

AGENDA ITEM 5 - QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

(B) QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

1. Mary Neale to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:

Local Areas of Special Character

Will the planning department be supportive of formally recognising the designation of Local Areas of Special Character (LASC) in Reading?

Metropolitan boroughs around the UK use this designation to aid decisions on planning applications for areas that hold special architectural character and have the qualities required to fulfil the criteria typically used to define Local Areas of Special Character (LASC). The relevance of LASCs to Reading has been discussed with the CAAC, two neighbourhood organisations and the Civic Society, who support formal recognition of LASCs in Reading.

The need to take the account of local character is a requirement within existing RBC planning policy (C7: Design And The Public Realm; Policy CS18: Residential Conversions; Policy CS33: Protection and Enhancement of the Historic Environment; among other policies) and policies in the forthcoming local plan. A summary of the character of these areas would aid planning decisions.

Two residents' associations, the Bell Tower Community Association and Northcourt Avenue Residents' Association, are seeking support for formal recognition of a designation for Local Areas of Special Character.

Additional information: background

The Bell Tower Community Association and Northcourt Avenue Residents' Association have seen how the designation for Local Areas of Special Character has assisted in understanding and managing future developments in metropolitan boroughs. This designation might be extended to other character areas where these are found to meet the criteria.

Residents that enjoy living in historic environments are justifiably concerned about impacts of changes to their areas that adversely affect the distinctiveness of local setting and architecture. These areas are coming under increasing development pressure and an existing evidence base is needed to support planning decisions. Residents in these areas are interested in producing short documents with images and a map showing the extent of the areas in question, and need to know whether Reading Borough Council would be prepared to formally recognise LASCs in Reading.

High-quality townscape, architecture and landscape add to local distinctiveness and are protected by local plan policy. A document that defines the extent and character of these areas would help with planning decisions for developments in and near these areas. These documents serve to describe the LASCs and recognise areas that are clearly good examples of historic interest or importance or environmental interest.

Other examples from metropolitan boroughs

Kingston

https://www.kingston.gov.uk/info/200216/heritage_and_conservation/1230/local_areas_of_special_character_lasc/3

Bromley

https://www.bromley.gov.uk/downloads/file/1150/areas_of_special_residential_character

St Helens

<https://www.sthelens.gov.uk/media/3189/residential-character-areas.pdf>

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

I thank Mary Neale for her question and supporting information.

I am advised that some local planning authorities have chosen to rely on additional forms of local designation to control and manage historic environments. 'Areas of special local character' can highlight places which fail to meet the criteria for formal conservation area designation but nevertheless continue to provide historically important areas given their architectural or townscape merits.

These Areas do not enjoy the statutory protection provided by planning legislation as Conservation Areas, and demolition and new development is not precluded.

I always welcome and encourage greater engagement by the public in protecting and enhancing their communities and local environment.

I note the comment by Mrs Neale that residents in some areas of Reading are interested in preparing documents with images and maps in support of designating Local Areas of Special Character (LASC). I recognise that the CAAC, Civic Society and other organisations are supportive of this as well.

I am happy, therefore, to engage with the Bell Tower Community Association and the Northcourt Avenue Residents' Association and discuss progressing LASCs in their respective areas.

I must stress, however, that the Council's planning resources are already stretched and the basic work in documenting and justifying the case for any LASC will have to be done by community and residents' associations.

2. Tamzin Morphy to ask the Leader of the Council: Cross Town Route Proposals

In 2008, the then Cabinet, including the now Leader of the Council, Councillor Lovelock, resolved that:

"The Council reaffirms its total opposition to any resurrection of the Cross Town Route proposals. The Council is committed to ensuring full protection of the Kennetmouth area and therefore wished to see any public transport improvements make maximum use of the current bridges. The Council commits itself to full consultations with local people in the East Reading area before any decisions be taken".

Does the Leader of the Council stand by this resolution ?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock Leader of the Council.

