

**HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES - 4
JANUARY 2023**

Present: Councillor Hacker (Chair);

Councillors G Dennis (Vice-Chair), Ayub, Barnett-Ward, Cresswell, Cross, Emberson, Kitchingham, Lanzoni, McCann, O'Connell, Mpofu-Coles, Rowland, R Singh and Woodward

25. MINUTES OF THE HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS & LEISURE COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 9 NOVEMBER 2022

The Minutes of the meeting of 9 November 2022 were confirmed as a correct record.

26. HOUSEHOLD WASTE: UPDATE ON PHASE 2 FOOD WASTE COLLECTION SERVICE FOR HIGH AND LOW-RISE FLATS

Further to Minute 8 of the meeting held on 6 July 2021, the Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services submitted a report providing an update on Phase 2 of the roll out of the food waste collection service. Phase 2, which was for the roll out of the service to approximately 14,000 communal and high- and low-rise flats, started in June 2022 and continued to be implemented on a block-by-block basis to achieve greater buy-in of residents and maximise participation.

The report set out the achievements to date following the roll out of Phase 1, including carbon savings, improved efficiency, a net revenue cost saving of £500k and a reduction from 41% to 23% (2022) of food waste being deposited in the household residual waste bin. The report also contained the 2019 and 2022 Binfographics with illustrations that represented the type of waste materials found during a composition analysis of a sample of Reading households, which would be used to inform the Council of where to concentrate its focus to improve future recycling of materials collected.

The report explained that Phase 2 was being delivered in a systematic manner to the larger blocks of flats and communal properties that had shared bin facilities as these required a greater level of support to adapt to the required change. The introduction of the food waste collections had already made a positive impact on our overall recycling rate, increasing from 34% to 50.5% and the effect of the introduction of food collections had surpassed expectations by an additional 7% increase in terms of recycling performance. The additional resources and time being taking in the Phase 2 introduction would potentially offer a further increase in the overall recycling rate.

The report further explained the procedure for introducing food waste collections in blocks of flats which included detailed communications with residents and, where appropriate, landlords and managing agents before, during and after the introduction of the service and planning for the capacity needed per block for food waste, recycling and residual communal bins. To date, the food waste caddies had been delivered to 34

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blocks of flats, totalling 800 households, within the borough. The report added that each block of flats had been assigned a dedicated Recycling Officer to oversee and monitor the collections and food waste usage for a four-week period following the delivery of the new bins, to ensure that any issues with collections or resident participation could be addressed at an early stage. It was too early in the rollout of Phase 2 to measure any changes in the Council's overall recycling rate or food waste tonnages, however the communications and additional support being applied would give every opportunity to ensure a positive result. The rollout of food waste collections remained a priority for the recycling team, and where possible it would continue at a rate of one new block of flats per week to ensure resident engagement and monitoring could be maintained.

Resolved - That the update on Phase 2 of the food waste collection roll out be noted.

27. ALLOTMENT SELF-MANAGEMENT UPDATE

Further to Minute 35 of the meeting held on 10 March 2022, the Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services submitted a report updating the Committee on the progress made on the actions contained in the Allotment Action Plan and on the uptake of Self-Management practices across the Council's 20 allotment sites. The following documents were appended to the report:

- Appendix A: Allotment Action Plan 2022;
- Appendix B: Current allotment tenancy agreement;
- Appendix C: Proposed draft allotment tenancy agreement.

The report stated that all of the Council's 20 allotment sites were currently engaging with the self-management programme to a degree and that progress was very encouraging. The engagement and improved communications had led to a reduction in the number of allotment service requests. The rate of re-lettings had also significantly increased.

The report set out three proposals relating to tenancy management:

- A review of rent and discount levels to support low-income households and help meet the agreed savings targets. The proposals were for a 4% increase in line with the annual Directorate of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services fees and charges increases and consultation would take place between January and March 2023. The report also set out the factors to be considered for consideration when setting the rents for 2024-25.
- To propose, consult on and agree new conditions for tenancy agreements to clarify rights and responsibilities. This included changes to the operation of the waiting list and a one-plot only policy for new tenants.
- Address excessive waste generation on site and reduce disposal costs. The report proposed that on-plot and on-site composting be promoted, improvements to site security to reduce fly-tipping and the introduction of charges for waste collections and clearance of plots that were in poor condition.

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The report also proposed that the allotment year start date be changed to April rather than January from April 2024. There were no statutory requirements to consult on this change, but tenants would need to be given 12-months written notice of the change. Officers had given tenants informal notification with the December 2022 invoices, and would also include this in the formal 12-month notice period for changes to the new conditions on tenancy agreements.

