

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

26 NOVEMBER 2018

QUESTION NO. 1

Roger Lightfoot to ask the Leader of the Council:

Sale of Arthur Hill pool site

It appears to me that the prospective purchasers of Arthur Hill Pool are having difficulty in getting to the exchange of contracts stage of the purchase for reasons that remain murky. Will the Council consider aborting the transaction and going with one of the bidders who will re-open the building for sports or community use?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

Thank you for your question Mr Lightfoot.

The Council and the prospective purchaser are progressing towards an exchange of contracts and the prospective purchaser has been securing funding and undertaking their own due diligence in order to formally exchange on the property. It is not unusual in transactions of this sort for it to take some time for the contract to be finalised.

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QUESTION NO. 2

Richard Stainthorp to ask the Lead Councillor for Education:

Provision for students with Special Educational Needs

The Government's own figures show over 4000 children with Education, Health and Care Plans have no educational provision, the number of children with complex needs is rising, demand for special school places is rising all at a time when Government funding for education per pupil has been falling. Can the Lead Councillor for Education update me with what provision is being made in Reading to help our students with Special Educational Needs?

REPLY by Councillor Pearce (Lead Councillor for Education):

Reading Borough Council have been very closely involved in the development of strategy for SEND to help prepare for Reading children's needs into the future. This has involved a careful analysis of data which is recording the changing SEND needs of pupils in the borough. It has also involved discussion and planning for the expansion of provision in Reading for those children in Reading who have a range of complex SEND needs. We are currently working with The Blessed Hugh Farringdon School on a capital build programme to double their provision for autistic pupils. We have agreed an extension to provision at The Avenue Special School for a further 25 students. We have advanced plans for the relocation and expansion of Phoenix College to increase numbers, and also to enable the school to admit female students. In October this year, ACE agreed a plan to increase the number of places for autistic children in mainstream primary schools by opening two mainstream autism units to enhance the current single provision we have at Christ the King Primary School. Schools are currently considering submitting expressions of interest to host these. The local authority has also, with the support of both Wokingham and West Berkshire Councils, put a case to the government for funding for a new 150 place special school to be hosted in Reading, and that will commission places from our neighbouring local authorities but also with a significant number of places for Reading children.

All these projects will collectively provide an additional 170 specialist places for Reading pupils within the borough over the next 3 years. This will have a significant impact on improving the diversity of provision, and range of places locally for our children into the future. We are working to improve school capacity to support children with SEND and challenging behaviours in all our schools and are, as part of our strategy, launching a major initiative with schools based around a therapeutic approach to managing behaviour in schools. This builds upon our cross service work with the police and other agencies and aims to reduce the risk of exclusion of those pupils with multiple and complex needs.

The SEND strategy has been in place for a year and already we are seeing ideas and the joined up thinking of health, education, schools, parents and the Council implementing practical solutions to strengthen provision so that we are well on track to meet our future needs.

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POLICY COMMITTEE

26 NOVEMBER 2018

QUESTION NO. 3

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

Palmer Park Development Framework

Publication of the draft Palmer Park Development Framework is a welcome move to explain the Council's proposals for the park. However, it lacks important information which members of the public will need if they are to respond meaningfully to the forthcoming consultation on plans for the park.

Would the Lead Councillor please tell me:

- What is the proposed footprint area for each of the two new swimming pool design options?
- What would be the net loss or gain of car parking space in the park?
- How much, if any, informal parkland would be lost as a result of the development proposals?

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

I thank Mr Burt for his question. I have set out the reply beneath each of your questions.

What is the proposed footprint area for each of the two new swimming pool design options?

The Framework shows conceptual building designs with the proposed size of the structures based on indicative information. While the final designs may differ the following gives an indication:

- Pool Option 1: Total footprint of leisure complex 2,197 sqm of which 1,004 sqm is the existing building.
- Pool Option 2: Total footprint of leisure complex 2,493 sqm of which 1,004 sqm is the existing building.

What would be the net loss or gain of car parking space in the park?

At the moment there are three areas for car parking in the park totalling about 217 spaces:

- Disabled parking (3 spaces) at the historic entrance gates near the library - these are proposed to be retained
- Parking near the church at the corner of Wokingham Rd/Palmer Park Avenue. Total number approx. 20 spaces (not marked). The framework shows no change to this
- Main car park in the centre of the park. The current no of spaces here is 194 (including 5 disabled).

The draft Development Framework states a range of 200 - 280 spaces overall within the park. The range allows for a like for like retention of car parking spaces and a maximum total gain of 63 spaces. Final numbers will be determined through a transport assessment/travel plan in order to provide an appropriate amount of car parking.

