

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 1

David McElroy to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation:

Feeling Safe In Our Green Spaces

Covid and lockdown has meant that our green spaces are busier than ever. More people in our parks means more interactions and more interactions will be mostly positive, but occasionally negative such as the dog attack that led to a Redlands Road resident being wounded on New Year's Eve. Are the Council considering any strategies for ensuring that residents can continue to enjoy our parks safely and equitably? Park Wardens, as we had for many years in Palmer Park, could be an option. Or maybe consolidating the responsibilities of various existing wardens (e.g. traffic and waste) to cover a wider range of issues including parks could be an efficient way forward for reassuring the public.

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

It is certainly true that our parks have been busy during the pandemic and that most people have enjoyed their outdoor public spaces in a safe and considerate way.

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. Although we retained a park keeper at Palmer Park for some years after this time, his work was also allocated to mobile staff on his retirement and for the same reasons.

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 antisocial or criminal activity as much of this happened outside of their working day.

However, I do share your concern that the pleasure of many people can be disrupted by the bad behaviour of a few.

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 or antisocial behaviour needs to be reported to the police as well as the Council in order to identify hotspots and inform tasking priorities. For example, during COVID, police have been adding parks to their regular patrols where they have received numerous reports of guideline breaches. 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.

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 2

David McElroy to ask the Leader of the Council:

Rent Holidays For Local Businesses

We need to support our local small businesses during this awful time - not just for the owners and employees of those businesses, but so the whole community can be sure they will still be there when we come out the other side of covid. We know Council officers are helping signpost businesses to government grants, but across Berkshire commercial landlords are helpfully considering requests for rent holidays. Are RBC considering something similar for its local small business tenants, and if not, why not?

REPLY by Councillor Brock (Leader of the Council):

The Council has managed the award of Business Rates Relief to businesses in the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure industry and to date over 1,500 have been supported at a total value of £57.6m.

In addition to Business Rates relief, some businesses have been eligible to receive grants to further support them at this difficult time. During the first lockdown (March 2020), in excess of 2,000 businesses were able to access grants totalling £28.5m and in the second and third lockdowns (since November) over 700 businesses to date have received support in excess of £6m.

The Council has a wide variety of tenants within its properties who are required under the terms of their lease to pay rent to the Council. The income received from these rents supports the provision of vital services to residents. While no formal blanket 'rent holidays' are planned, tenants are asked to contact officers should they have difficulties in paying their rent so that their particular circumstances can be considered and, where appropriate, agreements put in place to help tenants who may be under financial pressure at this time. Moreover, no legal actions are being undertaken to enforce payment of any rent arrears at this time, but, again, I'd strongly request that anyone in arrears contacts the Council so that we can facilitate sustainable arrangements as necessary.

As Leader, may I implore local businesses to take advantage of the support available to them as set out on our webpage and to contact their landlord, whether that is the Council or other, as early as possible should they need further support.

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 3

Peter Bowyer to ask the Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods & Communities:

Changes to Waste collections

The Council's introduction of Borough-wide kerbside food waste collection is to be commended. The environmental and financial benefits speak for themselves and the promising early figures for take-up of the service are impressive.

However, the concurrent reduction in size of residual refuse bins from 240L to 140L is more troublesome. Again the intentions are good; reducing the amount of landfilled refuse is an environmental and financial imperative. This is not in dispute. However from personal experience during the pilot stage of the scheme, there has been a marked rise in the amount of fly-tipped domestic refuse on street corners, near communal bins, and especially at street recycling facilities. Excess that is not flytipped builds up in and around bin areas.

On my street in Abbey ward there is new fly-tipped domestic rubbish every day. The Council's Streetcare teams are very efficient at clearing it up once reported, but this efficiency effectively rewards the residents for their actions and does nothing to discourage them. There is no incentive to change their behaviour to reduce their levels of waste and increase recycling.

I have seen no publicity or communication from the Council about this aspect of the scheme or advice to residents as to what actions they can take. In our area which has many HMOs with low car ownership, it simply isn't an option for many people to book a visit to the recycling centre. A recent report from Keep Britain Tidy which Councillors were kind enough to forward to me identifies the importance of communication with both residents and landlords in areas with HMOs.

I'm aware of an increased focus on enforcement and welcome this, but this can only ever be part of the solution.

