

AGENDA ITEM 7

QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

1. Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods & Communities: Fly-Tipping so far this Year

Fly-tipping can blight an area. Over the year, with the recycling centre being closed and other factors at play, Green Councillors have received numerous reports of fly-tipping. On Amity Road next to the trade waste bins for example there are numerous things dumped every week ranging from rotting meat to household waste. Please can we get the fly-tipping statistics for the year so far and the ones for the previous three years for comparison ?

REPLY by Councillor Barnett-Ward Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods & Communities

Thank you for your question.

Illegal fly-tipping is a nationwide problem. People who choose to fly tip rather than dispose of their rubbish responsibly are creating eyesores, risks to public health and, if it is on public land, a drain on the council-tax payers who ultimately foot the bill for clearing up after them.

In Reading, numbers of fly-tipping reports dipped during the lockdown, but we did see more low-level fly tips around our recycling banks and on-street litter bins caused by people choosing not to manage their waste responsibly. Non-compliance with waste regulations by commercial premises can also be a factor which compounds the problem.

This Council is determined to address this blight which has an adverse visual and environmental impact on all our residents and visitors to our town.

The figures which you have requested are found below;

| Date:                    | Reports, as taken from the waste data flow management tool: |
|--------------------------|---|
| April 2017 - March 2018  | 2509  |
| April 2018 - March 2019  | 1574  |
| April 2019 - March 2020  | 1835  |
| April 2020 - August 2020 | 747   |

Fly tipping is an environmental crime and this council will not tolerate the selfish and

irresponsible behaviour of those who dump rubbish on public land. Our commitment to tackling this problem is demonstrated by the introduction of a new team of Recycling and Enforcement Officers, dedicated to improving recycling rates and carrying out environmental enforcement activities. Despite restrictions imposed by the Covid 19 pandemic these officers have continued to investigate fly-tipping and littering offences. The team issued 329 Fixed Penalty notices (FPNs) between the end of November 2019 and the end of September 2020, and recently secured 4 successful prosecutions for littering offences.

Officers have been monitoring the area around the Amity Road trade waste bins on a regular basis. 'No Flytipping' signs which display the maximum penalty for such offences have been put up as a deterrent. In addition, Officers have been speaking to business owners who use those bins, reminding them of their responsibilities to manage their waste effectively and re-stating that all waste should be contained in the bins. One business has recently changed hands, and the new owner has been contacted to make them aware of their waste duty of care responsibilities. Any waste left at the side of the trade waste containers is inspected and action is taken if sufficient evidence of origin is found. This work will continue.

The team has purchased overt CCTV cameras to expand its ability to monitor problem sites. The first deployment at Kensington Rd bring bank site has resulted in the issue of 27 FPNs using camera evidence. This has proven the worth of investing in camera enforcement for fly tipping hotspots so we are now expanding our capacity for these installations. We are about to tackle a hotspot in Abbey Ward and I welcome suggestions from members of other fly tipping hotspots that could benefit.

2. Councillor Manghnani to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation: Children's Parks

When will Tilehurst children's parks be refurbished to a standard suitable for children with special needs. We have two schools in the Tilehurst area who cater for special needs children, however the parks do not have adequate equipment for them.

**REPLY** by Councillor Rowland Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation:

Reading Borough Council currently manages 58 equipped playgrounds. The existing stock is aging, however, the Council has made a priority of addressing this need across the Borough and in so doing, we recognise that not enough sites provide sufficiently for children with disabilities.

In December 2018 a capital bid was submitted for £2.86 million investment in play facilities over the next 5 years for spending on the sites most urgently requiring refreshment and on providing better facilities for people with mobility issues. Approval was given for investment of £270,000 in 2019/20 and £494,000 in 2020/21.

The Council is pleased to say that the capital spending approved for 2020/21 includes full reprovision of both the junior and toddler play areas at Blagrave Recreation Ground. The value of the work is estimated to be around £244,000, and plans are being made to commission work from playground suppliers. The brief includes challenging and attractive equipment for children of all abilities and needs, and safety surfacing that allows for easy wheelchair and buggy access.

