

To: Councillor Hornsby-Smith (Chair)
Councillors Naz, Rowland, Thompson
and Goss

e-mail:
helen.bryant@reading.gov.uk

Your contact is: **Helen Bryant**

NOTICE OF MEETING - ACCESS AND DISABILITIES WORKING GROUP 11 SEPTEMBER 2025

A meeting of the Access and Disabilities Working Group will be held on **Thursday 11 September from 2 pm until 4 pm, to be held both in the Civic Offices in the Council Chamber and online.**

The Agenda for the meeting is set out below.

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1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS	
2. APOLOGIES	
3. COUNCILLORS' DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS	
4. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 26 JUNE 2025	3 - 10
5. MATTERS ARISING	
6. UPDATE ON DESIGN FOR HEXAGON STUDIO THEATRE - HAWORTH TOMPKINS, ARCHITECTS	
7. TOWN CENTRE STRATEGY - SAM RACKHAM - ACTING ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF INFRASTRUCTURE, ECONOMY AND CAPITAL PROJECTS	
8. FESTIVAL OF INCLUSIVITY - 13 SEPTEMBER 2025	

CIVIC OFFICES EMERGENCY EVACUATION: If an alarm sounds, leave by the nearest fire exit quickly and calmly and assemble on the corner of Bridge Street and Fobney Street. You will be advised when it is safe to re-enter the building.

- 9. PAGES REGARDING DISABILITY ON THE COUNCIL'S WEBSITE**
- 10. FUTURE PRESENTATIONS**
- 11. DATE OF NEXT MEETING:**

20 November 2025

Access and Disabilities Working Group - Thursday 26 June 2025

Present

Cllr Andrew Hornsby-Smith – Chair - Church Ward Councillor

Cllr Mamuna Naz – Vice Chair – Norcot Ward Councillor

Cllr Karen Rowland – Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Community Safety – Abbey Ward Councillor

Cllr Anne Thompson – Tilehurst Ward Councillor

Cllr Will Cross – Redlands Ward Councillor

Cllr Rachel McEwan – Church Ward Councillor

Jill Marston – Policy Officer RBC

Helen Bryant – Access Officer RBC

Nina Crispin Information & Engagement Officer

Public Health and Wellbeing Team – RBC

Andy Briggs – Destination Director – The Oracle

Sabina Piech – Destination Host – The Oracle

Aaliyah Wilkinson – The Oracle

Paul Kirton - Occupier, Customer Manager – The Oracle

Simon Houghton – Unseen Aware

Olly Kierle – Outreach Team Leader - Citizens' Advice Reading

Bob Bristow – Reading Talking News

Fiona Price – CEO- Age UK Berkshire

Anthony Freeman – Readibus

Brian Oatway – Member of the Public

Pat Watson – Member of the Public

Apologies

Louise Anderson – Customer Relations Officer – Reading Borough Council

Teresa Colliass – Member of the Public

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Cllr Hornsby-Smith welcomed everyone and asked attendees to introduce themselves.

MATTERS ARISING

Helen Bryant said that there were flashing lights in various places, such as the gyms, in the Leisure Centres run by GLL, to alert Deaf people of emergencies such as fire.

Cllr Hornsby-Smith extended his thanks to Steph Smith from GLL for providing the information, and to Helen Bryant for relaying it.

COUNCILLORS' DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

None

PRESENTATION BY SIMON HOUGHTON

Simon explained how Unseen Aware worked. Unseen Aware has been launched in several shopping centres, including in London, Bristol and The Bullring in Birmingham.

There are different kinds of training for different kinds of job; this depends on whether the employee is customer-facing or not, and levels of seniority.

There have been some very positive results so far. Lush reported an encouraging experience with two autistic customers.

Cllr Thompson asked if there was Councillors' training available. Simon confirmed that there is.

Andy Briggs explained that meetings with Sabine Piech, Cllr Hornsby-Smith, Helen Roche from the University Medical Group and Helen Bryant have been held to improve the information on The Oracle's website concerning Shopmobility.

He said that the AccessAble Access Guide on The Oracle's website is refreshed every two years.

Anthony Freeman asked if it was necessary to register to use Shopmobility, and Sabine said that 24 hours' notice is needed. Potential users of the service need to provide two forms of ID. There is a registration process, and staff ensure that people understand the Terms and Conditions, Then the service user is shown the equipment that is available, which lifts to use and so on.

Bob Bristow asked what was available for blind people at the centre Sabina Piech said that there are always staff members around the centre, such as security staff and Destination Hosts. Andy Briggs said that security staff would always help. They can ask if you can come to the centre at a certain time and they will meet and assist you.

Cllr McEwan said that the service needs to be promoted more. Andy Briggs said that there are over 130 groups for disabled people in Reading, and they need to know about the service.

Cllr Naz asked about the criteria to use the pushchairs in the Shopmobility. Andy Briggs said that, as with other forms of equipment, people must show two forms of ID.