Resolved -

- (1) That the progress of the Allotments Action Plan and Allotments Self-Management plan, and the further work needed to develop greater levels of self-management across all sites be noted;
- (2) That a Rent Review be carried out in Spring 2023 to allow time for a consultation period on the proposals prior to giving the statutory 12-months notice period to tenants of the agreed new fees and charges;
- (3) That the start date of the Allotment Year be changed from January to April;
- (4) That the revised Tenancy Agreement Conditions be approved for consultation;
- (5) That a site-by-site waste generation study be completed to inform proposals for the introduction of charges for the collection and disposal of tenant's plot waste;
- (6) That a further update report to include the rent review consultation findings, a proposed new rent structure and a proposal to consider charging for site waste collection be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee.

28. DOMESTIC ABUSE AND SAFE ACCOMMODATION STRATEGY 2023-26

The Executive Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services submitted a report which introduced the Domestic Abuse and Safe Accommodation Strategy 2023-2026 that had been produced in collaboration with Reading's Domestic Abuse Partnership Board.

The report explained that the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 placed new statutory requirements on local authorities to assess the need for domestic abuse support in their area for all victims who resided in relevant safe accommodation, including those from outside their area and to prepare and publish a strategy for the provision of such support to cover their area having regard to the needs assessment. The comprehensive strategy assessment had been carried out and would be used to inform the commissioning of new safe accommodation provisions and support services as a result of current contracts coming to an end. The following documents were appended to the report:

Appendix A: Domestic Abuse and Safe Accommodation Strategy 2023-2026;

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Appendix B: Priorities Consultation - Response Summary
Appendix C: Equality Impact Assessment.

The report explained that a comprehensive Needs Assessment had been undertaken in the spring of 2022 to understand the needs of victim survivors in relation to safe accommodation and support and shape the following priorities:

- Effectively commission refuge and other Safe Accommodation spaces;
- Raise awareness about Domestic Abuse;
- Engage with those in diverse communities experiencing abuse with a view to encourage trust to remove barriers to access support services and supporting victim survivors to view seeking help early;
- Develop and support a multi-agency approach to working with an array of groups, inclusive of perpetrators and victim survivors (irrespective of gender/sexuality identity);
- Continue to safeguard and advocate for all children who have witnessed or experienced domestic abuse.

A public consultation had been undertaken between July and September 2022 to seek views about the proposed strategy priorities, and an overview of the responses was set out in Appendix B to the report. The Domestic Abuse Strategy would ensure that the needs of all victim-survivors of domestic abuse and their families, both within safe accommodation and the community, would be considered and this was reflected in the strategy's priorities. The Domestic Abuse Strategy would be launched on 5 January 2023 and the Partnership Board would complete the accompanying action plan.

The report also explained that the Domestic Abuse Partnership Board and wider Community Safety Partnership were committed to developing a realistic and achievable delivery plan, given the current economic situation, and to ensuring the effective, efficient and collaborative use of the resources each agency had to reduce harm caused by domestic abuse. An interim contract had been put in place with the current provider, Berkshire Women's Aid, which would run until 30 June 2023, to allow for the commissioning process to be carried out.

Resolved: That the Domestic Abuse and Safe Accommodation Strategy 2023-2026 be endorsed and adopted.

29. COMMUNITY SAFETY & SERIOUS VIOLENCE STRATEGY 2023-26

The Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services submitted a report which introduced Reading's Community Safety Partnership's (CSP) new Community Safety and Serious Violence Strategy, which had been co-produced with key stakeholders following a comprehensive strategic assessment and consultation exercise. The Strategy had been approved by the CSP Executive Group, which was in the process of finalising a three-year plan which would be launched following the adoption of the new Strategy. A Community Safety Survey would start at the end of February 2023 to provide a baseline to measure

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the impact of the strategy on public perception. The following documents were appended to the report:

Appendix A: Reading's Community Safety and Serious Violence Strategy 2023 - 2026

Appendix B: Reading's Community Safety Partnership Priorities Consultation - Response summary

Appendix C: Equality Impact Assessment

Superintendent Steve Raffield, Thames Valley Police, attended the meeting, addressed the Committee and answered questions.