In addition to these car parking areas there is also the overflow car park with additional capacity during peak times and special events. Capacity remains as per the current arrangement at around an additional 150 spaces.

- Option 1: The indicative design at Option 1 shows the max car park allowance with 280 spaces overall in the park (circa 260 at main car park plus other retained car parking). This would be a gain of circa 60 spaces. Note the designs are conceptual at this stage and need the inclusion of coach parking.
- Option 2: The indicative design at Option 2 shows car parking at 259 spaces overall in the park (circa. 236 at main car park plus other retained car parking). This would be a gain of ca. 40 spaces.

How much, if any, informal parkland would be lost as a result of the development proposals?

The net loss/gain of the park area needs to be judged against usability/quality of spaces not just a quantitative assessment. In principle, the concepts aims to replace a hard car park, currently at the heart of the park, with a new public realm, replacing car parking as a well-integrated 'green car park'. The framework also seeks to define spaces better, provide new footpath links and add 'layers' of usability all resulting in a more versatile and user friendly park, which could see spaces being used more intensely overall. The existing area of the car park is 5,272 sqm.

- Option 1: The indicative design at Option 1 shows a total car park area of 6,258sqm (additional net area of 986sqm and a gain of circa 60 spaces)
- Option 2: The indicative design at Option 2 shows a total car park area of 5,454sqm (additional net area of 182sqm and a gain of circa 40 spaces)

I would emphasise, as I did at last week's SEPT Committee, that this draft Framework is the start of a consultation process and we look forward to receiving feedback from local residents and regular users of the Park and all its facilities.

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QUESTION NO. 4

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

Comments on East Reading MRT site

The Reading Chronicle recently published a news article with the title ' East Reading MRT plans attacked at meeting by Green Councillor ' which quoted the Deputy Leader as saying that "There is no wildlife there" along the proposed route of the Mass Rapid Transit scheme and that " People who claim that are lying. It is a rubbish dump. "

Is this an accurate description of what you said, or have you been misrepresented by the Reading Chronicle?

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

I thank Mr Mullaney for his question.

Unfortunately the Reading Chronicle article misrepresented elements of my interview. Early on in the interview I stressed to the journalist that the really neglected and abused area was the relatively small area of land to the immediate east of the Horseshoe Bridge within Wokingham Borough. The omission of this important contextual element has resulted in the impression that my remarks applied to the full 800 metres of the East Reading Mass Rapid Transit route.

Even though I spent nearly an hour with the journalist it is regrettable that, at the time of my interview, he had not even taken the trouble to visit the site - a site visit which only took place much later. I know that he was new to Reading and this probably also accounts for the fact that he did not see the significance of my focus on that stretch of land and riverside in the immediate eastern vicinity of the Horseshoe Bridge which has been so neglected and abused over many years.

A zip file of photographs was also sent to the journalist to help underline the points that I was making about the major environmental improvements that could be delivered to this area, by way of a series of strict planning conditions, on the back of the MRT scheme. It's interesting that he chose not to use any of them!

I do recollect referring to people 'lying' about the impact of elements of the scheme, although I would stress that this was focussed on the significance of that small neglected area so heavily abused by anti-social behaviour, drug dealing, and fly-tipping around the area which also includes the neglected mosaic which we intend to rescue, restore and relocate to a more prominent riverside position.

For the record, the planning documentation for the East MRT application provides full details of the effects on wildlife which have been considered and addressed through the design of the scheme.

In the long term, it has been demonstrated that the scheme will provide an overall net gain for biodiversity (i.e. wildlife benefits) through:

- Retention of existing trees and vegetation where practicable, with additional planting of new native trees and shrubs to complement retained trees.
- Selective management and re-planting of the woodland within the Coal, Kennetmouth and Kings Meadow to replace trees which require removal and increase diversity to the woodland, will permanently improve the quality of the habitat present within the remainder of The Coal, Kennetmouth and Kings Meadow.
- Management of an area of poor semi-improved grassland matrix habitat at the western extent of the site to develop its acidic character and increase the extent of acid grassland species. Scattered planting of acid tolerant tree species will create a glade.
- Enhancements to the riparian corridor, for example removal of Himalayan Balsam and retention of Loddon Lily.
- Creation of tussocky grassland between the River Thames and the East MRT, and wildflower hydro-seeded grassland on the East MRT embankment.
- Enhancements to both King's Meadow and Hills Meadow, including planting of four black poplar trees within King's Meadow.
- A newly created marginal shelf with riverside planting and the installation of three new timber short-stay mooring facilities.
- A new area of marshy wetland and grasses, providing an area for seasonal flooding which will also allow planting of the locally-occurring Loddon Lily.

