

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

17 JULY 2017

**AGENDA ITEM NO. 8**

PETITION

	<b>Petitioner</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Response</b>
1.	Peter Burt	Keep the Arthur Hill Site for Community Site	Cllr Hacker

PUBLIC QUESTIONS

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COUNCILLOR QUESTIONS

	<b>Questioner</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Reply</b>
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Petition from Peter Burt:

**Keep the Arthur Hill Site for Community Site**

Reading Borough Council is planning to develop housing on the current site of the Arthur Hill swimming pool.

The Arthur Hill site was donated to the local community in 1911 for the benefit of the general public, and it is not appropriate for the Council to sell the site for private gain.

We object to the proposal in Reading Borough Council's draft local plan to change the land use category of the Arthur Hill site to allow residential development and request that the current land use for the site be retained, and that the site continue to be used for leisure, sporting, and community activities.

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

The proposal to identify the Arthur Hill swimming pool site for residential development is included within the Draft Local Plan. The Local Plan, once adopted, will be the main document containing planning policies for Reading. This document was published for public consultation on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2017, and consultation closed on 14<sup>th</sup> June 2017.

Representations on the Draft Local Plan needed to have been made in writing to the Council's planning policy team by 14<sup>th</sup> June in order to be taken into account. Responses from the Arthur Hill - Save Our Swimming Community Interest Company, including a petition, had been received by the deadline and will be taken into account in the next version of the Plan.

The Council is currently considering representations made during the Draft Local Plan consultation. As such, it is not possible to respond to comments on identified Local Plan sites at this point. The Council will take account of those representations in developing the next stage, a Pre-Submission Draft Local Plan, which is expected to be subject to consultation at the end of 2017.

The value of any capital receipt gained from the disposal of the Arthur Hill site would be used to contribute to the cost of a new pool at Palmer Park Stadium.

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### QUESTION NO. 1

Roger Lightfoot to ask the Lead Councillor for Education:

#### School Transport to Swimming Pools

Labour Councillors stated at the time, as a result of the closure of Arthur Hill swimming pool, that local schools would be provided with funding by the Council to allow them to arrange transport for pupils to alternative locations for swimming lessons. Please could you tell me:

1. Which schools have been given such funding?
2. How much funding has been given to each school for this purpose in the 2016/17 and 2017/18 Financial Years?
3. Within which budget allocation such funding has been included?

REPLY by Councillor Jones (Lead Councillor for Education):

I reported to the Adult, Social Care, Children's Services and Education Committee in December 2016 that the Council had made an offer to arrange free transport to the primary schools using Arthur Hill Swimming Pool. At that time most of the schools had decided to use other more convenient local alternatives rather than to travel to any of the Council pools. I promised in December to extend this offer and keep it open should schools wish to reconsider their options.

Alfred Sutton School was not planning to include swimming lessons in the term after Arthur Hill closed, but they have now taken up our offer. They will be using South Reading Leisure Centre for swimming next academic year and the Council will be providing transport at no cost to the school.

Transport is arranged by the leisure centre for a number of schools with buses providing a shuttle service throughout the day. With this system already in place, a specific additional cost has not been identified for the transport provided for Alfred Sutton School and for this reason grant funding is not required.

The budget for, and management, of this school swimming programme lies with South Reading Leisure Centre which is part of the Council's Economic and Cultural Development Service.

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QUESTION NO. 2

Peter Burt to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport and Consumer Services:

Arthur Hill Building

What plans does Reading Borough Council, as site owner, have to manage and maintain the newly listed Arthur Hill building, and what is the Council's strategy for the Arthur Hill site over the long term?

What impact does the Council consider that the recent local listing of the Arthur Hill site will have on the value of the site?

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

As approved by Council in October 2016, following closure the Arthur Hill Pool site is surplus to requirements and will be disposed of. The Council will be disposing of the property on the open market seeking value for money proposals which secure both the retention and reuse of the locally listed element of the building alongside a capital receipt. The building is listed as an Asset of Community Value and the Council's Community Letting Policy is also applicable to the disposal process.

The building at the front of the site has local listing status. This may well impact on the overall value of the site. The extent of the impact will be determined by the development proposals put forward for planning permission. The value of any capital receipt gained from the disposal of the Arthur Hill site would be used to contribute to the cost of a new pool at Palmer Park Stadium.