The historic Cross Town Route proposal by Conservative controlled Berkshire County Council, which was opposed by this Labour Council, proposed creating a major new road link through central Reading between the Oxford Road in the west of Reading to the A329 in the east.

There are significant differences between the Cross Town Route, which fortunately was never progressed, largely due to opposition by Labour Councillors, and the current proposal for the East Reading Mass Rapid Transit scheme, including:

- The MRT scheme is for public transport, walking and cycling only, compared to the Cross Town Route scheme which was proposed for use by all traffic.
- The MRT scheme is being developed alongside a network of park and ride sites on the wider A329 corridor, to provide attractive alternatives to the private car. The Cross Town Route scheme would have generated significant levels of additional general traffic in the town centre.
- The MRT scheme is reduced to a single lane for buses at the confluence of the River Kennet and River Thames, reducing the impact on the area and the listed Horseshoe bridge.
- The Cross Town Route scheme would have resulted in a possible dual carriageway over the Kennetmouth and passing through the south side of Kings Meadow. The MRT scheme does not impact on the Meadow, but will improve public transport accessibility to it.

In conclusion, there are fundamental differences between the two schemes and therefore the Council's historic resolution against the Cross Town Route scheme remains valid today.

3. Roger Lightfoot to ask the Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing and Sport: Reading Sport and Leisure

What stage has the process for privatising Reading Sport and Leisure reached ?

REPLY by Councillor Hoskin Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing and Sport.

Thank you for your question Mr. Lightfoot.

The Council's procurement of a leisure operator to support the modernisation of the Council's leisure facilities and provide a better quality service to local people at lower cost is progressing. The required OJEU notice was published on the 29th March, completed Pre-Qualification Questionnaires were received from interested leisure operators on the 30th April and outline solutions from bidders were received on the 9th July. The next stage will be the submission of detailed solutions and their evaluation followed by dialogue with the short-listed bidders to get 'final and best offers'. We anticipate awarding the contract in June of next year.

4. Roger Lightfoot to ask the Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing and Sport: Reading Sport and Leisure

Has the Council conducted a risk assessment for its proposals to privatise Reading Sport and Leisure ?

REPLY by Councillor Hoskin Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing and Sport.

Thank you for your question Mr. Lightfoot. Our decision to procure a leisure operator to support the modernisation of the Council's leisure facilities and provide a better quality service to local people at lower cost was taken in the light of recommendations from specialist leisure consultants. As set out in the previous public Policy Committee report:

'through appointing a new leisure operator there would be a significant revenue improvement compared to the current costs of the Council's provision and that with new facilities income would exceed costs of operation. This additional income potential can be used to support the capital investment needed to deliver new facilities. It is therefore proposed that the Council commences a formal procurement process with a view to contracting with a partner leisure operator to run the Council's leisure facilities.'

Whilst there are a number of risks and unknowns with regard to the detailed outcome of the procurement process, these are managed through a competitive process that includes dialogue to secure the best possible affordable outcome for the Council and for the users of our leisure facilities.

5. Anne Green Jessel to ask the Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing and Sport: Reading Sport and Leisure

Which organisations have been consulted about proposals to privatise Reading Sport and Leisure and what events and activities have been organised to allow the public to have their say on this matter ?

REPLY by Councillor Hoskin Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing and Sport.

Thank you for your question Ms Jessel.

The Council is seeking a leisure partner to invest in the modernisation of the Council's leisure facilities and provide a better quality service to local people at lower cost. This includes designing and building new swimming facilities as well as investing to improve existing centres and their subsequent operation. There has been ongoing dialogue with clubs that were using Central Swimming Pool for a number of years. This has included both the provision of interim swimming facilities and the planned major developments currently being procured by the Council. The Clubs involved included:

- Reading Swimming Club,
- Albatross Diving Club
- Cygnets
- Tilehurst Swimming Club
- Reading Royals Synchronised Swimming Club
- Reading Octapush

In addition to this consultation, Swim England (at that time known as the Amateur Swimming Association) and Sport England were part of the panel identifying the preferred facility mix and specification of sport facilities. The Council involved these organisations to ensure the proposals met their strategic sporting and participation requirements.