The report explained that a public consultation had been undertaken between July and September 2022 and the responses were attached at Appendix B. The Strategy had been developed in response to the consultation feedback and discussions with key partners and had been approved by the CSP at its Executive Group meeting in November 2022. The Strategy would be formally launched at the CSP Executive Group on 2 February 2023, along with the launch of a new annual Community Safety Survey to support the monitoring of the new plan. In addition to this, the CSP would hold annual Community Safety Conferences to promote the work of the partnership and provide feedback to residents about what action was being taken to tackle crime and disorder in the town. Key CSP partners were completing a Community Safety and Serious Violence action plan which would be overseen by the CSP Executive Group, with the proposal to set up a number of delivery groups to take responsibility for the delivery of the actions.

Resolved

- (1) That the Community Safety & Serious Violence Strategy be adopted;
- (2) That a Community Safety Survey be undertaken in February/March 2023 to provide a baseline for the Community Safety Partnership's Community Safety & Serious Violence Strategy 2023-26.

30. HOUSING OMBUDSMAN'S REVISED COMPLAINTS HANDLING CODE

The Executive Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services submitted a report informing the Committee of changes to legislation and Government Guidance that impacted on a Social Landlord's response to a complaint, Reading Borough Council (RBC) Housing Services' compliance with the new Complaints Handling Code published by the Housing Ombudsman, and any changes in process required. The following documents were appended to the report:

Appendix 1: RBC Housing Service's Complaints Handling Code Self-Assessment;

Appendix 2: RBC Corporate Complaints Policy;

Appendix 3: Housing Complaints Leaflet.

The report explained that the Government's The Charter for Social Housing Residents - Social Housing White Paper in 2020 had outlined seven principles that every social housing tenant should expect from their landlord, one of which was "To have your complaints

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dealt with promptly and fairly, with access to a strong Ombudsman who will give you swift and fair redress when needed.” In March 2022, as part of the enactment of the Social Housing white paper, the Housing Ombudsman published an updated Complaints Handling Code (CHC) for all Social Landlords, which came into effect on 1 October 2022. A replacement Housing Ombudsman Scheme was also implemented on the same day, and compliance with the CHC was a mandatory requirement for membership to the scheme.

Under the Building Safety Act 2022 tenants were no longer required to go to a designated person or wait eight weeks after receiving a response from the landlord before approaching the Ombudsman. Tenants were now able to make a referral at any time and it would be investigated by the Ombudsman as soon as the Landlord’s internal processes had been resolved.

The report also explained that a key requirement for all Social Landlords was the annual completion and publication of a self-assessment against the CHC and RBC’s Housing Services’ self-assessment was attached at Appendix A. The self-assessment had prompted a few minor updates to the RBC Complaints Policy, information leaflet and template letters used for complaints regarding the Housing Service, including:

- Updating the complaint leaflet and webpage to provide information on the Housing Ombudsman Scheme;
- Updating template letters for complaints to include details on how to contact the Housing Ombudsman, including when there were disputes regarding timelines for extensions;
- Including details of the Housing Ombudsman in tenant newsletters;
- Regular monitoring programme introduced by HCMT to ensure quality of response, follow-through on remedies proposed and learning from complaints/ themes.

The assessment indicated that the Council was compliant with the Code in all but two areas, however, non-compliance was permissible for Local Authority Landlords in these two areas as long as they were working in line with a Corporate Complaints Procedure:

- The timeframes in which complaints are expected to be responded to - The Code requires that complaints are responded to in 10 working days, the Council’s Policy is 20 working days.
- The inclusion of Stage 0 - The Code states that there should not be a stage 0, but it is included as an internal complaint management step to encourage early resolution of complaints for the tenant. At Stage 0 the tenant is contacted by telephone and a follow up written response is provided. This does not replace the stage 1 if the tenant still requires a Stage 1 response.

The report added that complaints performance would now be included in the Annual Housing Update and Works Programme report to the Committee by the Assistant Director for Housing and Communities each March and the Self-Assessment would be published on the Council’s Website.

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Resolved - That the requirements of the revised Complaints Handling Code from the Housing Ombudsman and Reading Borough Council Housing Service's associated Self-Assessment be noted.

31. HIGH STREET HERITAGE ACTION ZONE PROGRAMME UPDATE REPORT

Further to Minute 6 of the meeting held on 15 December 2020, the Executive Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services submitted a report which summarised the key achievements and the next steps of the High Street Heritage Action Zones (HSHAZ) scheme that would end on 31 March 2024. The report reminded the Committee that HSHAZ was a regeneration initiative led by Historic England, working with local councils and the community to create economic growth and improve the appearance and quality of life in historic high streets. Reading had secured HSHAZ status for three conservation areas in the centre of the town and would receive up to £806,500 from Historic England (HE), with match funding of £808,500. The Council had entered into a contract with Historic England to run the programme from 1 April 2020.