Pending disposal Reading Borough Council will maintain the property in line with its set procedures. This will include disconnecting services such as gas, electric and water. An appropriate inspection regime will be in place to ensure the property remains safe and in an appropriate condition.

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### QUESTION NO. 3

Tony Warrell to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport and Consumer Services:

#### Trees in King George V Memorial Garden

On 22 February 2017 Eldon Square was hit by a gale which took out one of the mature Linden trees in the Garden. Fortunately it fell parallel to the pavement without crushing motorists and no damage was done to property or the parked cars. It could be seen the tree was rotten at the roots which was also shown in the lack of upper growth.

It is clear that Reading Borough Council takes no interest in this secluded part of Central Reading and has not given attention to the number of overcrowded trees grown over the last century in this Garden.

On closer observation, now that the trees are in leaf, there are many rotten boughs in all the trees that need taking out, or better still the trees pollarded for future safety. In addition trees are infringing the use of the footpath outside the Garden. The Highways Act 1980 (Section 154 - Trees and/or vegetation overhanging the Highway) requires that a clear height of 2.75m (9 feet) over the footway and 5.5m (18 feet) over the carriageway must be provided.

Have these trees reached a time when they need replacing?

Will the Council make an effort and carry out all necessary work for the betterment and safety of the public, where maintenance has stopped for ten years and the Council is not honouring its responsibility for the listed Garden?

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

The Council takes its duty of care in respect of trees very seriously. It aims to inspect all trees on its estate on a 3- to 5-year cycle, with frequency determined by the extent of risk attached to failure (so trees on the public highway are inspected more frequently).

The trees in Eldon Square were last inspected on 12 April 2016, and the fungal infection at the base of the tree in question was noted. It was therefore re-inspected on 30 June 2016, and felling was advised. The note to fell was not marked urgent. The tree was therefore put on the list to fell, a list that in November 2016 included 42 trees. Further felling has subsequently been added to this list. Work to remove these trees commenced in November, and, as of today's date, all but one have been removed.

The level of urgency of works to trees is, except in exceptional cases, a judgement call. It does happen that an inspector advises immediate felling on the grounds

that imminent failure is foreseeable. Where future - but not imminent - failure is foreseeable, it is entirely reasonable for managers of trees to prioritise work based on what is known. The felling programme therefore started with trees on the public highway.

Given that the lean of the tree in Eldon Square was towards the neighbouring tree and not towards the road or the park, putting this tree lower on the list was not unreasonable. In the event, the tree collapsed before it could be felled. However, it collapsed into the neighbouring tree, as expected, so the professional judgement in this case is justified.

The Council is uncomfortable that the tree failed before it could be felled. However, it is equally reassured by the professional opinion of the tree inspector and Tree Officer that other potential failures should be addressed first, where there was a greater risk to life and property.

In respect of other trees in Eldon Square, there is no evident defect suggesting that trees require removal, although some routine maintenance is required. This will be scheduled once more urgent work is finished.

A team carries out grounds maintenance work in the gardens at least fortnightly during the growing season. If staff note anything that requires attention, this is logged with the office and investigated.

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**QUESTION NO. 4**

Tony Warrell to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:

**Kings Road and Queens Road junction**

At the full Council meeting on 23 March 2016, I asked Councillor Gittings about this important central reservation in Kings & Queens Road, Abbey ward, where the shrub beds, missing bench seat, bricks and bottomless rubbish bin warranted the Council's attention by way of Section 106, and have been ignored over the last decade.

This was the Councillor's reply:-

'The Council is in receipt of funding through a section 106 agreement for landscape maintenance of the highways shrub beds at the junction of Kings and Queens Road and this funding will be used for that purpose.'

Alas, this was last years' 2016 budget, what now?

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

I thank Mr Warrell for his question.

The maintenance of the highway and shrub beds at the junction of Kings and Queens Rd is carried out under the general highways inspection and routine landscape maintenance regime.

The Section 106 funding received will continue to be used for this purpose and outstanding repairs will be put in hand as required.

Works orders currently in hand include repairs to the retaining wall brickwork and the replacement of the damaged litter bin.

The Council's landscape architect will prepare a schedule of planting improvement works for the forthcoming winter planting season, as the ornamental grasses in the planting beds now require renovation.



