

AGENDA ITEM 6

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

1. Louise Keane to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation:
Will the Council Locally List the Black History Mural

I fully support the initiatives to nationally list the Black History Mural. I understand that the Council runs a local listing scheme. Can the Council consider locally listing the Black History Mural as a stopgap measure until hopefully this important mural is nationally listed?

REPLY by Councillor Rowland Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation.

I thank you for the question, Ms. Keane and the opportunity to set the record straight on the Mural's status in terms of listing, which is often queried.

The Mural is a significant part of Reading's local history. It was painted circa 1990 by Alan Howard along with an outstanding community effort. It commemorates the memory of C.L.R. James, the peaceful anti-apartheid demonstrators massacred in Soweto in 1976, Black history through the ages, and notable Reading figures from within our own proud black communities. It is a noted landmark for this town as a statement not only of our deep appreciation of our Black communities, but more broadly of this town's embracing of its widely diverse makeup.

The question, however, as to why the Mural isn't Locally Listed, has a very simple answer:

In short, the Mural is already protected by a number of Planning Constraints that carry greater import than it being on a Local List.

Firstly, as the Mural lies within a designated Conservation Area, the Mural is not actually eligible for the Local List. In Reading, as set out in our Local Plan, does not locally list buildings/monuments within Conservation Areas. By virtue of it being within the Market Place/London Street Conservation Area, the status for the site is actually higher than a Local List designation and any demolition of it, as such, would require a prior planning application.

It is worth noting that the conservation area appraisal for Market Place/London Street is currently being reviewed and a designation within the Conservation Area which many feel that it should have had prior, is being suggested: that of highlighting the Mural as a "Building of Townscape Merit". In layman terms, that designation is slightly comparable to a "Local Listing" within a Conservation Area. Such a designation in turn, could give it even more weight in planning decisions. It is something that as Heritage Champion for Reading, I do hope happens at the first opportunity, and I know that work is progressing on that reappraisal by the Conservation Area Advisory Committee which will then be submitted to the Council. I do not know the timeline for that, as it is dependent on a number of factors.

To further reassure you that until such time as Historic England may choose to designate it nationally, the building on which the Mural is located is included in the Reading Borough Local Plan, under Policy CR14: OTHER SITES FOR DEVELOPMENT IN CENTRAL READING where it makes clear that any new development of the Central Club is to "retain the iconic mural on the northern façade".

Finally, the Council has recently publicly reiterated two things are required of any plans in the redevelopment of the Central Club building that it is on:

That community space is retained as part of that site and;

That the Mural be conserved and maintained by the developer in accordance with specialist historic conservation guidelines that will ensure its protection for the future.

Along with you, I also share the hope for its national Listing, which could be seen as a final crown on its already well-protected future. The Mural became eligible for national listing this year when it became 30 years of age, the “youngest age” at which a building or site is generally considered for national listing. Such a designation will not only afford a final measure of protection, but even more importantly, it would mean that Reading’s Black History Mural is recognised on a national level for the unique significance and value to this town that we all feel it deserves. I join you, and many others, in requesting directly to Historic England, that it is an honour that we in Reading and beyond, all feel is well due for Reading’s very special Black History Mural.