

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

28 SEPTEMBER 2020

Petition presented by David McElroy:

Increase the Cycling Targets and Action in the new Local Transport Plan

Reading is a compact town and could be great for cycling. At the moment only 5% of people in Reading cycle for travel three or more times per week. Cycling is great for health and cutting pollution. The council is currently consulting on a new Local Transport Plan and has the weak target of increasing cycling to 10% by 2036. Already in the UK many places have over 10% of residents cycling and across Europe Reading is even further behind.

Sign the petition and urge Reading council to boost its ambition for cycling in the town. Raise the targets and provide more facilities for cyclists.

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

I thank Mr McElroy for submitting this petition to the Council regarding our plans for increasing levels of cycling in the town, including the targets set as part of the draft new Local Transport Plan (LTP).

The draft version of the LTP, the Reading Transport Strategy 2036, was published in March 2020 and followed initial consultations that we undertook in summer 2019. These consultations demonstrated strong support for increasing levels of walking and cycling in Reading, alongside other sustainable transport modes.

The draft strategy was prepared accordingly and was intended to be launched at our Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport Committee on 16th March but, unfortunately, this meeting was cancelled at 30 minutes notice due to the COVID emergency. We then re-launched the formal consultation on 4th May, for an extended period until the end of August. At the time we stressed that:

At this stage the duration of the Covid crisis is unknown, as well as its long term impact on society.....As a result the amended consultation asks for feedback specifically on how the Strategy can contribute to Reading's recovery from the pandemic, as well as for feedback on the contents of the Strategy itself.

Alongside the new LTP we also consulted on our draft Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP). This is a sub-strategy to the LTP which sets out our planned active travel networks throughout the borough, together with key infrastructure improvements for both pedestrians and cyclists.

Both the draft LTP and LCWIP set out ambitious plans to increase levels of walking and cycling in Reading. However since they were prepared the Covid-19 pandemic has altered travel behaviour with more walking and cycling trips being undertaken.

We have also secured limited funding through Tranche 1 of the Emergency Active Travel Fund to deliver a range of schemes that involve reallocating road space for both pedestrians and cyclists. These schemes are currently temporary, with a view to being made permanent if they prove to be successful and subject to the results of public consultation.

We are currently reviewing feedback received from the consultations for both the draft LTP and LCWIP, alongside the possible longer-term impact of the current pandemic on travel patterns. As part of this process we are reviewing all of our targets in the LTP, including those for levels of cycling, to reflect our future ambitions and in line with the increased levels of funding anticipated from Government to increase levels of active travel and enable longer term behaviour change.

It should also be noted that we have recently submitted ambitious plans to Government as part of Tranche 2 of the Emergency Active Travel funding opportunity. These proposals involve introducing physically segregated cycle lanes in key locations to join-up our existing strategic routes. We are currently awaiting a decision from Government on the award of funding for these schemes. Initially we were told we would hear from the Department for Transport in September, but this has now slipped to October at the earliest.

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 1

Roger Lightfoot to ask the Leader of the Council:

Arthur Hill site

Could you please explain in layman's language RBC's objection to buying cheaply and earlier on the open market 15 of the vast number of flats being built and allocating them for key workers, rather than trying to squeeze them onto the Arthur Hill site? With the savings you could undertake minimal spending on refurbishment of Arthur Hill pool until the replacement is built in Palmer Park, then try again to sell the Arthur Hill site. We all know the plans for the Palmer Park pool will not run to schedule.

REPLY by Councillor Brock (Leader of the Council):

The fact of the matter is that the redevelopment of the Arthur Hill site for key worker housing is a financially viable option that supports the Council's efforts to deliver new housing while protecting a local listed building.

Purchasing properties on the open market for key worker housing is not prudent, as Right to Buy receipts can only be used for 30% of the purchase and Section 106 receipts are targeted to our Local Authority New Build programme, which is delivering much-needed new Council housing across the Borough. Moreover, open market properties are highly unlikely to meet the environmental standards that the Arthur Hill development will and developing properties within the Housing Revenue Account enables the Council to have full ownership of the properties as opposed to becoming a leaseholder in a private development. Becoming a leaseholder would create a complex arrangement around the management of such stock and leave the Council exposed to future costs in terms of planned maintenance arrangements over which it would have no control.