QUESTION NO. 5

Ruth Pearse to ask the Lead Councillor for Children's Services & Families:

Proposal to reduce Information Advice & Support Service

I write in reference to the proposal documented in the papers for consideration by Policy Committee on Monday 17 June to delete a post in the Parent Partnership Service (which has in fact been known as Reading IASS for SEND since 2014). I wish to ask the following questions:

1) Has the Committee considered how the views of service users have been taken into account? The Reading IASS service has supported around 300 families this year alone and for many the service is a lifeline. They would undoubtedly wish to make representations were the service to be reduced, as this would impact significantly on the service level that they would receive. If service users have not yet been consulted, what plans are there to do this?

2) Has the Committee considered the cost-saving work that the Reading IASS service brings about for the Local Authority? Reading IASS officers spend the bulk of their work in schools, facilitating communication between parents and school staff to ensure that parental concerns are heard and acted on at an early stage. In this way many parents who initially consider, for example, that they need to pursue an EHCP for their child, find that with the support of the IASS service this is no longer necessary. The IASS service plays a vital role in parent empowerment, and ensuring that the parental voice is heard at an early stage means that costlier challenge to the Local Authority is averted.

3) Has the Committee considered the impact of reducing the service on the borough's children? The IASS service provides support for parents/carers of some of the most vulnerable children in Reading, many of whom are on CiN or CP plans. The Reading IASS service works to bring about positive outcomes for these children by, for example: encouraging parents to keep their children in education, rather than educating them at home; negotiating on behalf of families whose children due to their complex needs are only accessing a part-time education to secure a suitable full-time placement; and by supporting families whose children have received a fixed term or permanent exclusion to negotiate their entry back into education.

As a charity working with families who have children and young people with special needs we signpost parent/carers to IASS on a weekly basis; IASS is invaluable to more vulnerable families who struggle to represent themselves effectively with regard to exclusions and other school related challenges for their children/young people. As a charity we have seen an increase in parent/carers accessing the charity regarding school difficulties, we see no reason why the number should decrease, since the charity was established 11 years ago we have continued to see a rise in parent/carers need for support from IASS.

**REPLY** by Councillor Gavin (Lead Councillor for Children's Services & Families):

Thank you to Ms Pearce for your question.

Firstly, may I apologise that the policy paper refers to the previous name of the service. We are aware that the service has been called the Reading Information Advice and Support Service for SEND (IASS) for some time and in fact sits in the Education Portfolio area of the Directorate as part of the SEND local offer.

*Our statutory Duties as summarised in the SEND Code of Practice 2015: Local Authorities must arrange for children with SEN or disabilities for whom they are responsible, and their parents, and young people with SEN or disabilities for whom they are responsible, to be provided with information and advice about matters relating to their SEN or disabilities, including matters relating to the health and social care. In addition local authorities must have regard to the importance of providing children and their parent and young people with the information and support necessary to participate in decisions.*

*Information, advice and support should be provided through a dedicated and easily identifiable service. The service should be impartial, confidential and accessible and should have the capacity to handle face to face, telephone and electronic enquiries.*

To answer the specific issues raised by Ms Pearce in her question:

**1. Views of service users:**

The budget cut being required of this service is categorised as Management Action; the proposal is to reduce the spend on IASS (in the report as Parent Partnership) by £30k or delete 1 post. The final budget position over the last three financial years has resulted in a series of underspends. The out-turn underspend has been as follows 14/15 £28k; 15/16 £42k; 16/17 £43k. The proposed saving from the budget is £30k. Therefore this proposed saving should not see an impact on service delivery.

In terms of a consultation process or user input, the Council is committed to working with staff and key partners in particular our parent/ carer forum to co-produce alternative options for delivery to meet the statutory duty. The Council will take account of the parental user feedback received through the IASS survey information. A formal statutory consultation process with staff would be initiated before a final decision is taken on the best way forward if a reduction in staff was regarded as the best way to achieve the required savings.

**2. Cost-saving to the LA lost by reducing the service**

The service is in place to fulfil the LA's statutory duty as outlined above, not to reduce cost to the Local Authority, although we do recognise the contribution the service makes to supporting families and children with SEND and providing advice and guidance in a timely manner, including sign posting where appropriate. We do not feel it is appropriate to use 'preventing spend' as a benchmark to judge the purpose and impact of the service.

**3. Impact of reduction of the funding.**

The Council remains committed to fulfilling its statutory duty in this area, and any proposed changes to models of delivery will need to reassure us that these duties are fulfilled.

