

**HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE
15 DECEMBER 2020**

Present: Councillor Davies (Chair);
Councillors Barnett-Ward, Ennis, Hoskin, Lovelock, McGonigle,
Rowland and R Singh.

Apologies: Councillor O'Connell

1. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of 11 March 2020 were confirmed as a correct record.

2. MINUTES OF OTHER BODIES

The Minutes of the following meeting were submitted:

Community Safety Partnership - 17 September 2020.

Resolved - That the Minutes be received.

3. PETITIONS IN ACCORDANCE WITH STANDING ORDER NO 36

Gary Stocking-Williams presented a petition in the following terms:

Trade Waste Bins On Amity Road

Since the trade waste bins (belonging to up to 4 London Road shops) appeared on Amity Road they have been a magnet for fly tipping. They often look disgusting with black bags on the road and pavement. In the recent past there were no bins on the road or pavement and there was far less fly tipping. Please work with the businesses to get the trade waste bins back onto private land.

RESPONSE by Councillor Barnett-Ward (Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods):

Thank you for your question and for the petition.

The Council takes every report it receives about littering and fly-tipping seriously and is committed to reducing the instance of environmental crime and taking robust enforcement action against those who blight local communities in this way. This is clearly demonstrated by the creation of the Recycling and Enforcement Team who, despite Covid restrictions, have issued over 350 Fixed Penalty Notices (FPN's) for dumped waste and secured 17 successful prosecutions since its formation in November 2019.

Officers from the team monitor the area around the Amity Road trade waste bins on a regular basis and 7 Fixed Penalty Notices (FPN's) have been issued to those who we found to be responsible. Officers have also been in regular contact with the businesses to remind them of their legal duty of care to manage their waste responsibly, to ensure that they are aware that all waste must be contained within the bins, and that any waste that is found around the bins will be investigated as fly tipping. To try and deter fly tippers 'No Flytipping' signs which display the maximum penalty for such offences

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have been put up and further information signs are currently being designed which will re-enforce the message.

The location and layout of the properties and the space available limits the options for storing these trade waste bins, which have been in situ for several years. There are many factors that have been considered regarding siting the bins elsewhere, including:

- Many shops are food premises, so a sack collection would not be appropriate for these businesses;
- Some businesses do not have rear access, which means they do not have any land to place the bins on;
- The current use of private land to the rear of the shops including the alleyway and the condition of the surfaces, and their suitability for collection crews to move heavy 1100l bins over safely;
- Collections from flats and residential properties;
- Proximity of businesses to the Highway on London Road.

Officers will carry out further work to try to identify alternative siting options, which will need to be practical for businesses as well as the local community. We hope to complete the further assessment and contact the lead petitioner by the end of January with our valuation.

4. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND COUNCILLORS

Questions on the following matters were submitted:

<u>Questioner</u>	<u>Subject</u>	<u>Reply</u>
Tommy Johnson	Scours Lane Allotments	Cllr Rowland
Councillor McGonigle	Bird Feeding, Kennetside	Cllr Rowland

The full text of the questions and replies was made available on the Reading Borough Council website.

5. READING ANNIVERSARY PLANS

The Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services submitted a report advising the Committee on the plans to mark 2021, a year of culturally significant anniversaries in Reading. 2021 would mark the 900th anniversary of the founding of Reading Abbey as well as the 250th anniversary of the Thames Conservancy, 150 years of Reading Football Club, 75 years of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, 70 years of Museum of English Rural Life, 50 years of Reading Festival and 30 years of the Rising Sun Arts Centre. The Council and these organisations had been working together to develop a programme of activity during 2021 to celebrate these special milestones.

The report explained that the proposed programme had a strong digital presence, with the expectation of some live events. Whilst a purely digital offer could be delivered, this would limit the reach and opportunity for celebrating these special anniversaries.

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Instead it was proposed to plan for a blend of both digital and live, with digital being the fall-back position in the event that Covid19 restrictions prevented live events.

One of the highlight events would be the celebration of the 900th anniversary of the founding of Reading Abbey, planned for Saturday 19 June 2021, in Forbury Gardens, Abbey Ruins and along the Kennet in the town centre. Water Fest would take place the same day and would showcase the significance of the Kennet and Avon Canal in Reading. All plans for Saturday 19 June would also need to be sensitive to any commemorative events to mark the anniversary of the attack in Forbury gardens taking place on the Sunday and would be foremost in the minds of everyone in the shaping of this day.