The Council is also pleased to confirm that £350,000 has been approved for investment in a fully-inclusive play area at Prospect Park. This will also serve children in Tilehurst as well as across the Borough. In 2019 a tree fell next to the playground, damaging the equipment. Although the tree was in good health, the ground underneath was eroded by an underground spring in spate after the wet winter. Full planning permission is required to move the play area to a different location closer to the car park, and public consultation will form part of the process of seeking approval. This work will start in 2020/21, and be completed in 2021/22.

The positive news is that the Council, in consulting about new play areas, has developed a positive working relationship with the new Accessible Play Task and Finish Group, which was set up following a play focus workshop of the Access and Disabilities Working Group held on 26 June 2019. The T&F Group is made up of myself as the Lead Member for Culture, Heritage and Recreation, Council officers, carers of children affected by disabilities and disabled carers. This group will advise the Council at each juncture, during the five-year investment period planned for play improvements in Reading, with the goal of ensuring the highest possible quality of play provision for children of all abilities. I am delighted that this group has been brought to formation over the past year. Their advice has already proved to be invaluable.

The first significant opportunity to make a difference arose earlier this year when the old multi-unit at Palmer Park needed to be removed for health and safety reasons, leaving a large space at the heart of the play area. A scheme was chosen with the Accessible Play Task and Finish Group and significant modifications were made to make sure that the experience for disabled children could be even better. These changes were approved by the whole group and we delivered a far more accessible scheme as a result.

The Council has been seeking to take account of the play needs of children with disabilities for over a decade. Still, it is a significant number of sites across the estate to modernise with funding limited as it has been over this past decade and sadly, our budget is not in the position to provide immediate "accessibility for all" on every site tomorrow. However, it is the involvement of our Advisory Group and local parents and children in the development of the new playgrounds at Blagrove Recreation Ground and Prospect Park, that can encourage and guide officers to the best designs which will improve the experience for children (and carers) with disabilities. However, creating great play areas is actually hard work and very detail-intense; it is very easy to miss things that make a big difference to people. Still, we look forward to learning as we cooperate more and more on these schemes. I think this iterative consulting process we have started will now continue to make the real difference in providing the new generation of play equipment we are delivering for Reading. Along with Officers, I am looking forward very much to getting these plans on the table and getting to work.

3. Councillor Manghnani to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation:

### Park Keepers

With the recent unlawful gathering by youths in parks in and around Tilehurst, where criminal damage to equipment and unsociable behaviour including drug dealing and users. The parks are left with rubbish and needles making them unsuitable for little ones to play safely. Would the Council consider employing park keepers to help curb the unsociable behaviour and the gathering of drug users. The parks should be closed to public from 7pm to 7am during the winter months with longer openings in the summer months from 7am to 8pm.

Tilehurst receive very little funding for recreation for little people and those who abuse the parks and green areas make it even more difficult for parents with young ones to have a place of fun and safety. With the restriction of social distancing it's important we have safe, clean, pleasant places for children.

**REPLY** by Councillor Rowland Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation:  
Thank you for your question, Councillor Manghnani.

Park keepers used to be employed in most of the large parks in Reading, until the late 1980s when reorganisation in favour of efficiency created the predominantly mobile staffing structure that we have today. The only parks in Reading that now have permanent staff are Forbury Gardens and Caversham Court Gardens where we have Head Gardeners who, whilst they liaise with other agencies in relation to ASB, are predominantly responsible for the upkeep of the sites as this was a requirement of the Heritage Lottery Funding for the restoration of both Gardens. However, even when park keepers were around, working daytimes as they did, they were not all that effective in stemming situations such as you are describing.

However, I do share your concern that the pleasure of many people can be disrupted by the bad behaviour of a few. Problems with bored and troublesome youngsters have been

occurring across west Reading, not just in Tilehurst. West Berkshire was facing similar problems over the summer.

There are primarily two ways that are best to contend with alienated youths who cause damage and ASB and that is largely through either enforcement and/or engagement. When problems are persistent, enforcement must become necessary, but this is a Police rather than a Council matter, although there is certainly multi- agency work between the Council's ASB Team and the Police to curb issues. It is therefore, so important that any criminal behaviour needs to be reported to the police as well as the Council in order to identify hotspots and inform tasking priorities. Reports of persistent ASB should also be fed into the Reading Safer Neighbourhood Forum to enhance the multi-agency work that may be needed, and I know you are a member of that Committee.