Can I ask the Lead Councillor:

- The September 2019 Policy Committee report which gained approval for the scheme identified many actions (sections 4.41, 5) that would be required in order to achieve the goals of the project. What is the progress of these?
- The report also refers to experience from other Local Authorities - how has this informed the scheme?
- What lessons have been learnt from the pilot areas about the fly tipping problem, and what interventions have been identified?
- Is there a plan to communicate and engage with residents and landlords to help them reduce the amount of residual refuse they produce, and what to do with any excess?

REPLY by Councillor Barnett-Ward (Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods & Communities):

Thank you for your question.

Illegal fly-tipping is a national problem, which has been compounded by the Covid 19 lockdowns and the increase in home working. Numbers of fly-tipping reports dipped during the lockdown but the number of low-level fly tips increased, with our recycling banks and on-street litter bins proving particularly popular with those who chose not to manage their waste responsibly. Non-compliance with waste regulations by commercial premises is also a factor which compounds the problem. The Council is determined to address this blight which has adverse impacts on all residents and visitors to our town, both visually and environmentally.

The Council has demonstrated its commitment to addressing environmental crime by introducing a team of Recycling and Enforcement Officers. This team engages with residents on how to manage household waste and carries out environmental enforcement activities. Despite the restrictions imposed by the Covid 19 pandemic, officers have continued to investigate waste offences. The team issued 392 Fixed Penalty notices (FPNs) for fly-tipping and littering offences between November 2019 and Dec 2020. We have secured 19 successful prosecutions for waste offences with more planned for the coming months.

With regard to your questions:

Question 1

Unfortunately, the Council was unsuccessful in its bid for this funding, so is exploring other means of conducting this work through its membership of Keep Britain Tidy, re3 and WRAP. In January the Council concluded a jointly funded project with WRAP, the waste reduction charity, through the re3 waste partnership, which analysed the effect of targeted communications for residents on a specific collection round who were not putting the right materials in their recycling bin. The results are still being collated but, as with similar initiatives carried out by Council officers in 2017 and 2018, it is likely to conclude that direct communications and door step discussions are the best way to reduce such contamination.

The Recycling and Enforcement team have been in contact with the landlord of every registered HMO as part of the current food waste and 140l bin project, reminding them of their responsibilities under the EPA and the team continue to liaise with all managing agents and landlords and will take enforcement action if necessary. The council recognise that residents in HMOs operate as separate households so should be expected to generate more waste per person than a single household. This has been taken into consideration when calculating grey bin capacity for licensed HMOs but where landlords have not registered their HMO waste management do not have any way of knowing that the property is not a single household. Our waste collection crews log all instances of excess or contaminated waste and the Recycling and Enforcement Team follow up on these reports with residents. Where this follow-up work identifies an unlicensed HMO the team engage with the landlord and recalculate the property's waste allowance. This illustrates the importance of landlords registering their HMOs and the sorts of issues that can arise for their residents and neighbours when they do not.

Officers in Waste Operations are internal consultees for all new developments and are in regular contact with colleagues in Planning, making recommendations about the suitability of proposed infrastructure and waste storage, including for separate food waste bins.

Officers have been monitoring problem areas, most notably around bring bank sites, and they investigate any fly-tipping which is found. Cleansing crews use the Love Clean Reading app to capture pictures and details of any identifying marks which are passed on to the Recycling and Enforcement team for further investigation. 'No Flytipping' signs which display the maximum penalty for such offences have been put up as a deterrent and this message will be strengthened further by the deployment of signs which give details of the number of prosecutions which have resulted from fly-tipping in an area.

The Recycling and Enforcement team has expanded its ability to monitor problem sites by installing overt CCTV cameras at problem sites. The first deployment began at Kensington Road bring bank in September 2020 site has resulted in the issue of 29 FPNs, using evidence obtained solely from those cameras. Cameras have also been installed in Howard Street and Anstey Road and other sites will be assessed as they arise.

Question 2

The Council recognises that it is difficult for residents who do not have a car to take their excess waste to the HWRC and is investigating ways to provide residents with opportunities to dispose of bulky and excess waste closer to home. Officers are in contact with authorities such as Brent Council who provide a community skip service to assess whether this is viable in Reading and how we might assess which areas would most benefit from such a service. The Council currently provides a chargeable bulky waste disposal service. This charging structure was last reviewed in 2016. The Covid 19 pandemic and the resulting lockdowns and restrictions have changed the way residents dispose of their waste and the bulky waste service will be reviewed as part of the Council's ambition to improve accessibility of waste disposal for all residents.