In considering the impact of any reduction of funding we will ensure that we are able to deliver those duties as efficiently and effectively as possible, with maximum value for money. An Equalities Impact Assessment will be completed as part of a case for change that ensures that children and young people with SEND and their families are not disadvantaged.

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### QUESTION NO. 6

Lesley McDonald to ask the Lead Councillor for Children's Services & Families:

#### Proposal to reduce Information Advice & Support Service

We note with alarm in the papers for this committee (Appendix C, page 2 of 9, D16) that there is a one-line mention of the deletion of a post within the 'Parent Partnership team' to save the amount of £30,000 for the year 2018/19. The committee papers present no argument for this action, nor give any indication of how the council's statutory obligation may be otherwise met in this regard.

As I represent the voluntary sector on the Management Group for this service, I felt it important to let Councillors know about the extensive disruption that such a cut to this statutory service would cause to vulnerable families in Reading.

The service, which since 2014, is now properly called IASS for SEND (Information Advice and Support Service for Special Educational Needs and Disability), has been a statutory requirement since the 1996EA and its requirement was reaffirmed by the Children & Families Act of 2014. The current service consists of one full-time post during term-time and one part-time post during term-time. There are also two other part-time, term-time posts until 2019 which are funded from a specific central-government grant to help the successful commissioning of the C&F 2014 Act and the transition of Statements of SEN to EHC Plans.

This very busy service is amongst the most outstanding in Reading Borough Council's domain and supports upwards of 300 of Reading's most vulnerable families of children with SEN and disabilities each year, delivering a high-quality product which should be the envy of other local authorities.

The staff, to my personal knowledge, are generous in giving their own personal time to enhance the service, which is value added, because the families they help are so in need and because they are a caring but very professional service, with an outstanding manager.

Not only families, but also we in the voluntary sector rely heavily on the support of this service because of cutbacks in our own and our colleagues' I&A services from our RBC contracts. Education and SEND is an increasingly complex area of the law and parents are lost without help to navigate their way thought it.

When the grants from central government via the Council for Disabled Children finish in 2019, the danger will be that the service will suffer a setback at that point as two posts will be lost at that time. These posts ensure further value added to the service by recruiting, training and supporting volunteers to help deliver this vital service. To expose the service to cuts in RBC-employed and funded-officer time on top of this will be nothing short of disastrous for our families.

Without a robust IASS service, the equality impact on families will be significant in terms of parents of learning disabled children accessing their rights to an education that meets their needs and in getting the best start for learning disabled children in the most deprived areas of Reading.

We are aware of the significant funding problems that RBC faces and the impending OFSTED recommendations about the Children's Service, but learning-disabled children and adults have faced too many cuts and changes from both central and local government simply because they are a silent community with no electoral clout.

I therefore respectfully ask Councillors if they will protect our vulnerable children and look elsewhere for savings, and also ensure that discussions with the voluntary sector take place whenever cuts to learning disability services are considered, because our input is frequently of constructive value?

**REPLY** by Councillor Gavin (Lead Councillor for Children's Services & Families):

May I thank Ms McDonald for her question and refer her to the answer I gave to the previous question.

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**QUESTION NO. 7**

Jo Billington to ask the Lead Councillor for Children's Services & Families:

**Proposal to reduce Information Advice & Support Service**

In respect of the proposal to reduce staffing levels by 1 FTE staff member at the Reading IASS for SEND service (incorrectly termed 'Parent Partnership' in Appendix C of the Committee Papers), I wish to ask whether the Committee has considered the impact on the very diverse users of the service in Reading.

The service supports a great number of parent/carers who themselves have disabilities, social communication difficulties or mental health conditions, or for whom English is not their first language. With its current levels of staffing the IASS service is able to support these very vulnerable parents in understanding the complexities of SEND law by face-to-face meetings with the parents and by attending meetings in schools.

The Children and Families Act (section 19) places parent participation at the heart of the law around special educational needs. The IASS service, with its current levels of staffing, helps parents to express their views and ensures that these views are heard, empowering them and placing them at the centre of decisions around the education of their children.

Has the committee considered how parents, particularly those parents for whom disability, mental health, culture or language presents a barrier to communication and understanding, will be supported in accordance with section 19 principles, should staffing levels at Reading IASS be reduced to a level at which attending meetings would be impossible for the service to maintain?

**REPLY** by Councillor Gavin (Lead Councillor for Children's Services & Families):

May I thank Ms Billington for her question and refer her to the answer I gave to question 5.