Developing the site through the HRA enables the Council for the first time to bring forward units of Council owned homes specifically for key workers and a planning application is currently being considered by the Local Planning Authority.

The Council remains committed to providing a modern new community swimming pool for east Reading in Palmer Park. An update on the programme was presented to this Committee in August.

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 2

Roger Lightfoot to ask the Leader of the Council:

Arthur Hill legacy

RBC promised to transfer the proceeds of the sale of Arthur Hill Pool towards costs of the replacement swimming pools. There would appear to be no proceeds. How are you going to explain the Hill family's legacy evaporating?

REPLY by Councillor Brock (Leader of the Council):

The legacy was the provision of swimming facilities in East Reading. The Council has committed to making a significant investment in new, modern, sustainable and more extensive swimming facilities at Palmer Park. This is clearly a continuation of, and an improvement to, Arthur Hill's legacy. The investment to improve the services clearly demonstrates the Council's perpetuation of his desire to provide for the people of Reading.

It is also worth noting that the Council has locally listed the façade of the former pool, reflecting the historic value of the building and a continuation of the local recognition of Arthur Hill's gift.

It is further testament to his memory that the site will become key worker housing, continuing a thread of public service. Moreover, the new housing will be built to the highest environmental standards. Given that Arthur Hill spent most of his business career selling one of the most polluting of fossil fuels, it seems fitting that we might seek to make a step towards ameliorating his own carbon footprint legacy.

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 3

Peter Burt to ask the Leader of the Council:

Arthur Hill site - conflict of interest

What steps will the Council take to avoid a conflict of interest in its roles as both developer and planning authority when the planning application for the Arthur Hill Swimming Pool site is determined?

REPLY by Councillor Brock (Leader of the Council):

It is not unusual for the Council to submit planning applications for development on its own land. Such proposals are treated with the same transparency and impartiality as those of any other developer. Planning applications submitted by the Council are determined by the Council's Planning Applications Committee and not dealt with by an officer delegated decision. Several applications have been through this process even in recent months.

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 4

Peter Burt to ask the Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing and Sport:

Collaboration on Sports and Leisure provision

Last month Wokingham Borough Council opened a brand-new leisure centre at Bulmershe, having closed the old Bulmershe Centre in February 2018.

In contrast, Reading Borough Council closed Arthur Hill Swimming Pool in December 2016 and has not yet commenced work on building a replacement pool.

Given that Wokingham Borough has managed to provide local swimming provision to replace Arthur Hill when Reading has not, Wokingham is clearly doing something right. Will the Lead Councillor approach Wokingham Borough to discuss working together collaboratively to run an effective sport and leisure service for the two boroughs and successfully deliver new sports centres for Reading?

REPLY by Councillor Hoskin (Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing and Sport):

Thank you for your question Mr Burt. The Council is well advanced in the procurement of a flagship leisure venue to replace Rivermead, building a new swimming pool at Palmer Park as well as refurbishing both Meadway and South Reading. We will be improving or replacing all our leisure facilities not building a single replacement centre. We are building facilities to meet the needs of our community and this includes swimming provision in East Reading.

As you will be aware from August Policy Committee we are continuing to develop plans for our new facilities and intend to be making planning applications in November for both Rivermead and Palmer Park. Stopping these processes and starting a new procurement process would significantly delay the building of new facilities and investment into other leisure facilities.

Despite Wokingham Borough being a significantly richer and larger council its ambitions for leisure are significantly more limited than here in Reading. Wokingham have no plans to provide a competition standard pool with diving and the deep water required for synchronised swimming. If Mr Burt has any inkling that Wokingham Borough are willing to make a financial contribution to the swimming and diving facilities at Rivermead that their residents will no doubt use then we would be very pleased to talk to them.

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COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 1

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing & Sport:

Getting more Covid-19 tests for Reading residents

Many Reading residents have told me that they have found it impossible to get a test for Covid-19 recently. This seems like a basic part of identifying Covid-19 outbreaks quickly so that contacts can be traced or allowing people to get on with working, schooling and living. What figures does the council have access to on the number of tests residents have been able to access over the last few weeks? What is the trend on the number of tests available to Reading residents? And what is the council doing to get more tests for Reading residents?

