour council in Reading can see a clear and urgent need to increase investment in our communities and in our health. The grievous funding cuts to Reading meted out by the Conservative government mean we are instead looking at how we reduce spending in the fairest and least damaging way. Reading Labour councillors will, over the coming years, be working tirelessly for a change of government to one that will value and fund our town's public services. I hope you'll join us.

6. Andrea Elliott to ask the Leader of the Council:  
Consultancy and Agency Staff

Budget monitoring reports are submitted monthly to Policy Committee, which highlight a number of risks including the high use of agency staff and consultants. Will Council instruct senior managers to provide JTUC with a detailed monthly report showing: Targets set to reduce this spend, the timescales for those targets and progress in achieving the targets ?

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

The Council has an objective of directly employing staff where that represents best value. We do however from time to time need to employ temporary staff for their expertise and to support teams where more capacity is needed. Without some excellent agency staff in Children's Services we would have failed in our statutory obligations to children and without temporary employees we would not have been able to create the budget. Everyone who works for the Council is measured by their commitment to Reading and is of equal value.

The purpose of a temporary or agency appointment is to provide short-term cover for key funded vacant posts or to cover sickness absence in key service areas.

It is important to understand that the cost of many interims, where there is a vacancy, is largely covered by the budget which is available for a permanent post holder's salary, but which is not being used due to the vacancy. It is also the case that interim appointees do not receive holiday or sickness pay and the Council does not pay National Insurance or Pension costs as it would for a permanent employee. So the net cost needs to be understood.

Sometimes it is also necessary to use an interim for a fixed period to do a specific piece of work, but for which there will not be an ongoing role, so it would not be right to make a permanent appointment.

However I do recognise that there have been times when too many posts were covered by temporary staff and the Council is working to reduce its use of temporary and agency staff where it can and employ its own staff when that represents a best value solution. But it would be wrong to set targets which don't meet the needs of the Council. In the last year we have seen more managers recruited which we hope will lead to a more stable officer leadership.

Performance reporting on risks and budget will be through regular reports to Policy Committee and published for Councillors, staff and the public at the same time, which can of course be available to the JTUC.

**7. Billie Reynolds to ask the Leader of the Council:  
Staff Terms and Conditions - Incorrect Document**

Please can the Leader of the Council explain how an incorrect document, CSS44-C relating to staff Terms and Conditions was submitted to Policy Committee on Monday 19 February 2018 and then, confirm that this document was included with the submitted papers in error ?

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

I can confirm that the background paper was submitted in error, for which the Chief Executive has apologised to me for the concern it caused to staff. The budget report, at paragraph 4.4, stated explicitly that some previously agreed savings could not now be delivered, "...including the £2m in regard of the redefining some staff terms and conditions". This saving was agreed in July 2017, but was formally withdrawn. The trade unions were informed of this in writing and in meetings that I have had with them. The report to the Policy Committee included a further proposal to review staff terms and conditions with a reduction of only £50,000 in 2019/20 and £50,000 in 2020/21 and this was set out accurately in the schedule appended to the report.

It is worth noting that during the preparation of the budget officers and Councillors considered many options for addressing our funding gap, some of which were rejected, some were amended and some were rejected but had to be reconsidered and brought back onto the table. In managing all of these iterations of paperwork I am not surprised that some errors were made in the hundreds of pages of detailed background papers, as reports were prepared for submission to various meetings at great pace.

However, I am confident that the core report and its recommendations to the Policy Committee were correct; the main appendices, including the summary of savings upon which the resolution of the Committee was based, were also correct.

The incorrect document has been removed from the Council's archived papers and it has been replaced with a correct version.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank our officers and Councillors for the effort that they have made to ensure that a balanced 2018/19 budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy can be presented to this meeting. This budget feels significantly more secure than the one that I was presenting a year ago.