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### QUESTION NO. 8

Ramona Bridgman to ask the Lead Councillor for Children's Services & Families:

#### Proposal to reduce Information Advice & Support Service

Members will be aware that the Parent Partnership team became the Information, Advice and Support Service (IASS) for Special Educational Needs and Disability in 2014, three years ago.

This small team undertakes statutory work under the SEND code of practice 2014. The team is increasingly busy with increasingly complex cases and struggles to support all the children who need their help to secure their education needs.

Neither the IASS team manager nor the Families' Forum, which represents parent carers and young people with SEND, have been consulted or informed of the changes prior to finding the papers on the council website. The fact that the report gives the wrong name is evidence that the consultation is severely lacking.

**Can the Committee confirm that consultation will take place to ensure that RBC can meet its statutory duties before cuts are made?**

A member of staff has been appointed to the post for over two years. Deletion of the post will also need consideration of her employment rights.

In addition, Appendix C recommends a reduction in Reading Children's & Voluntary Youth Service Contract in 2018/19 of £28K. The Families' Forum wish to make it clear how much support RCVYS provide to the voluntary sector to ensure good governance and robust safeguarding. This is vital if the voluntary sector are to work with RBC to reduce the financial burden on RBC.

**REPLY** by Councillor Gavin (Lead Councillor for Children's Services & Families):

May I thank Ms Bridgman for her question and refer her to the answer I gave to question 5 and to the detailed answer I am about to give to question 9.

QUESTION NO. 9

Leslie McDonald to ask the Lead Councillor for Children's Services & Families:

Proposal to reduce RCVYS grant

I am writing on behalf of myself and my trustees to ask why the papers for this committee show a total cut to the long-standing grant of £28,000, made to Reading Children's & Voluntary Youth Services (RCVYS), and whether the Councillors have considered the vital contribution this small charity makes to all voluntary organisations in Reading working with Children? There is no further explanation of the cut in the papers and no impact assessment, which is disturbing.

Councillors may know just how hard it is to get funding for infrastructure charities in any climate so Local Authority funding it extremely important. But in the case of this charity, although it has a very small turnover it also, unusually, has a very committed and talented Board of Trustees, all current practitioners, experienced and knowledgeable in the area of support for children and one of the best and most effective charity managers in the area.

We in Reading Mencap would not have been able to work together so effectively with other colleagues in learning disability charities without the support of RCVYS and its manager Ben Cross.

Together this year we have been able to work cooperatively and harmoniously with RBC Early Help to improve commissioning of the short breaks respite system and the new Children's Single Front Door. The RCVYS Disability Special Interest Group is indispensable to the local disability voluntary sector as is their comprehensive service to support, train and inform local charities in Safeguarding, First Aid, and DBS checking.

At a time when we must all work together to make the most of scarce resources, RCVYS is peerless value for money when it comes to supporting the VCS working with children both in terms of its in-depth knowledge of the needs of children and young people and also in the value it adds to local charities and other organisations to help keep children safe.

Cutting infrastructure in a time of austerity and great need is like shooting oneself in the foot. May I ask Councillors not to make this cut while they still run their own Children's Services please?

REPLY by Councillor Gavin (Lead Councillor for Children's Services & Families):

Thank you to Ms McDonald for her question.

The Local Authority have undertaken a lengthy process of decision making, debate and scrutiny that predated the proposals outlined for Policy Committee including the engagement of elected members of the administration, the LGA, corporate



management team and directorate management teams. One of the outcomes of this scrutiny was that we were unable to identify viable options within or external to the service that could achieve the £28k identified against RCYVS.

It is of course deeply regrettable that the Local Authority is in such a challenging financial position. If the £28k cannot be found from an infrastructural organisation then it will mean that the money will need to be found from services that directly deliver to Reading's children and families. An equivalence might be a Family Support Worker working directly with children and families.

We fully acknowledge the hard work and dedication of RCVYS and its staff in supporting children, young people and families in the town. We are aware that the organisation, understanding that local authority funding was not guaranteed into the future, became a registered charity in November 2016, which allows them to seek funding from a much broader range of sources. The excellent stewardship of the organisation from its dedicated Board of Trustees has ensured that they have also built up net uncommitted assets of £53,132 [RCVYS Annual report 31 March 2017] which we trust will allow them a sufficient buffer to apply for other sources of grant funding.