In more recent months meetings have been held at each of the Council's Leisure Centres, including Rivermead, where all clubs regularly hiring facilities were invited to attend. This was followed up by a meeting with all clubs in preparation for developing a 'Sports Forum'.

These meetings will continue as our procurement process progresses.

In addition, and in parallel with the procurement process, we will be working with Sport England to develop a strategic vision for sport and physical activity in the town and how our facilities can contribute to delivering this. It is our intention to consult widely as we develop this.

**6. Peter Burt to ask the Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing and Sport:
Sports Forum**

At the Council meeting on 26 June the Lead Councillor for Sport and Leisure answered a question about reconvening the Council's Sports Forum by saying that he would support such a move and would canvas stakeholders on interest in such a Forum. Four months later, and there is no evidence that any canvassing has taken place or that the Forum is any closer to opening. Is the Council serious about wishing to reconvene such a Forum ?

REPLY by Councillor Hoskin Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing and Sport.

Thank you for your Question Mr Burt which overlaps with the previous question asked relating to consultation but also explains how we have been engaging with groups with a view to establishing a Sports Forum.

In recent months a number of meetings have been held at each of the Council's Leisure Centres, including Rivermead, where all clubs regularly hiring facilities were invited to attend. This was followed up by a meeting with all clubs in preparation for developing a 'Sports Forum'.

In addition, and in parallel with the procurement process, we will be working with Sport England to develop a strategic vision for sport and physical activity in the town and how our facilities can contribute to delivering this.

As the development of the Sport and Physical Activity Strategy progresses, and we move into the next the next phase of the Leisure procurement, we do intend to invite people to participate in a sports forum so that we can collaborate on delivering better outcomes for the people of the town.

Setting up a successful sports forum isn't about me creating a meeting in the form I want but creating a forum that works for and delivers for the sports community of Reading. I am confident that this process, using the opportunity of our leisure procurement and the development of a Sport and Physical Activity Strategy will be the best way to establish a sports forum with a purpose and that will thrive.

**7. Nicola Orr to ask the Lead Councillor for Health:
Breastfeeding Support**

I chair a localised breastfeeding support group, Breastfeeding Berkshire.

I'm here on behalf of mothers across Reading, who wanted to breastfeed but are currently being failed by the Council's complete lack of breastfeeding support.

Reading Borough Council. Public Health England estimates that 8 out of 10 women who wanted to breastfeed were forced to stop before they'd have liked, and felt they could have continued with more support.

These women who, if they'd met their breastfeeding goals, would have been at a reduced risk of postnatal depression are now at a greater risk. These women's lives and mental health are being put at risk, and they and their children are being robbed of the health benefits and protection that breastfeeding can provide. Including reduce risk of childhood illnesses and reduce risks of certain cancers for both mother and babies. This all ultimately leads to further strain and cost on our health services.

- So firstly I ask the Council, knowing all of this, how do you justify a complete lack of breastfeeding support ?
- What was the reduced amount of money the Council designated for breastfeeding support spent on instead ?
- Why did the Council refuse to negotiate SOME level of breastfeeding support, for the reduced amount of money available, and instead chose to provide NONE at all ?
- Will the Council, knowing how high the stakes are, provide the full amount of money required for level of support they expected ?
- Or Will the Council negotiate SOME level of breastfeeding support, for the money available, instead of offering NONE at all ?

Council, I respectfully request that you do not go off topic with a women's right to choose how she feeds her children, that is not in dispute here. I have already established I am asking on behalf of mothers who WANTED to breastfeed.

Breastfeeding matters to every mother who has ever given their baby even a drop of their milk. They deserve better and they deserve to be supported.

REPLY by Councillor Hoskin Lead Councillor for Health.

May I thank Ms Orr for her question and say that I completely agree with her statements on the benefits of breastfeeding. I am pleased to confirm that Reading Borough Council does continue to commission breastfeeding support. This is part of the 0-19 Public Health Nursing contract we have with the Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust, which includes the health visitor service.