Anthony Freeman asked about how colourblind people could access information about the centre on the website. Andy Briggs said that it is possible to change the colours of the writing or the background on the site, but going forward the website will be mostly black and white.

Bob Bristow said that off-white is sometimes better than white, because it gives less glare. Pale blue also works well.

Cllr Hornsby-Smith thanked The Oracle for the constructive engagement over the last few months.

PRESENTATION BY OLLY KIERLE

Olly Kierle explained that The Government is consulting on changes to benefits for disabled people.

He outlined the different benefits and the differences between them.

There would be more consultation with groups and other people.

Cllr Hornsby-Smith asked what "Right to Try" is, Olly replied that if claimants are getting ESA (Employment and Support Allowance) or have Limited Capacity To Work they can do 16 hours of work, trying it out and they will not lose their benefits if it does not work out for them as they hope. However, if they go over the 16 hours, they will lose the ESA element.

The Government is trying to be less stringent over how this is managed, which should be positive, as it is trying to be more flexible, and people should be more likely to stay in work.

Helen Bryant asked about safeguarding. Olly said that there are no hard and fast safeguarding policies in Job Centres; they do not necessarily have a duty of care to claimants. Policies are outdated, but this is being looked at.

Cllr Hornsby-Smith asked how claimants appeal if they are not granted their benefits. Olly explained that if they get a decision that they disagreed with, they could get a Mandatory Reconsideration, or MR. Claimants must provide evidence to support their reasons for the challenge. Claimants may also challenge if they believe that a mistake has been made.

If the outcome of the MR is not satisfactory, people can appeal; they can make a submission and provide evidence to show why the decision is incorrect. People should use the services of the CAB, or similar.

Cllr Hornsby-Smith said that the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) can make it difficult for claimants to get to their interviews, including sending them to places a long way away from where they live to be assessed.

Olly said that the DWP is changing the way that the assessments are carried out.

Anthony Freeman asked if he could reapply for PIP, and Olly replied that it is possible, but claimants could gain or lose, so it might be a risk.

Cllr Hornsby-Smith thanked Olly for his informative presentation.

PRESENTATION BY BOB BRISTOW

Bob Bristow said that the first Reading Talking Newspaper had been issued in 1976, The first delivery went to only 35 people.

The newspaper is recorded with a volunteer operating the recorder, and two or three readers, who read mostly extracts from the local press and other publications, such as magazines. Another volunteer edits the recording, sorts out the articles and gives them to the readers.

The Reading Talking Newspaper started at Radio 210, but when that station shut down, the organization moved to the Wilson Centre, and then to their current location, in Carey Street. Unfortunately, the service will have to move out again, soon.

At the moment, 150 talking newspapers are sent out, but the subscribers are getting fewer.

The newspaper used to be recorded onto cassette tape, but now USB players are used. They are more expensive than tapes, but they last longer.

Bob demonstrated how the newspaper worked with a USB player, showing how subscribers can fast forward or rewind in small stages, so that tracks are not missed. Tracks can be selected. The Talking Newspaper is also online, and can be used with smart speakers; the user just has to say "Play Reading Talking News".

People can listen to the recordings wherever they live.

Articles for the Blind is a free postal service – USB players should be sent by First Class post, but this does not always happen.

Unfortunately, the USBs and players go missing, sometimes.

Daylight times are announced so that blind people know when to put their lights on or draw their curtains.

Cllr Thompson asked how many copies were distributed. Bob said that the use of smart speakers mean that more people can listen.

The USB players are sent in wallets. On the USB there is a small felt pad to show which way to put it in the player.

People could volunteer to work at Reading Talking News. There is a list of jobs and duties on the website.

The newspaper is publicised by BBC Radio Berkshire, articles in newspapers, and by organisations such as The Round Table and the Lions. Listeners also tell other people, and the Eye Department of the Royal Berkshire Hospital gives patients the details of how to access the service, as does the Outreach Team of Berkshire Vision.

Simon Houghton congratulated the Reading Talking Newspapers team and said that he was very impressed with the service. He asked if The Oracle might be able to provide a space for it, after the move from Carey Street. Bob Bristow said that not much room was needed; they needed a copier. Simon said that if Bob shared his details or those of Reading Talking Newspapers, they might be able to help, as they had lots of contacts with local businesses.

Cllr Hornsby-Smith asked how long the broadcasts were; Bob said that each was around 90 minutes, but that they could be up to 2 hours long.

He thanked Bob for his presentation.

www.readingtalkingnewspaper.org.uk

He passed around forms regarding the disability pages of the Council's website and asked people to respond and send it to Helen Bryant as soon as possible.

He said that the Festival of Inclusivity is to be held on Saturday 13 September, at Palmer Park, and he hoped that people would come to that. Flyers for the event were passed round.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

September 11

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Brian Oatway said that training for Councillors – conduct at meetings needed to be carried out.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE TOPICS

Reading Borough Council Website – Disability Pages

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