

AGENDA ITEM 6

QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

1. Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:

Is the Council Committed to Tackling Climate Change?

As part of declaring a climate emergency, the Council committed to the very minor task of putting an environmental impact section at the end of every report. However, Lead Councillors have failed to ensure this happens in a large number of reports, making people question if the good talk on tackling climate change from Labour Councillors is just hot air. Most worryingly the Council's recent proposed budget report was lacking an environmental impact section. Please can the relevant Lead Councillor confirm how much the Council budgeted to spend on tackling climate change in the 2019/20 budget and how much the Council plans to spend on tackling climate change in 2020/21 ? Please can these figures be broken down into capital and revenue spend, and can each high level project or area of spend be listed ?

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

I thank Councillor White for his question.

The absence of an Environmental Impact section in some recent Council reports was an accidental omission, and a robust procedure has now been put in place to ensure that this does not happen again. Guidance has been issued to officers to this effect and Committee Services will liaise with appropriate colleagues to monitor and ensure compliance with the requirement to assess environmental impacts in future Committee reports.

Notwithstanding the regular snide comments from Councillor White this Council has made significant financial commitments towards tackling climate change over many years. Regular reports have documented the impressive record of delivering on our environmental targets, in spite of ten years of massive cuts in grant funding from central government

This year's Council budget dedicates increased resources towards delivering on our ambitious climate emergency targets. Full details of both capital and revenue commitments will be included in the final report on the budget which will go to Full Council on 25 February 2020.

2. Councillor Josh Williams to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:

Empty Premises and Lost Business Rates in Reading

The local press have recently reported the news that the HMV store in Reading has, at least for now, been saved and is not closing. This will be welcome news to music lovers who still want to shop in town. Will the Lead Councillor tell us the first record he ever bought ?

The press has also recently reported that the cost of empty shops in lost business rates is particularly high in Reading, with nearly 700 empty business premises, and lost rates in 2018/19 totalling over £4.7 million and rising. Can the Lead Councillor please confirm if these figures are accurate, and tell us what the Council has done in the last twelve months to regenerate our high streets and town centre ?

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

I thank Councillor Williams for his question.

I can report that around £5.5m of empty business rate relief was applied in 2018/19.

As all colleagues know high streets across the country are under enormous pressure given the change in the pattern and shape of consumer purchasing, most notably the rise of internet-based shopping.

Notwithstanding these changes our high streets and local shopping precincts are the centre of many communities and need to remain vibrant places where residents still want to socialise, shop and do business.

Reading is not immune from the impact of the internet but our town centre is better placed than most in the South East. The Centre for Cities has undertaken research for us which corroborates this and puts the success down to a lot more people living and working in the town centre. The regenerative results of new office and residential development, which is supported by our recently adopted Local Plan, can be seen with more people demanding goods and services seven days of the week rather than just the traditional Saturday and Sunday shopping.

Businesses through the Business Improvement District (BID) managed by Reading UK are using business rate payers funds to make Reading safer (wardens patrolling and CCTV); cleaner (street cleaning, cardboard collection); more attractive (summer and winter flowers) as well as to promote the centre and manage a series of events and cultural activities.

The hosting of programmed events in our town centre venues, gardens and open spaces forms a key part of efforts to maintain the vibrancy of Reading's town centre as well as attract and engage audiences and visitors, both new and returning.

In 2019, the diverse programme at the Hexagon Theatre attracted 171,000 visitors, with over 40 events sold out, including Kaiser Chiefs, Ben Elton and Michael Palin. The majority of these visitors will combine their theatre visit with local bars, restaurants and hotels, bringing vital custom to the town centre. The recently renovated Town Hall and Museum attracts on average over 165,000 visitors a year, and in 2019 we launched the new cafe and kitchen, The Pantry, on the site of the former 3Bs.

The Council's two flagship events Reading Water Fest and Forbury Fiesta, which launches the month-long Reading Children's Festival, attract more than 14,000 visitors to the Forbury Gardens and the Town Centre. The Council works in partnership with local businesses and involves more than 50 local charities and community groups in both events.

Over the last 12 months, we have worked with groups and organisations to host and deliver more than 40 programmed event activities in the Abbey Quarter using Forbury Gardens and the Abbey Ruins sites, generating more than 50,000 visits. This excludes the Forbury Winter Event which attracted over 100,000 visitors in 2019, many of whom combined their visit to the Forbury Gardens with visiting the town centre.

The Council has also had its expression of interest application accepted for the High Streets Heritage Action Zones Programme which is administered by Historic England(HE). Reading's project scheme could be funded to up to £1.6million with a 50% match funding commitment.

The funding will be aimed at the retail areas of three conservation areas namely: (1) Castle Hill/Russell Street; (2) St Mary's Butts/Castle Street and (3) Market Place/London Street.