Lastly, and for the public record, deliberate falsehoods and misrepresentations by anti-MRT campaigners are still being propagated in leaflets and on social media. For example with regard to the costs of the scheme claiming it will be £31m+ when in fact the figure is £24m; and claiming that all this money could be spent on other Council services when it is in fact ring-fenced for transport infrastructure.

If the £19m from the LEP Local Growth Fund money is not spent on the ERMRT scheme it will go to another transport project in Berkshire, just as the £5m contribution from Reading's developers would have to be spent on another transport scheme.

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POLICY COMMITTEE

26 NOVEMBER 2018

QUESTION NO. 5

John Mullaney to ask the Leader of the Council:

Cycle safety on East Reading MRT route

Reading Council's promotion of the East Reading so-called 'MRT' scheme, and Councillor Lovelock's recent letter to the Chronicle have stated that the East Reading MRT is ' a direct and segregated fast track bus, pedestrian and cycle route from the east to the heart of the Town Centre. '

The new bus lane would actually end at Napier Road, and after that the route makes no provision for a segregated bus or cycle lane, making it incredibly dangerous to cyclists. Assuming MRT cyclists survive the buses hurtling past them on the narrow-laned Napier Rd stretch, they would then have to negotiate one of the most dangerous roundabouts in Reading at Vastern Road/Reading Bridge - a crashmap hotspot which already records one of the highest cyclist casualty rates in Reading... and that's before the danger is compounded by a huge influx of buses feeding onto it from the MRT.

Can the Leader of the Council confirm that for half of its length the buses and cyclists using the scheme will share unsegregated road space with normal traffic along the existing Napier Rd single carriageway?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

I thank Mr Mullaney for his question.

The East MRT scheme will provide a new, segregated, accessible cycle route between Reading and Wokingham Borough to the north of the Great Western mainline. The scheme links directly to the Napier Road underpass which was opened to the public by the Council in 2015, providing a route for pedestrians and cyclists from the MRT scheme to residential areas in east Reading and linking to National Cycle Network Route 4 and local cycle network route R3.

Land to the south of Napier Road, between the East MRT route and the Vastern Road/Napier Road roundabout, has been safeguarded in the draft Local Plan for the provision of an MRT route. This means the Council will be in a position to acquire land through the planning process as development comes forward, to provide a segregated route from the new MRT link along Napier Road towards the railway station and town centre.

A separate scheme is currently being developed to implement improvements to the Vastern Road/Napier Road roundabout. The scheme aims to improve lane discipline

and clarity of motorists' intentions as they enter and use the roundabout, for which we expect to see a reduction in the types of actions that are causing incidents and concern for cyclists and pedestrians. Safety audits are currently being undertaken on the scheme design and the scheme will be implemented independently of the East MRT scheme.

Significant consultation has been undertaken throughout the development of the MRT scheme, from which feedback has highlighted a desire for enhanced cycle routes between Caversham, the town centre and Thames Valley Park. The current route on the towpath is not accessible, due to having to cross the River Kennet via the stepped Horseshoe Bridge; is considered unattractive due to a lack of lighting and the quality of the surface, and is prone to flooding.

The MRT scheme will undoubtedly encourage more cycle trips to be undertaken and help to achieve the overall vision of providing a joined up cycle network in Reading and the wider area.

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26 NOVEMBER 2018

QUESTION NO. 6

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

Apartment developments in Reading

The Lead Councillor will be aware that there is much disquiet in Reading at the number of apartments that have recently been constructed, are being constructed or have planning permission to be constructed in the near future. Does the Lead Councillor share this concern?

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

I thank Mr Stainthorp for his question.

Since the late 1990's national planning policy has examined the question of how the high need for housing might be accommodated in the UK. At the same time it has sought to provide a vision for Britain's cities based on the principles of sustainable development.

Planning policy at that time, (Planning Policy Guidance 3 on Housing), sought to steer policy away from the development of large, spacious houses on greenfield sites, towards higher density development using brownfield or urban sites wherever possible. It sought to achieve more sustainable development with housing being located near to existing facilities that could be reached by walking or cycling and which could be well served by public transport. It therefore committed to locating significant residential development within town centres.

Current government policies in the Revised National Planning Policy Framework are seeking to increase the provision of housing via ambitious development targets related to objectively assessed need. They emphasise the need to make efficient use of urban land and to optimising the density of development in city and town centres and other locations that are well served by public transport. Our emerging Local Plan, which has recently been examined in order to complete the process to adopt the plan, responds to the Framework and the significant challenge to meet our housing including affordable housing needs. These needs have been assessed via the independent Strategic Housing Market Assessment as 699 homes per year up to 2036, with the majority of that need (over 400 per annum) being for affordable housing.