However, where it can, the Council tries to engage. If there is a persistent issue with young people causing disturbance in an area, the ASB Team will look to liaise with Brighter Futures for Children to see what resources can be accessed to work with young people and provide meaningful options to destructive behaviour.

Apart from the Forbury Gardens and Caversham Court Gardens, which are secured at night by trained security staff, there are four sites that are currently locked at night by local residents. However, most parks cannot be closed off effectively because they do not have sufficient boundary infrastructure, making them not feasible to prevent unauthorised access. That makes security and enforcement of larger parks a more challenging issue.

More positively however, the Council has just announced over £0.5m funding for play area improvements in West Reading, and it is hoped that this will provide years of safe, attractive and fully accessible fun for young people in the area. Again, I would actively encourage all local communities to report any incidents of anti-social behaviour they encounter to the police via 101 or online for investigation and potential action as well as making the Council aware. That information is critical in helping us to develop the best ways to resolve the problems you describe.

4. Councillor Manghnani to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:  
School Streets Project

Can the Council clarify how the school street project will work ?

Residents living in roads that are near Schools such as Parklane are concerned they're movements will be restricted during the start and close of the day.

I personally would like to see traffic wardens placed in those areas rather than a restriction on local residents. Issuing fixed penalty notices would encourage parents if not willingly to walk their children to school. Although I do believe getting children to school safely is essential and reducing the ozone levels, by encouraging children to walk benefits everyone.

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

I thank Councillor Manghnani for her question.

The Council is currently working with a number of interested schools to support the development of School Street applications. This includes the school undertaking an initial consultation with parents/carers and nearby properties, including those within close

proximity of the proposed School Street and which may be impacted by diverting traffic when the road closure is in operation.

All applications from schools will need to be approved by the Council's Traffic Management Sub-Committee in order to proceed with the proposed School Street road closure. Further information is available on the Council's website at - [www.reading.gov.uk/schoolstreets](http://www.reading.gov.uk/schoolstreets)

By way of background summary, an approved School Street closes the road outside the school from traffic for up to 45 minutes, twice a day, during school term time only. Any vehicles already parked in the road can stay or leave throughout the duration of the School Street. Only eligible vehicles can gain access to the road during the School Street closure (this would include residents, carers, delivery drivers, emergency services or by special arrangement with the school). Residents who live within the School Street will not have their access restricted.

The relevant school(s) will take ownership of the day to day operation of the School Street, including providing a marshal at each barrier, opening and closing the School Street, and ensuring eligible vehicles are adhering to safe speeds.

Where there are concerns about displacement of traffic on to neighbouring roads, schools must identify potential dedicated Park and Stride sites for parents/carers that have no alternative option other than to drive. These sites will be located within a 5/10-minute walking distance and aim to limit the level of displacement on to other residential roads.

Schools are encouraged to look at other complementary initiatives, including:

- Bikeability - offering more courses to encourage children to cycle to and from school;
- Walking buses - these can encourage children to walk, socialise and help get children into a routine;
- Scooter/Cycle parking provision - making sure there is enough safe cycle/scooter parking on site, which will reassure parents and incentivise pupils to travel by bike or scooter;
- Modeshift STARS (a national sustainable travel initiative) - signing up to this free programme will help the school embed sustainable travel for the longer term; and
- WOW (The year-round walk to school challenge) - this is an excellent way of helping to reduce congestion and pollution outside the school gates, while increasing safety and improving the physical and mental wellbeing of pupils.

5. Councillor Whitham to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:

**Redlands Road Active Travel Scheme**

Redlands residents have been contacting me querying how the recently implemented Redlands Road Active Travel scheme, mostly consisting of white bicycle symbols painted on the road, cost £30,000. Please can I have a breakdown of the costs ?