Officers also regularly liaise with our re3 waste partnership partners Bracknell and Wokingham Borough Councils about fly-tipping and waste issues. The Council also plans to approach Haringey, Luton, Redbridge, and Waltham Forest Councils about their promotional activity around publicising successful fly-tipping prosecutions as a means of deterring illegal dumping.

Question 3

The Council is aware of the areas which suffer regular fly-tipping through the reports it receives from residents and staff. The early adopter project has not significantly changed this: those early adopter areas that historically saw very little fly-tipping continue to see very little, those with an established fly-tipping problem continued to experience fly-tipping through the trial. This demonstrates that this problem is ongoing and that continuous efforts are needed to change entrenched behaviours.

The introduction of kerbside food waste collection and the change to 140l bins is in its early stages but the experience of the early adopters has proven valuable both operationally and in the type of communications used. The early adopter

areas served to identify the property types and locations which do not manage their waste according to the Council's Service Standard and the recycling and enforcement team have been focussing available resource on communicating with residents, landlords, managing agents and tenants to ensure compliance, but this is a long term issue which can only be solved by regular direct engagement.

Question 4

With regard to communications, we surveyed the early adopters half way through the trial period asking what type of communications they thought were most effective. The results showed that residents preferred direct mailing and leaflets rather than social media as their preferred means of receiving information. However, social media posts and digital marketing have proven successful as a means of communicating with 100,000 people opening posts on Facebook, Daily Mail, Get Reading, Youtube, Reading Chronicle sites in November and December.

We intend to build on this success by establishing a continuous waste communications campaign further posts to support how to reduce, reuse and recycle, and the consequences of fly-tipping using the Nextdoor app, residents newsletters, direct e mail messages and further direct posting.

This communications plan will emphasise that residents can request additional waste capacity, and their request will be considered by waste officers. The recycling and enforcement officers will continue to distribute educational material to residents who are struggling to recycle and once restrictions are removed direct contact will resume. Officers will continue the long-standing close working relationship with Reading University and the managing agents and landlords who provide student accommodation.

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

15 FEBRUARY 2021

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 1

Councillor Duveen to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:

Future Development of Reading

With the apparent demise of the scheme for 15,000 new homes at Grazeley and possible changes to the AWE exclusion zone, can the Lead Councillor tell us what effect these changes may have on plans for development in Reading?

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

I thank Cllr Duveen for his question.

Changes to the Detailed Emergency Planning Zone (DEPZ) for the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) Burghfield have already taken effect in March 2020. The DEPZ is the area that the AWE Off-Site Emergency Plan must cover in detail. Co-ordinating the preparation of the Off-Site Emergency Plan is the responsibility of West Berkshire District Council, but Reading Borough Council and many other agencies participate in its preparations and have responsibilities associated with its activation.

The changes to the DEPZ were not due to any changes to the activities on the site, but were the effect of new legislation in the form of the Radiation (Emergency Preparedness and Public Information) Regulations 2019 (known as REPPiR 19). The DEPZ around AWE Burghfield was significantly extended, and now covers parts of Reading Borough west of the A33 and south of the Kennet & Avon Canal and Reading to Newbury railway line, as well as the Grazeley area.

In terms of direct effects on development within Reading, the presence of the DEPZ is relevant to the determination of planning applications in the affected area. It does not exclude development taking place, but development would need to be capable of being accommodated within the Off-Site Emergency Plan.

West Berkshire Emergency Planning is a consultee for planning applications within the DEPZ, as is this Council's own emergency planning team, and any significant growth in population or workforce within the area is likely to cause concern. This should not affect developments where permission is already granted (such as existing permissions at Green Park), nor should it affect the delivery of any of the sites allocated for housing in the Reading Borough Local Plan, all of which are outside the DEPZ.

The background to the proposed development of a Grazeley garden settlement of around 15,000 homes was set out in a report to the Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport Committee meeting in March 2020 which, as you will recollect, was cancelled on the evening due to new COVID restrictions.

However, the extension of the DEPZ has significantly changed the context for this development. The inclusion of Grazeley within the Wokingham Local Plan Update led to an objection from the Ministry of Defence and AWE, and West Berkshire's recently published emerging draft Local Plan does not make any provision for development at Grazeley. This Council has not withdrawn its commitment to work with Wokingham and West Berkshire Councils on progressing proposals at Grazeley, that are supported by the necessary infrastructure, and wishes to continue discussions. However, it is ultimately for those Councils to determine what should be included in their Local Plans, and we do recognise that the DEPZ presents a considerable constraint.