We agree that RCVYS provide valuable safeguarding training opportunities for voluntary sector organisations, however this training is not commissioned and paid for by Children's Services but by Reading Children's Local Safeguarding Board [LSCB], this income stream has been guaranteed by the LSCB for the remainder of 2017 and 2018. RCVYS recently reported to the LSCB that:

*" 2017 will be a period where we move towards endeavouring to make the Safeguarding Training Programme as self-sustainable as possible, with an expectation that LSCB funding may be reduced in the near future. To help plan for this, we have adjusted our pricing to begin to make the transition for organisations to have to pay something for their safeguarding training. 2017 will be a period where we move towards endeavouring to make the Safeguarding Training Programme as self-sustainable as possible, with an expectation that LSCB funding may be reduced in the near future. To help plan for this, we have adjusted our pricing to begin to make the transition for organisations to have to pay something for their safeguarding training."*

We therefore trust that the excellent programme of Safeguarding Training will not be adversely affected.

We apologise for the typo in the report which wrongly states the proposed saving would come into effect in July, which understandably caused additional concern. We apologised unreservedly to RCVYS for this error and I am happy to repeat that apology here.

RCYVS were first informed via email in January 2017 that the contract between the Council and RCYVS would only be extended between April and September 2017. They were informed that a new 6 month contract was required as all legal extension periods to the original contract had been utilised. A delay in providing the new contract necessitated a further month extension to 31 October. The revised contract was handed to RCVYS staff in early July and is valid from April 2017 through until the end of October 2017.

The Local Authority has been advised that as this is a proposed cut of infrastructure spend and not to the delivery of front-line services to children that a public consultation is not legally required, however we are committed to consulting on the position and best way of ensuring that we maintain a close, productive and good relationship with voluntary sector organisations that work with our children. The ART Team in Children's Services are planning to set-up an initial meeting of a new Children's Sector Voluntary Forum on 31 August with our community and voluntary partners, the shape and development of this Forum will be co-produced with our partners to ensure that we maintain direct and effective relationships with the sector as we all seek to deliver high-quality services to children albeit on reduced budgets.

The extent of the savings this Council needs to achieve over the next two to three years mean the Council has to prioritise our limited funding to meeting increasing demands for statutory services and the services that engage in direct working with children and families in the Early Prevention arena.

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### QUESTION NO. 1

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning & Transport:

#### Cost to Local Taxpayer of East Reading MRT and Park-and-Ride

What is the currently estimated cost for development and construction of the East Reading Mass Rapid Transit scheme and the associated park and ride scheme? In your answer please make clear what contributions to this funding will be made from a) central government, b) the Thames Valley Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership, c) Reading Borough Council, and d) other local authority partners.

For the contribution to be made by Reading Borough Council, please identify how this will be comprised, including identification of individual developments from which community infrastructure levy / section 106 payments will be levied towards the project.

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

The East Reading Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) scheme is a segregated fast track public transport, pedestrian and cycle route that will support enhanced accessibility and continued sustainable growth in Reading, Wokingham and the wider area.

The MRT route is proposed to link 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 being promoted by Reading Borough Council, Wokingham Borough Council and Thames Valley Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership.

The scheme will provide substantial benefits to Reading and the wider area by providing an attractive sustainable alternative to the private car. The benefits of the new route include:

- Significantly improved public transport connectivity between Reading town centre, east Reading and beyond.
- Increased public transport service frequency, capacity and reliability; and significantly reduced journey times.
- Facilitating and managing in a sustainable way the significant levels of economic growth and housing delivery planned for Wokingham Borough and Reading town centre.
- Reduced traffic congestion in east Reading, particularly on the congested A4 London Road and Cemetery Junction.

- Improved air quality in Reading's Air Quality Management Area through reducing use of the private car.
- Promote healthy living, well-being and active lifestyles by promoting walking and cycling.
- Provide ecological enhancements along the route, increasing biodiversity and species diversity.

The capital cost to construct the MRT scheme is estimated to be £24m, of which £19m has been allocated from the Local Growth Fund from central Government. The Council intends to fund the remainder from Section 106/Community Infrastructure Levy contributions from the private sector.

Development of the scheme to date has been funded by grant funding allocated by central Government specifically for transport schemes and work undertaken by Council officers as part of their range of responsibilities.

The proposed Thames Valley Park park & ride scheme is not part of the East Reading MRT (although it is obviously a complementary initiative) and is being promoted by Wokingham Borough Council at no cost to Reading Borough taxpayers.