Reading is a very constrained urban area, and meeting these significant needs does mean making the most efficient use of land possible. In some locations this means

that housing developments need to take the form of apartments. In particular, around half of all new dwellings up to 2036 are expected to be in the town centre.

Densities should be highest where accessibility by public transport, walking and cycling are at their best, and the location and context of these town centre sites inevitably mean high density development, wholly or mostly consisting of apartments. To fail to make the most of those suitable sites that do exist for new homes would mean the Council would not meet its priority of ensuring access to decent housing to meet local needs, and would be contrary to both national and local planning policy. This in turn would mean a need for more homes to be provided outside the Borough boundaries, almost certainly on greenfield sites, which would lead to unsustainable patterns of development, with homes more distant from services and facilities and less efficient to service by public transport.

It is, however, agreed that a mix of sizes and types of home is needed within Reading. High density housing in the town centre is not suitable for all, and it is particularly difficult for town centre sites to provide larger dwellings of three to four bedrooms for larger households including families with children. For this reason, the Council's emerging new Local Plan also identifies that, on major developments outside centres, at least half of new homes will be of three-bedrooms or larger. It also requires that internal dimensions and external outdoor space will be adequate.

Therefore, while I appreciate that some people do not support flatted developments, in urban locations they meet needs and demand and are a much more sustainable form of development.

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

26 NOVEMBER 2018

QUESTION NO. 7

Tamzin Morphy to ask the Leader of the Council:

East Reading MRT funding

The Leader of the Council was quoted in last week's Woodley and Earley Chronicle as saying that if the East Reading Mass Rapid Transit scheme does not go ahead, the money would be "lost to Reading" if it is not spent on the scheme.

Could she please explain exactly what she means by "lost to Reading"?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

I thank Ms Morphy for her question.

The majority of funding for the scheme (£19m) has been allocated by Thames Valley Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership from the Local Growth Fund, specifically for the purpose of the East Reading MRT scheme on the basis of the approved business case for the scheme.

It is simply not the case that any of this ERMRT money could be spent on other Council services as the funding comes from the Local Growth Fund, and is specifically for transport infrastructure projects in Berkshire. If the scheme does not progress then the money would be spent on another transport project on the Berkshire priority list.

Even Reading Council's contribution to the scheme comes from payments made by developers towards infrastructure projects and could not be spent on other Council services.

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

26 NOVEMBER 2018

QUESTION NO. 8

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

East Reading MRT scheme costs

In July 2017 the Council gave a figure of £24 million for construction of the East Reading Mass Rapid Transit scheme in response to a question at Policy Committee. Please could the Lead Councillor inform me when this costing was calculated, and what are the current revised estimates for construction of a scheme starting in a) 2020 and b) 2021?

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

I thank Ms Morphy for the opportunity to correct the misleading information being disseminated by some objectors to the ERMRT scheme.

The estimated cost of developing and delivering the East Reading MRT scheme was calculated at £24m in 2016 when the second funding bid for the scheme was submitted to the Local Enterprise Partnership. This figure was based on a number of assumptions regarding the scope and design of the scheme, materials to be used, and the overall delivery programme for the scheme. In addition, a significant amount of contingency was built into the estimated scheme cost.

At the present time this estimated scheme cost is still considered to be a valid basis for the scheme and will be refined through the detailed design process. It is therefore absolute nonsense for objectors to quote a fantasy figure of over £31m!

It is also not the case that any of this ERMRT money could be spent on other Council services as the funding comes from the Local Growth Fund, and is specifically for transport infrastructure projects in Berkshire. If the scheme does not progress then the money would be spent on another transport project on the Berkshire priority list. Even Reading Council's contribution to the scheme comes from payments made by developers towards infrastructure projects and could not be spent on other Council services.

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COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 1

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

Cycling Provision on East Reading MRT

My question is to ask why there is no provision for a cycle lane on Napier Road in the East Reading MRT plans. Having consulted with Adrian Lawson, chair of Reading Cycle Campaign, he tells me:

“The cycling element of the MRT has not been thought through at all. It is part segregated, part shared, in conflict with a bus stop and leads onto the most dangerous roundabout in Reading for cyclists at the end of Napier Road, Vastern Road and Reading Bridge. Then would have extra buses to contend with.

The current cycle routes into town from the east, along the Thames path and Kennetside should be enhanced by raising the parts of the Thames path that are prone to flooding, and widening the narrow sections and removing pinchpoints to avoid conflict with pedestrians.