Reading's Local Plan, adopted in 2019, identifies unmet needs of 230 dwellings that cannot be met within its boundaries, and should be met within the wider area of West Berkshire, Wokingham and Bracknell Forest. Whilst none of these needs had been explicitly directed towards Grazeley, and Reading is not therefore specifically relying on Grazeley to meet its development requirements, if those proposals were not to proceed it would narrow the options for where the significant housing needs of the whole area can be met. The Council will continue to work with neighbouring authorities through their respective local plan processes to ensure that the housing needs of the wider area are met in full without placing additional strain on local infrastructure.

It is worth emphasising, once again, that the changes to the DEPZ do not indicate any change to the risk associated with the AWE Burghfield site or for any nearby residents, but are instead purely a result in changes to legislation. More information can be found on West Berkshire Council's website.

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 2

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Housing:

Insulating Houses In Reading

Insulating houses tackles poverty, creates jobs and helps address the climate emergency. Can the Council confirm how many houses it has insulated every year for the last three years?

REPLY by Councillor Ennis (Lead Councillor for Housing):

Insulating Houses can be complex and can take many forms, including Cavity Fill, External Wall Insulation, Loft Insulation and of course Replacement Windows. Reading Borough Council has always taken a fabric first approach towards its housing stock having externally insulated all of the non- traditional stock in the 1990's and cavity filled the majority of the cavity wall stock by 2010. In 2015 we completed our loft insulation programme ensuring that all of our lofts that we could get access to had at least 200mm of insulation. (some residents did not provide access although small numbers).

In line with our declared Climate Emergency we are working towards further reducing carbon across the stock and as such planning has begun for further major works including the stripping and re insulating of the high rise blocks, continuing increased loft insulation where possible to 300mm thick, stripping and re-insulating more cross wall properties and embarking on an External Wall Insulation and replacement windows programme.

Our stock currently has an average SAP rating of 74 which puts us in the top quartile within our comparator group of landlords and we will be doing all we can to improve this over the next 9 years.

In the last three years we have

- Carried out 273 improved loft insulations
- Replaced cavity insulation on 600 properties
- Stripped and reinsulated 81 cross wall flats
- Replaced 250 windows

The private sector is much more of a challenge; however, we have successfully bid this year for Green Homes Grant which has enabled us to obtain funding for private sector residents to improve insulation within their homes. We are currently putting together literature to publicise opportunities for people to enable them to access this funding and where needed access to our own RBC Home Improvement Grants to enable insulation measures to be put in place. We will continue to take advantage of the funding opportunities the Government provides and encourage private sector residents to take these up this will include considering opportunities linked to Ecoflex.

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 3

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Corporate and Consumer Services:

£20 Universal Credit Top Up

The £20 universal credit top up is a lifeline for more than 5.5 million families who receive the standard universal credit allowance. Can the Lead Councillor confirm how many families in Reading received the top up and how the Council is lobbying government to keep the top up in place?

REPLY by Councillor Emberson (Lead Councillor for Corporate & Consumer Services):

The £20.00 per week increase to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit was implemented to support residents during the pandemic. Whilst the authority does not administer either of these benefits, provisions were put in place in the Housing Benefit regulations to ensure that any increase to Universal Credit and Working Tax credit did not adversely affect any Housing Benefit Entitlement.

Based on the current Housing Benefit & Council Tax Support Caseload (10,292) we can estimate the following:

- 301 residents in receipt of Housing Benefit combined with Universal credit benefited from additional support up to £313,040
- 977 residents in receipt of Housing Benefit combined with Working Tax Credits benefited from additional support up to £1,016,080
- 1822 residents in receipt of Council Tax Support & Universal Credit benefitted from additional support up to £1,894,880

The figures are based on current caseload and assumes the circumstances apply for the full financial year. There will be residents that have benefited from the scheme who are no longer claiming Housing Benefit.

There may be a number of residents not included in this data. As you will be aware, we only pay Housing Benefit for residents on Universal Credit in a few limited circumstances and there may be circumstances that deem residents ineligible for Council Tax Support, i.e. have no liability, savings exceed threshold or may have chosen not to claim.

We would certainly welcome the continuation of this support to our local residents.