Until the end of May this year, the Council was also commissioning The Breastfeeding Network to deliver a breastfeeding peer support service in Reading under a contract worth £30,000 p.a. In November last year, we published a new tender for breastfeeding peer support which would have led to a four year contract from 1st June 2018 - again valued at £30,000 p.a.

The Breastfeeding Network was aware of this opportunity. However, on 20th December 2017, they wrote to us to advise that, after careful consideration, the organisation had decided not to submit a bid as they felt unable to continue to deliver the service at the previous funding level.

Prior to publishing this tender, we went through a period of several months of consultation and invited potential providers of a range of community support services to discuss with us what could be provided with the funding available. In the case of breastfeeding peer

support, unfortunately, we received no contact from any potential provider during this consultation and market testing period.

When the tender closed, we had received no bids from any organisation to supply any peer support for breastfeeding. This was disappointing, but we then needed to put in place plans to ensure mothers could access breastfeeding support through other routes. We worked with The Breastfeeding Network on an exit plan, which included signposting new mothers to alternative sources of support such as health visitors and national websites and support lines. This includes resources from

Public Health England -Start4Life breastfeeding friend and La Leche League which offer friendly breastfeeding support from pregnancy onward.

Breastfeeding support for Reading mothers is also available via the midwifery service, although this is commissioned by the NHS rather than the council.

The evidence is absolutely clear that breastfeeding gives a child the best start in life and provides major health benefits. I agree with Ms Orr that this council and this country should be investing more in supporting breastfeeding, as well as investing more money in a range of public health services, and in the community and voluntary sector. But the annual national government cuts to the public health budget coupled with the slashing of £58 million per year of government funding to the council over the period from 2010 to 2019 mean we simply do not have the money to fund vital services we know Reading needs.

Whilst we were able to consider a continuation of breastfeeding peer support at previous levels, it just was not possible to offer a higher value contract. In the absence of any provider willing to offer a service for the funding available we have now decommissioned this particular service. We will continue to promote the other support which is available to mothers who wish to breastfeed. If the government performs a desperately needed u-turn on properly funding councils or there is the election of a Labour government committed to funding local services then we will be able to revisit this decision as well as many other cuts we have had to make against our wishes and beliefs.

**8. Keith Kerr to ask the Lead Councillor for Corporate and Consumer Services:
Interest Charge Payments**

Reading Borough Council finances are in a perilous state near to bankruptcy! Services are being cut to all of Reading Borough Council hard pressed council tax payers with impunity, including the disabled, the weak and the vulnerable. Can the Lead Councillor tell us, how much has been paid out so far and is forecasted to be paid by year end in interest charge payments on loans and public - private partnership projects ?

REPLY by Councillor Brock Lead Councillor for Corporate and Consumer Services.

Reading Borough Council, like all local authorities, can borrow only for the purposes of capital investment. Although such money cannot be used to support day-to-day service provision, which must be funded from revenue, the ability to borrow to invest plays a fundamental role in ensuring that services have the necessary infrastructure to facilitate delivery. Without this we would not be able to provide, for example, Council housing, school expansion, or the equipment that is needed for all other service delivery.

In 2018-19 the Council forecasts it will make interest payments totalling £14.68m. Of this, £1.78m relates to its two PFI schemes and the remaining £12.9m consists of servicing loans taken out directly by the Council.

It is forecast that the Council's share of the joint Waste PFI charge which relates to interest will be £0.47m and that the North Whitley Housing PFI charge for interest will be £1.31m.

In respect of the £12.9m loan interest, £6.7m relates to Housing Revenue Account borrowing and is largely a consequence of the Council being required to buy itself out of the previous funding (subsidy) system for housing. This borrowing funds around 5,500 Council homes held on the Council's Balance Sheet.

£0.6m of the £12.9m relates to loans made to the Council's wholly owned companies (Homes for Reading and Reading Buses) which support the Council's wider priorities in terms of sustainable transport and affordable housing. These costs are repaid in full by the companies.