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

I thank Cllr Whitham for his question

The £30,000 estimate was reported in an update to Traffic Management Sub-Committee in July. This figure was an estimate based on the original bid to the Department for Transport

for 'Tranche 1' emergency funding to introduce schemes supporting active travel and social distancing as part of the COVID pandemic.

At this point we did not know if we would be successful with our bid and did not have a concept scheme design. Like many other Councils we did not receive the total initial funding allocation and, therefore, officers have reassessed the original thinking adjusting the proposals to fit the funding offered.

It is important to understand the context of these Active Travel schemes in that they were and are a response to COVID and intended to be temporary. The funding reflects that the situation will change, and some of these temporary measures may be removed as we eventually 'return to normal'.

At this time the scheme is incomplete, so we do not have the scheme costs yet. Officers are reconsidering some aspects such as the use of virtual cushions and also assessing the benefits of these being physical constructions.

The costs of any implemented scheme, including these Active Travel schemes, are the whole costs including design, procurement and delivery by our in-house staff - not just the deliverables on street. The cost of these measures in Redlands Road to date will be nowhere near £30k, but officers cannot directly answer the question at this time due to the scheme being incomplete. The revised cost estimate for the measures in Redlands Road is about £10K allowing for possible changes to the cushions.

6. Councillor Raj Singh to ask the Leader of the Council:  
Racist or Religiously Aggravated Crime

Recently Reading Chronicle reported and revealed a gradual increase in racist or religiously aggravated crime in the past three years.

There are also reports of a surge in hate crimes against gay and transgender people and let us not forget the heinous act at Forbury Garden.

Last month, an Indian Sikh taxi driver, who lives in Tilehurst was slapped and shoved near Grosvenor Casino in Reading in the early hours of Sunday. One of the men tried to remove his turban and asked him: "Are you Taliban?"

Building cohesive environments in which our communities can flourish must lie at the core of Councils' day to day business and should reflect across a range of different policy areas underpinned by robust and visible leadership.

Reading Residents are known for their caring and compassionate outlook, and we see that through this pandemic. What steps is the Council pursuing to shape cohesion, rebuild trust and promote Reading values ?

**REPLY** by Councillor Brock Leader of the Council:

Councillor Singh is quite right to highlight some deplorable recent incidents and I am sure we would all join in condemning the actions of those who seek to divide our community.

This year has been a particularly challenging one. Throughout the pandemic the vast majority of Reading's residents and organisations have demonstrated the most positive spirit of helping one another and proactively demonstrated all that is wonderful about our town, but we have also seen the unequal and inequitable impact Covid-19 has had on BAME groups; people with particular long-term health conditions; older people; younger people; people who are

unwaged or in lower-paid jobs; those with mental health conditions; and those who suffer digital exclusion.

The Council is committed to working with local communities and partner agencies to improve the quality of life in our neighbourhoods so that they meet the diverse needs of residents in being safe, well run, and attractive places in which people want to live and work. We want our neighbourhoods to be inclusive places where local people are empowered to feel ownership of, and contribute to, the life of their neighbourhood. We want residents to shape the places where they live.

We work closely with the voluntary and community sector to enable communities to shape the services they want and need. We commission the Alliance for Cohesion and Racial Equality (ACRE) to provide a service to support groups of people affected by complex multiple factors that put them at risk of suffering, discrimination, prejudice, and isolation. The main elements of this service are an Equalities Alliance, bringing together groups that are traditionally opposed to cast aside their difference and exercise mutual respect for each other's disposition and points of view, and a community-led Hate Crime Forum that works in partnership with agencies tackling hate crime.

Thinking about this year and acknowledging the unequal impact of Covid-19, as well as the enormous benefit that community groups have in helping to address this, in July we allocated £100k of small grants to the voluntary sector to assist their response to these impacts.

Going forward, we are working with voluntary sector and community groups to shape a Social Inclusion Action Plan to build thriving communities by addressing inequalities with a particular focus on reducing poverty, improving opportunities, and tackling the barriers our diverse communities face. In addition, we continue to work closely with the police on a strategic level, including through the Community Safety Partnership, to tackle crime in our town and keep our residents safe. Building a cohesive town is necessarily a task of partnership and collaboration.