The report added that the HSHAZ programme was focused on three Conservation Areas (Castle Hill/Russell Street/Oxford Road, St Mary's Butts/Castle Street, Market Place/London Street) and had the following objectives:

- To enhance the understanding of Reading's heritage by revealing its hidden histories and to give the community a sense of pride and ownership in their town.
- To improve the physical condition and viability of the high streets within the three conservation areas by identifying those properties most at risk and engaging with property owners to help them to restore the buildings, to show them how to maintain the buildings and to share best practice.
- To develop a comprehensive strategy to improve the public realm across the HSHAZ to provide a better experience and sense of place for those living, working in or visiting the town centre.
- To support local businesses, the economy and local community and cultural initiatives by creating a positive sense of place through contributing to the heritage of their high street.

The report set out the achievements to date in terms of building rescue and storefront improvements, public realm improvements, the Town Centre historic areas assessments, community engagement and the cultural programme. The report then detailed the further work to be carried by 31 March 2023 and 31 March 2024.

The report also noted that the effects of the covid pandemic and the current economic situation had already impacted on the delivery of the project plan. However, due to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport's funding policy, HE was unable to move unspent funding to following financial years or to extend the life of the programme beyond 31 March 2024. This had resulted in significant pressure on the team to deliver the projects within the agreed timescale, as the projects were competing for supplies and contractors

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across the wider construction sector which was already stretched before the pandemic. These external barriers could impact on the Year 3 delivery plan and lead to the reduction of the scope of the programme. Officers were working to avoid any significant underspend by engaging with property owners/tenants and other partners to achieve as much as possible within the financial year and make use of the HE budget before the RBC match funding.

Resolved:

- (1) That the achievements of the programme so far detailed in section 4 of the report be noted;
- (2) That the remaining elements and workplan for the programme detailed in section 5 of the report be agreed;
- (3) That the risks identified that might hinder achievement detailed in section 6 be noted.

32. STREET ART ADVISORY PANEL UPDATE

Further to minute 24 of the meeting held on 10 November 2021, the Executive Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services submitted a report updating the Committee on the progress of the Street Art Advisory Panel and its next steps.

The report explained that the Street Art Advisory Panel had been set up in response to the growing interest in Street Art and an increase in its appearance after Banksy had visited the town in 2021. The panel aimed to consider how street art and graffiti could be incorporated into the Reading's public art offering and agree a process for defining street art as opposed to graffiti and had met three times to date.

The Panel had agreed the definition of street art as a non-permanent artform, generally created on surfaces in public places like exterior building walls, overpasses, bridges and junction boxes and had drawn up a process for identifying a piece as either street art or graffiti. Street art did not have to involve painting: it could be done with stickers spread over surfaces or by methods such as yarn bombing, a process where artists covered things like trees and telephone poles with colourful fibres and crochet/knitting. As a non-permanent artform it was not expected that it would be maintained except for under exceptional circumstance, for example, if a piece of street art had been commissioned as part of a project where it was intended that the piece was permanent, or if a piece was deemed a part of Reading's social history or commentary and was therefore important to the town. The panel had also defined graffiti based on the RBC Street Cleansing Policy where graffiti was defined as 'any picture, letter, sign or mark which has been painted, inscribed or affixed on a surface'. The Street Art Advisory Panel had set out examples of content or context that would prevent any item from being considered as street art. Where a piece was considered graffiti, the work would be addressed under the Council's established graffiti policy.

The report explained that the initial membership of the advisory panel had been recruited and that it would continue to adapt as new key stakeholders were identified both within the community organisations (such as amenity societies and cultural groups)

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and the Council. All ward councillors would be consulted on street art within their wards.

The report added that a trial of the process had been carried out in August 2022 using two existing pieces. Officers would create a report based on the outcomes from the trial for distribution to the Street Art Advisory Panel, to ensure that it was an accurate summary of their recommendations. The report would then be passed on to key decision makers, in this case the Lead Councillors for Leisure and Culture, and Environmental Services and Community Safety, to inform their final decision. Officers would also continue to work with Lead Councillors and the Street Art Advisory Panel on developing this process.

Resolved:

- (1) That the progress and next steps of the Street Art Advisory Panel be noted;**
- (2) That the process for identifying when a piece was street art as opposed to graffiti be approved.**

(The meeting closed at 8.14 pm)