REPLY by Councillor Hoskin (Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing & Sport):

Thank you for your question Cllr White. I am sure you share Reading Labour councillors dismay and anger at the shambolic state of the government's privatised test and trace system. Despite having had months to prepare there is a major lack of capacity of labs to process tests leading to the difficulties residents are finding.

The farce reached a low point when Lady Dido Harding, the government appointed Tory Peer boss of Test and Trace said the surge in demand as children returned to school was "unexpected". This is what happens when experts are excluded and we suffer government by cronies. Not only cronies but incompetent cronies.

For Reading an issue we are facing is that where insufficient capacity has occurred in the testing system, a national decision has been taken to prioritise available tests to areas with outbreaks or that are in local lock-down, and not to areas like Berkshire. Locally the data tells us that the rate of testing in Reading has not changed over the last month but clearly demand has, predictably, increased.

Through a range of channels available to us my fellow Councillors and Council Officers have been, and continue to, make the case to central decision makers about the need for sufficient testing capacity locally. We have also been working to identify additional testing sites in Reading where the mobile testing unit vans can visit and where Local Testing Sites can be established. I am pleased to say that on Thursday and Friday this week the Prospect Park carpark will have a mobile testing van present and it will also be there on four further dates in October. Residents who have symptoms will need to book a test appointment (via the online testing portal, the NHS COVID-19 app or by calling 119).

There were also reports in the local media recently about a test site at the University of Reading campus. I can confirm that we have been working closely with the University and the Dept of Health and Social Care to establish a testing site there and I look forward to being able to provide more details about that testing site in the near future once the final sign-off process has occurred.

I'd like to take this opportunity to personally thank the extremely hard work of the council's public health team in securing this local testing in the face of a national system that seems indifferent to Reading's needs.

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 2

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing & Sport:

Targeting Covid-19 communications

What data does the Council have on which segments of the population in Reading are testing positive for Covid-19 and how are the appropriate messages being targeted at these segments of our community?

REPLY by Councillor Hoskin (Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing & Sport):

Thank you for your question Cllr White. I can confirm that in Reading, like most areas in the country, we are seeing a higher rate of positive tests in certain cohorts of people across the Borough. For example, of those testing positive a slightly higher proportion are women than men, there are higher rates in some of our black and Asian community groups and it is those aged 18 - 34 where we have seen the biggest increase in positive tests most recently. We know that those who have tested positive for the disease do not represent everybody who has had the infection in Reading. This is because some people have become infected without developing symptoms and, as referred to in your earlier question, testing has not always been universally available since the pandemic began.

As a result the council has developed relevant messaging for all residents, but also adopted a targeted approach to reach certain groups where higher rates occur, especially our Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups in Reading. Our strategy is built on working with partners and organisations to understand local need and develop materials that best meet local needs. We welcome input from partners to help us understand the requirements and needs of our communities and seek feedback on materials we produce.

Examples of targeted materials include the Reading Borough Council webpage www.reading.gov.uk/coronavirus-covid-19/coronavirus-translations where we are hosting a bank of materials that we have created ourselves including key Covid messages translated into 11 languages used locally. We are also signposting to resources from the NHS and World Health Organisation including translated materials. We are currently working with the Royal Berkshire Hospital to produce short videos in local languages with Covid safety messaging delivered by hospital staff. RBC staff have also helped with translation requirements and provided key contacts within minority communities for example the Konkani community.

We have targeted messaging around key dates, for example around Eid, key messages on social distancing, test and trace and hygiene were delivered on social media, email newsletter, a YouTube video with Cllr Ayub was produced and officers liaised directly with local faith leaders.

Our Health and Wellbeing team already communicate directly to 120 faith organisations including those that don't have official buildings and use community venues and the university student groups. These groups have been key in helping

identify what translations are needed in Reading and providing feedback on sense checking comms. We have expanded this team to include an additional COVID-19 outreach and engagement officer to strengthen the Council's community connections at this time.