The report also explained that Museums Partnership Reading (MPR) were planning an exhibition, provisionally titled '1971' that would display historic photography of the first Reading Festival, alongside material from both Reading Museum and the Museum of English Rural Life exploring life in 1971. The Museum of English Rural Life, with support from the Arts Council Cultural Recovery Fund, was planning to mark its 70th year through 51 Voices, a digital project that would draw on its Festival of Britain and other collections from 1951. In May 2021m Berkshire Record Office planned to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the Thames Conservancy with an online exhibition of its archive, which was of national importance.

In addition, the Hexagon's resident orchestra, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra were planning both digital and live performances throughout the year to mark their 75th anniversary and Reading Football Club were planning various activities and events, including a dedicated microsite, to mark their 150th season.

Resolved -

That the plans set out to celebrate the various anniversaries being celebrated in 2021 be noted.

6. HIGH STREET HERITAGE ACTION ZONE PROGRAMME 2020 - 2024 UPDATE REPORT

The Director of Environment and Neighbourhood Services submitted a report updating the Committee on the High Street Heritage Action Zones (HSHAZ) scheme, a regeneration initiative led by Historic England, working with local councils and the community to create economic growth and improve the appearance and quality of life in historic high streets. Reading had secured HSHAZ status for three conservation areas in the centre of the town and would receive up to £806,500 from Historic England, with match funding of £808,500. The Council had entered into a contract with Historic England to run the programme from 1 April 2020.

The report added that the HSHAZ programme was focused on three Conservation Areas (Castle Hill/Russell Street/Oxford Road, St Mary's Butts/Castle Street, Market Place/London Street) and had the following objectives:

- To enhance the understanding of Reading's heritage by revealing its hidden histories and to give the community a sense of pride and ownership in their town.

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- To improve the physical condition and viability of the high streets within the three conservation areas by identifying those properties most at risk and engaging with property owners to help them to restore the buildings, to show them how to maintain the buildings and to share best practice.
- To develop a comprehensive strategy to improve the public realm across the HSHAZ to provide a better experience and sense of place for those living, working in or visiting the town centre.
- To support local businesses, the economy and local community and cultural initiatives by creating a positive sense of place through contributing to the heritage of their high street.

The programme aimed to deliver across three strands: physical interventions, community engagement and a cultural programme.

The report also set out the next steps for the next six months which included reviewing and refining the conservation plans and to submitting them for consultation, engaging with key internal and external partners, and commenting on planning applications submitted within the HSHAZ areas. Other important milestones included producing a community engagement plan and delivering the activities of the cultural pilot project from October 2020 to the end of February 2021, including an evaluation report.

Resolved -

That the High Street Heritage Action Zone (HSHAZ) Programme update, aims and objectives, the plans to deliver the HSHAZ programme over the next four years and key milestones over the next six months be noted.

7. ALLOTMENTS CONSULTATION REPORT AND NEXT STEPS

The Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services submitted a report which gave an update on a recent consultation with allotment holders within Reading, set out next steps and proposals for the future management of allotment sites.

The report explained that the Council was undertaking a review of the current allotment management and charging model in order to achieve an agreed budget saving to support the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). However, the Council was conscious that significant rent increases might impact badly on some tenants who relied on the food that they grew on their plots and for whose physical and mental wellbeing allotments gardening was important, and had therefore been considering ways to reduce costs without further significant increases to those managing an allotment.

The report explained that over the past few years, the Council had been approached by allotments tenants looking for more say in the management of sites, faster turn-around times in letting vacant plots, and different ways of delivering a range of allotments services. A consultation with all tenants had been undertaken between 17 August 2020 and 17 September 2020 to gauge tenants' interest in and ability to form site associations that could take on aspects of self-management, specifically including site management, some grounds maintenance and waste management. A total of 452 responses or contacts had been received.