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### COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 2

Councillor O'Connell to ask the Lead Councillor for Education:

#### Take Up of Free School Meals

In light of the surprising news that Reading has the second lowest uptake of free school meals in the country, what actions are the council now going to take to make sure our parents on low incomes are aware of the money they can save and the nutritional benefits of having school dinners? Are we, or Chartwells, asking parents for the reasons why their children aren't taking up their free school meals and acting on the feedback they get?

REPLY by Councillor Jones (Lead Councillor for Education):

The Council are committed to ensuring that a quality nutritious meal is available to every pupil at lunchtime, and that those eligible for both Free School Meals and Universal Infant Free School Meals take their entitlement.

The Council works with its contractor Chartwells to provide healthy, tasty and nutritious meals to its primary and secondary school pupils. Menus in Reading meet the Silver Food for Life accreditation standard and are regularly reviewed following feedback from pupils and parents. The Council carry out regular audits and lunchtime reviews, to ensure that the contract standard is being met and a pleasant dining environment is provided.

The Council and Chartwells work closely with schools to encourage pupils to take a lunch and engage with School Councils to make improvements. School staff are offered a £1 meal to sit and eat with pupils, to model behaviour and reinforce the message that meals are tasty and nutritious.

Taster sessions are regularly held for both pupils and parents to give the opportunity for them to try the food and provide feedback on the food and menu options. Schools are also able to invite parents and governors in for a school meal to eat with the children.

Information on the criteria for Free School Meal eligibility and the Universal Infant Free School Meals scheme is regularly sent out to parents via schools and is also available on the Chartwells website. Other methods of communication include lunchbox slips, banners at school gates, attendance at parents evenings and school newsletters.

Chartwells carry out a national survey annually to seek the views of parents on a range of topics including menu choice, quality of food, value for money and awareness of free meal eligibility. Results for Reading are reviewed by the School Meals Scrutiny Board, and any feedback implemented as appropriate.

Monthly uptake figures are shared with individual schools and the Council will, in partnership with Chartwells, continue to work with those schools with low uptake to identify any barriers to pupils taking a meal.

I have also asked council officers to liaise with all schools to ensure all our efforts are redoubled to promote take up of these opportunities at the commencement of the new academic year in September.

## READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

17 JULY 2017

### COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 3

Councillor Duveen to ask the Lead Councillor for Children's Services and Families:

#### Children's Services

Could the Lead Councillor for Children's Services please explain why, 12 months since the original Ofsted report, Reading's Children's Services is still failing a large number of vulnerable children in our town, and why the service seems to be in such a state of disarray, given the dedicated leadership of the Lead Councillor who has assured this Council on several occasions that she is doing her utmost to bring the service back up to scratch? Her assurances do not appear to count for very much.

REPLY by Councillor Gavin (Lead Councillor for Children's Services and Families):

Thank you, Councillor Duveen, for your question. I assume that this question is prompted by the recent Ofsted Monitoring visit letter.

Firstly, Ofsted's recent report did not report that Reading's Children's Services were 'failing a large number of vulnerable children', in fact no children were reported as being unsafe or being failed.

I am not clear how your assessment of 'disarray' has been reached given that Ofsted noted that caseloads have been stabilised, transition arrangements are improved, accommodation is mostly suitable, there are examples of regular management oversight, the audit function has seen an increase in capacity, there is a focus on coaching and mentoring, performance management has developed, audit activity is evaluative and focuses on important areas for children, cases demonstrated close management attention, social work was described as stronger with workers working hard to build trusting relationships with children.

The reality is that we had a slow start to the improvement journey and we recognise and accept this. The reasons, previously debated at length relate in part to the churn of staff; the delay in securing the necessary investment for new and alternative delivery; the challenges relating to the case management system and the impact this places on the ability to provide accurate and verifiable data.

Though some progress has been noted in the last two monitoring visits we recognise that there remains a huge amount of work still to be improved including the securing of a permanent workforce. To date the new recruitment campaign has secured six permanent appointments. The campaign is ongoing and we expect this number to increase through the summer and early autumn.

My aspiration, which is shared by every one of my Labour Administration colleagues and I would hope all members of this Council, is not that we bring the service 'up to scratch' our aspiration is that we deliver the best service we can for Reading's children and families.

There is drive and commitment across the service with staff at all levels determined to deliver the best possible service to Reading's children.