The balance of £5.6m relates to the funding of the Council's General Fund Capital Programme which provides for the procurement of vehicles, property, IT assets, etc. required for service provision.

9. Keith Kerr to ask the Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods and Communities:
Central Club

How can the RBC prove that Council have met its legal duty as a Public Authority under section 149 of the Equalities Act 2010, when the Report to Policy Committee on 16 July 2018 for the sale of Central Club stated in Section 8.1 that "...we do not believe an Equality Impact Assessment (EAI) is required". Especially when Reading Borough Council knew that the site and buildings declared surplus to RBC's requirements had been in the sole use and control of a bidder from one of the 'Protected Characteristic' in the Equalities Act for nearly 50 years ?

REPLY by Councillor James Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods and Communities.

Thank you for your question relating to Central Club 36-42 London Street.

The building has not been in the sole use and control of a bidder from one of the Protected Characteristic as you state in your question, rather, this council owned building has been vacant and therefore under the sole control of RBC for in excess of 12 years, long before the incorporation of Aspire in December 2016.

Throughout the process of disposal of the building the Council has paid due regard to its duty under the Equality Act 2010 and has made all reasonable efforts to bring about a resolution that recognises the local Black community expressed preference for community centre use. This is documented in the reports to Policy Committee on 3rd November 2014 and 18th July 2016, which set out that in 2008, a Cabinet decision was made to grant a lease to the African & Caribbean Community Group (ACCG), subject to the successful outcome of a Capacitybuilders capital bid for £200,000 that would be matched with a capital contribution of £220,000 from Reading Borough Council.

The reports document that the Council would grant ACCG a license to carry out works on the building subject to an appropriate amount of funding being raised to complete the building works, and including a capital contribution from RBC of £220k. Unfortunately ACCG was unable to raise sufficient funds to deliver the project and this agreement ended in 2014.

The Council then took the advice of Reading Voluntary Action (RVA) to establish a Steering Group to direct the next phase of a proposal to bring the former Central Club building back into community use. The steering group had 7 members representing a number of voluntary organisations who had expressed an interest in the project including Councillor Page and

myself and much time was spent trying to bring the site back into use. This proposed method ensured that Reading Borough Council took an informed view of the impact on the diverse communities in Reading.

The report documents that the steering group identified 4 options but that none of these were viable. The recommendation was then made to dispose of the building through the Council's existing Third Sector Policy Statement where Third Sector organisations can bid for a surplus property and all bids received will be considered by Policy Committee. Policy Committee on 17 July 2017 considered a report on the outcome of the restricted bidding process for the voluntary sector for the Central Club Building and resolved that the property be advertised on the open market. That process concluded with a report to Policy Committee in July 2018.

10. Keith Kerr to ask the Lead Councillor for Corporate and Consumer Services: Compensation Payments and Legal Fees

Poor governance, lack of leadership, unfair processes and miss-management are the hallmark of a failing Council. Early indicators are likely to be the level of compensation paid out to complainants when Public Authorities fail in their duty of care when making decisions. Could the Lead Councillor tell us how much money, to the nearest million pounds has been paid out and set aside to pay out in compensation by RBC leadership and how much has been paid out in legal fees to external law firms to defend these claims ?

REPLY by Councillor Brock Lead Councillor for Corporate and Consumer Services.

This is a confusing question, expressed in a tone of criticism which my colleagues and I do not accept. It also carries the presumption that the Council has been the subject of significant compensation claims resulting from complaints, which is not the case.

In terms of how much the Council has paid out in compensation to people complaining about the Council's services to the Local Ombudsman, in 2017-18 the authority paid out £600 in total to three complainants. In 2016-17, we paid out £2,250 in total, again to three complainants. These payments are made from the budgets of the services complained about. Given the very small sums involved, which reflect a historic pattern, no specific provision for compensation payments is made in service budgets.

It follows that the authority has not spent any money in legal fees to defend the above compensation payments, which were recommended by the Local Ombudsman and the Council was prepared to accept.