Good, segregated cyclist crossings are also needed on all arms of the Vastern/Napier Rd roundabout.”

Can the Lead Councillor for SEPT tell us if they think much further consultation with cyclists and cycle groups is needed and alterations to the plan considered?

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

I thank Cllr McGonigle for her question and would refer her to the answer given a few minutes ago by the Leader of the Council to public question 5, which is reproduced below for information.

(The East MRT scheme will provide a new, segregated, accessible cycle route between Reading and Wokingham Borough to the north of the Great Western mainline. The scheme links directly to the Napier Road underpass which was opened to the public by the Council in 2015, providing a route for pedestrians and cyclists from the MRT scheme to residential areas in east Reading and linking to National Cycle Network Route 4 and local cycle network route R3.

Land to the south of Napier Road, between the East MRT route and the Vastern Road/Napier Road roundabout, has been safeguarded in the draft Local Plan for the provision of an MRT route. This means the Council will be in a position to acquire land through the planning process as development comes forward, to

provide a segregated route from the new MRT link along Napier Road towards the railway station and town centre.

A separate scheme is currently being developed to implement improvements to the Vastern Road/Napier Road roundabout. The scheme aims to improve lane discipline and clarity of motorists' intentions as they enter and use the roundabout, for which we expect to see a reduction in the types of actions that are causing incidents and concern for cyclists and pedestrians. Safety audits are currently being undertaken on the scheme design and the scheme will be implemented independently of the East MRT scheme.

Significant consultation has been undertaken throughout the development of the MRT scheme, from which feedback has highlighted a desire for enhanced cycle routes between Caversham, the town centre and Thames Valley Park. The current route on the towpath is not accessible, due to having to cross the River Kennet via the stepped Horseshoe Bridge; is considered unattractive due to a lack of lighting and the quality of the surface, and is prone to flooding.

The MRT scheme will undoubtedly encourage more cycle trips to be undertaken and help to achieve the overall vision of providing a joined up cycle network in Reading and the wider area.)

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POLICY COMMITTEE

26 NOVEMBER 2018

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 2

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

Consultation on East Reading MRT

What were the results of the consultation on the new plans for the MRT taken at The Waterside Centre? Were the majority of respondents for or against the new plan?

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

I thank Cllr McGonigle for her question.

A public consultation was held during September on design examples to enhance the East MRT scheme, including an exhibition at the Wokingham Waterside Centre.

In advance of the exhibition, a letter was distributed to approximately 3,000 homes and 77 local businesses within the vicinity of the application site inviting residents and occupiers to attend. In addition, posters advertising the event were distributed to approximately 160 local community facilities (doctor's surgeries, dental practices, pharmacies and chemists, churches, sports centres, local primary and secondary schools, local community centres and community groups) within a wider radius of the application site.

The public exhibition was attended by approximately 100 people, and in total 123 feedback forms were received. This was a relatively small response when compared to the number of leaflets and posters distributed along with letters sent to residents and local businesses.

When asked to provide their views on the potential amendments of the scheme, 89% of the respondents stated the enhancements would not help the scheme, 6% stated the enhancement would help the scheme but remain opposed to the scheme in general and 5% stated the enhancements would help the scheme and support the scheme.

Feedback received from the consultation was not definitive in respect of a preference for any of the design options; however as a result of a small number selecting planters and further consultation with Wokingham's planning officers, high level planters have been selected as the preferred option as they provide optimum mitigation of visual effects of the scheme.

It should be noted that in addition to the concerns raised regarding the scheme, letters of support were also submitted for the original scheme by local businesses, transport operators and members of the public.

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

26 NOVEMBER 2018

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 3

Councillor White to ask the Leader of the Council:

Leisure provider bids for Arthur Hill Pool site

In the recent sales process for Arthur Hill swimming pool, can the Leader of the Council confirm if any leisure providers - without naming any names - put in a bid to buy the swimming pool site? If the Leader avoids answering this question I will assume the answer is yes.

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

Thank you for your question Councillor White.

The Council received three bids seeking to retain the existing swimming pool on the site, one as a pool, another retaining use as a leisure centre and the third as part of a mixed residential scheme. All three bids were considered but none of them were taken forward; one was withdrawn by the bidder, the others were not chosen as the preferred bidder given the need to secure the best possible capital receipt, the equivalent value of which can contribute to the provision of a new swimming pool at Palmer Park. As you are aware we are currently consulting on a planning brief for Palmer Park that sets out how a pool could be accommodated at the park whilst also further enhancing its wider leisure and amenity value.