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Section 6 of the report set out proposals for the next steps which included:

- Starting work with representatives on the seven sites that were interested in self-management focusing identifying untended plots, resolving whether these were available for re-letting, and issuing offers. Site representatives to notify the Council about which plots required notification to plot holders about overgrown plots and meet prospective new tenants to show them the plot and hand out keys once a contract has been exchanged. The Council to retain administrative and invoicing functions. Learning outcomes from these seven sites would be recorded and used to inform the revised Allotments Plan reported below.
- Groups like Food4Families and horticultural societies to be engaged to support tenant groups that wished to take on management and/or maintenance tasks.
- The Council to start immediately on a programme of clearances of unkempt plots as well as other winter works, with these seven sites as a priority. Additionally, the Council would make bids for funding, if available, to make good site infrastructure on those sites working towards self-management, including fence replacement and road repairs.
- Regular reports on occupancy ratios and re-letting turnover to be published on a new allotments page on the website, demonstrating the improvements that were possible with very limited tenant involvement.
- Information about self-management schemes and other issues of interest to allotment holders would also be published on the website.
- The Council to apply electronic payments and communication for all hired services to allotment rental payments from January 2021, making allowances for those tenants unable to make electronic payments.
- Fees, charges and concessions to be reviewed and a new structure agreed for implementation in January 2022.
- The Council to draft a revised Allotments Plan during 2021-22, setting out the longer-term objectives for the service, then circulate it for wider consultation with tenants and elected Members. The Council would also seek additional personnel for engagement with allotment tenants during the period during when the Allotments Plan was being drawn up and consulted on.
- The Allotments Plan would be presented to a future meeting of the Housing, Neighbourhoods and Leisure Committee to allow time to notify tenants of any material changes to be applied when leases were renewed in January 2022.

Resolved:

- (1) That the report and the findings of the consultation of tenants be noted;**
- (2) That the next steps as shown in Section 6 of the report be noted;**
- (3) That an updated Allotments Plan be created, be subject to public consultation and be reported for approval to a future meeting of the Committee;**

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- (4) That an annual Allotment Plan progress report be submitted to the Housing, Neighbourhoods and Leisure Committee at its Autumn meeting in 2021.

8. REWILDING AND THE WILDFLOWER PLAN. INCREASING BIODIVERSITY ON HIGHWAY VERGES

The Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services submitted a report which gave further details of the operational changes involved in the re-wilding project, updated members on the results of the experiment and the recommended next steps contained in the draft Wildflower Plan. The following documents were appended to the report:

Appendix 1 - Site re-wilding information signs used during the experiment;
Appendix 2 - The Wildflower Plan.

The report explained that the rewilding project, which sat within the framework of the Council's new Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), began in March 2020. The project involved testing what different verges in different parts of Reading looked like over the course of the flowering and seed-setting seasons, how residents responded to changes in the mowing regime, how to carry out practical maintenance issues and whether there were ecological improvements coincident with changes to mowing patterns.

The results of the site-by-site assessment of Phase 1 were set out in detail in the Wildflower Plan and showed that the scheme had also been a success in terms of the maintenance regime.

The report also explained that the review had led to the creation of the Wildflower Plan, which captured the results of the rewilding experiment and made recommendations for achieving the expansion and improvement of the rewilded areas in the Borough, as summarised below:

- Rewilding of larger verges to continue.
- The maintenance regime to be changed from an annual cut-and-collect on some rewilded sites to a three-times-a-season cut-and-collect in order to assess the effect on biodiversity and the vigour of both flowers and grass.
- Some sites to be sown with locally sourced wildflowers and cut only at the end of the season to allow establishment.
- Marginal rewilding (changing the mowing regime around parks boundaries and margins) be trialled at twelve locations in parks, adding around 2ha (5%) to the current area of conservation grassland. These would be assessed on the basis of biological performance, appearance and difficulty of management at the end of the season.
- The Council to continue the public information and consultation started in 2020.
- The Council to work with business partners to create enhanced-flowering, wild-looking commercial centre schemes that would raise the profile of the rewilding initiatives and contribute to refocusing perceptions of Reading as a 'green/wild city'.

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Resolved:

- (1) That the report and the progress of the Rewilding experimental project in 2020 be noted;**
- (2) That the recommendations of the Wildflower Plan be endorsed;**
- (3) That the Wildflower Plan be subject to public consultation and its adoption be sought at a subsequent Housing, Neighbourhoods and Leisure Committee meeting;**
- (4) That an annual rewilding progress report be submitted to Housing, Neighbourhoods and Leisure Committee at its Autumn meeting.**

9. FOOD WASTE AND 140L BIN PROJECT - EARLY ADOPTERS AND PROJECT UPDATE

The Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services submitted a report on the progress of the kerbside food waste collections in the five early adopter areas and on the main Phase 1 roll-out planned for 1 February 2021. The following documents were attached to the report:

Appendix 1 - Project overview including the early adopter areas.