The Programme has as its goal making the high street a more attractive, engaging and vibrant place for people to live, work and spend time. The programme will support physical improvements to heritage building, support community engagement and a cultural programme. The Programme Design stage will be submitted by 6th February 2020. HE will confirm if this final stage is successful in March 2020

As part of its proposed 2020/21 budget the Council will be investing over £450k investment in enhancing the maintenance of the town centre's public realm. Improvements are intended to include:

- Paving and street furniture repairs
- Painting street furniture
- Replacing litter bins
- Refreshing faded street markings
- Access improvements to St Mary's service yard.

The Council is also developing a wider connectivity and investment strategy related primarily to the town centre, following the adoption of the Local Plan and to provide a step change to deliver Reading's 2050 vision.

Lastly, to answer your question the first record I bought was in April 1963 and was *Please, Please Me*, the Beatles first LP (that is a Long Player, 33 rpm, with 14 tracks). Some of the more mature members of the Council may have fond memories.....!

3. Councillor Whitham to ask the Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods and Communities:
Glass Recycling

In my Ward (Redlands) there is a lot of glass left in front gardens which looks unsightly and can end up going to landfill. Since glass is highly recyclable this is a huge pity. Would the Council re-consider kerbside glass collection? If not Boroughwide perhaps target collection in problem areas?

REPLY by Councillor James Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods and Communities.

Thank you for the question. Reading Borough Council is committed to achieving a recycling rate of 50%. The pathway towards this, set out with our re3 partners, Bracknell Forest Council and Wokingham Borough Council, has already seen an increased range of plastics being collected from residents, and recycled within the UK in addition to higher recycling rates at the two Recycling Centres and following a decision by our Policy Committee, on 26th September 2019, the introduction of a food waste collection for Reading residents.

It has been positive that our activities to date have yielded a 5% increase in recycling across the last year and we have introduced a new team to tackle the issues of recycling contamination, fly-tipping and littering that you mention in your question.

Any additional collection service will have to be fully considered, planned and project managed and whilst the re3 partnership is committed to exploring the collection of glass. The immediate focus for Reading Borough Council on waste, in 2020, must be on the successful introduction of our exciting new food waste service. However, in the meantime, and alongside our re3 partners at Bracknell Forest and Wokingham Borough Councils, I can confirm

that we are beginning the process of investigating the feasibility of a glass collection service. The investigations will initially be reported to the re3 Board, later in 2020, and thereafter considered within each council.

In the interim, Reading Borough Council has in place a network of recycling banks located strategically across Reading which are readily available for residents to conveniently deposit their used glass bottles and containers.

Alongside our own waste strategy commitments, it will also be important to take account of the requirements of the Government Resources and Waste Strategy (RWS), which we expect to be included within the forthcoming Environment Bill.

4. Councillor McGonigle to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:
Styrofoam Food Containers

This is a question I have raised before but as nothing has changed I feel compelled to ask again.

Styrofoam or expanded Polystyrene is still being used by many take-away outlets across the Borough.

This substance emits many unpleasant toxins in manufacture and is shown to be especially dangerous when in contact with hot or oily foods.

It takes up a great deal of space in landfill, it never biodegrades and emits CO2 if burned.

Last time I raised this I was told that all new take-away businesses would not be permitted to use it, but clearly this has not been monitored.

We do not want or need this product. It is a danger to our health and our environment and there are a number of safe alternatives.

Please can we ban the use of this unnecessary product as soon as possible.

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

I thank Councillor McGonigle for her question.

As you say, little has changed with regard to the Council's powers since you asked a similar question in January 2017.

Whilst I recognise the negative environmental impacts associated with Styrofoam, the Council's licensing powers under the Licensing Act 2003 are limited.

As previously reported to Licensing and other Committees, conditions requiring the use of biodegradable or recyclable materials have been attached to all new licences. Since 2016 all premises that have applied for a permission for late night refreshment have a condition requiring the use of biodegradable or recyclable materials.

However, where an old licence is still in force this condition cannot be imposed retrospectively.

The law currently allows the Council to vary existing licence conditions where one or more of the licensing objectives are not being met, or where the premises concerned gives its consent. Unfortunately, there are no laws allowing the Council to ban or restrict the use of certain forms of packaging such as Styrofoam.

Street Trading licences, however, are enforced under the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982 and do allow the Council to apply reasonable conditions. As such, all street traders that are granted a street trading consent within the Borough are required to use biodegradable or recyclable packaging materials.

Officers have placed an enquiry with the Institute of Licensing to determine whether any other Council has found alternative mechanisms to secure a move away from Styrofoam. I will ask officers to advise me of the response and ensure that members of the Licensing Committee and Cllr McGonigle are also informed.