

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 1

Councillor Josh Williams to ask the Chair of the Planning Applications Committee:

Locally Listed Buildings

One year ago I asked about the process for Local Listing of Reading's important buildings, which at the moment is conducted by officers and decided by the Lead Councillor for Planning. The answer from the Chair was that following a discussion with the Lead Member for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport a review would be undertaken of the whole local listing process and a report brought back for discussion at Planning Applications Committee. Could the Chair update us on what progress has been made over the last 12 months on making the Local Listing process more proactive, more public facing and part of the democratic work of the Planning Committee?

REPLY by the Chair of the Planning Applications Committee (Councillor McKenna):

I have provided the answers to the questions you had asked on the 9th October 2019 as an appendix to this answer for the written record. While I will not read those previous responses into the spoken record, I believe they may serve as a helpful reminder to members of the committee and may be of value to members of the public who may view this meeting in the future.

Turning to your direct question, initial conversations and scoping was begun and a named officer assigned who began the main body of work in the review in late February this year. This was to involve liaising with Historic England, the Planning Advisory Service (PAS), interested bodies within Reading, elected members and with a number of other local planning authorities to identify best practice and develop a model for Reading Borough Council that would be fit for the next decade.

This was to have resulted in a report to this committee which provided options and asked for our views on any proposed changes to the current process. A recommendation would then have been made to a constitutionally appropriate committee to formally endorse and enact any required alterations to enshrine a formal role for this committee.

Then our world changed. This is readily evidenced by our virtual meeting this evening. Understandably it became impossible to make good progress.

As you are unfortunately well aware as another serving councillor, councils have seen a decade long squeeze on available budgets. It should therefore be recognised that the staff of the planning service at Reading Borough Council, akin to all other Local planning authorities are often stretched.

This led to a necessary refocus on the 'core business' of determining applications, while at the same time having to develop entirely new ways of processing applications when remote working. This has been achieved at a time of considerable disruption and uncertainty while already in the middle of a long overdue upgrade of our IT infrastructure which was underway in the first few months of 2020.

We can all appreciate the scale of the challenges our new world has laid before us. However, I can easily commend our officers who have been able to adapt to this new and changing world without losing focus on the core function of the planning service. They have, despite the numerous challenges, continued the processing of planning applications within the statutory timeframes. This is evidenced clearly within the performance monitoring report we will come to discuss as Agenda item 6 of tonight's meeting and so I will not speak to it here.

That said, I would like to reassure you that neither I, the Lead Member for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport, who is a member of this committee, nor officers, have forgotten the commitment to bring a report to this committee.

Indeed, I can report a positive outcome of the initial scoping exercise, which along with the visit of the historic places panel of historic England, identified both the need and opportunity for creation of a new specialist post within the planning directorate. Our first Conservation and Urban Design Officer has joined the authority in mid-September and a refresh of the local listing process is already underway as one of their assigned duties.

As they are still in their onboarding process, I'm afraid I can't provide a definitive timeline at this point and will instead ask your indulgence to return to this discussion in our next meeting on the 4th of November.

Appendix - Local listing questions asked at Planning applications 9th October 2019:

Minutes:

Councillor Josh Williams submitted the following question to the Chair of the Planning Applications Committee:

Local Listing

Reading Borough Council maintains a list of locally important buildings which are subject to more detailed planning control. That list has recently protected Grovelands Church from being demolished, and includes entries such as the Arthur Hill Swimming Baths. It's right that Reading protects its architectural heritage and culture. Could the Chair of the Committee please briefly outline the Local Listing process? Our Planning Committee confirms protection orders on trees, chooses new street names, and determines new applications based on planning matters such as Local Listings. Does the Chair agree with me that requests to add or remove buildings from this Local list should be decided by Reading's Planning Committee?

REPLY by the Chair of the Planning Applications Committee (Councillor McKenna):

Q1. Could the Chair of the Committee please briefly outline the Local Listing process?

Historic England's advice is that local listing is a way to identify and celebrate historic buildings which enrich and enliven their area. They build a sense of place and history and are intended to highlight assets in order to ensure that they are given due consideration when change is being proposed.

Unlike national listing, Local Listing does not provide any additional legal protection for the building. However Locally Listed buildings *are* specifically referred to in existing and emerging local planning policy and the effect of development on their heritage significance can be controlled through the planning application process where an application is required.

The process of Locally Listing a building begins with the building being nominated. This nomination could be from a variety of different persons including a Council officer, a Councillor, a member of the public, or a local amenity group.

The current process was agreed by Cabinet on 18 February 2013 as follows *“That Cabinet delegates the decision for adding buildings or structures to the List of Locally Important Buildings and Structures of local heritage significance to the Head of Planning and Building Control in consultation with the Lead Member for Regeneration, Transport and Planning.”*

The Council has identified and locally listed buildings under the current procedure and there are 11 buildings currently on the list. The Council has successfully defended appeals in respect of 3 Craven Road and Pearsons Court on Northcourt Avenue, where the Inspectors accepted their local listed status.

Q2. Our Planning Committee confirms protection orders on trees, chooses new street names, and determines new applications based on planning matters such as Local Listings. Does the Chair agree with me that requests to add or remove buildings from this Local list should be decided by Reading's Planning Committee?

The current process, by operating outside the committee cycle and involving just a few key people, has shown itself to be an efficient and effective way of protecting buildings potentially at risk without taking up scarce resources.

However, following a discussion with the Lead Member for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport I can confirm that a review will be undertaken of the whole local listing process and a report brought back for discussion at Planning Applications Committee.