Appendix 2 - Data collected before and since the early adopter roll-out including the number of customer contacts and complaints received.

The report explained that the original roll-out timetable had been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and set out the revised timetable:

- Early adopter areas service (3,300) properties began on 5 October 2020.
- Phase 1 service to 59,000 properties due to begin on 1 February 2021. Phase 2 service to 14,000 high level flats due to begin later in 2021 once Phase 1 had been successfully implemented.

The report added that a total of 3300 early adopter properties had received the new service from 5 October 2020. The early adopters project was critical to the success of the full roll out and the areas had been chosen because they were operationally challenging, including various property types as well as a control area. In general, the roll-out to the early adopters had been a success with the tonnage of food waste far exceeding the predicted weight of 1kg/household/week. There had also been a number of learning outcomes which would be taken forward into the main roll out. There had been concerns over the smaller general waste bins, and officers stressed that where residents had a higher volume of general waste (eg disposable nappies or larger households), they could contact the Council who would work with them to carry out a bin audit and identify a solution where appropriate.

The report also explained that work for the main roll-out in February 2021 was on schedule. The new recycling, waste and food rounds were currently being finalised and the collection calendars for 2021/22 produced for distribution during week commencing 7 December 2020. The project was supported by a communications plan which included the following elements:

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- Printed information leaflets for all property types on delivery of the new bins.
- Articles in the residents' newsletter in November.
- Printed waste collection calendars posted with information to every property.
- Updated livery for food waste collection and waste vehicles.
- Digital screen content and use of bus interior screens.
- Short 'how to' films on web and social media.
- Direct resident e mails and social media promotion.
- Use of apps such as Nextdoor.
- Council buildings and notice boards.
- Communication activity will increase ahead of the main roll-out launch in February.

Resolved:

That the progress made on the food waste project and the timetable for the full roll out of the service in 2021 be noted.

10. FIRE SAFETY IN TALL BUILDINGS

Further to Minute 16 of the meeting held on 6 November 2019, the Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services submitted a report which provided an update on the Council's response following the Grenfell Tower fire in Kensington on 14 June 2017. This included action taken in relation to the Authority's own housing stock, other corporate buildings and schools, as well as wider work in partnership with the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (RBFRS) in respect of privately-owned high rise residential blocks within the Borough boundaries.

The report also set out the current position with regard to the work being undertaken to meet the requirements set out in the action plan in the Council's Housing stock, corporate buildings and schools. This included retro-fitting sprinkler systems, installing and upgrading fire alarms, fire risk assessments, ensuring fire safety was at the heart of the process for all Local Authority new-builds and bringing forward plans for the removal and replacement of cladding on Coley high rise to 2021/22.

The report updated the Committee on the progress that had been made on the four high-rise buildings:

- **St. Lawrence House** (social housing accommodation). Work to remove and replace the ACM cladding had been completed at the end of 2019.
- **Queen's Court** (student accommodation). Work to remove and replace the ACM cladding had been completed in March 2020.
- **Hanover House** (private residential accommodation). Interim measures were in place in accordance with the current MHCLG guidance and were monitored regularly. Planning permission had been agreed in October 2020 and a Building Regulations application had been made for removal and replacement of the cladding.
- **Crossway Point** (social housing accommodation). Work to remove and replace the ACM cladding had been delayed due to COVID-19 and remediation work was due to be finished in December 2020.

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The report also detailed the actions that Council and its partners were planning to undertake going forward:

- The Council would continue to undertake steps to obtain external wall details of all applicable buildings in response to the request from MHCLG in order to submit the required data by the extended deadline.
- The Council would keep up to date with the latest Government guidance and take action where appropriate.
- Regular communication and sharing of information between the Council and RBFRS, plus joint meetings with relevant stakeholders where required.

Resolved: That the action taken and planned in respect of fire safety in tall buildings, as detailed in the report, be noted.

(The meeting opened at 6.35pm and closed at 8.10pm).