

COUNCIL MEETING - 19 OCTOBER 2021

AGENDA ITEM 6

QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

1. Councillor McElroy to ask the Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods and Communities:
Rat Populations in Reading

Covid has coincided with a boom in rat populations (<https://www.sciencefocus.com/news/has-the-pandemic-unleashed-a-plague-of-rats-on-our-cities/>), with anecdotal evidence from residents suggesting this is also a problem in Reading. What is the council doing to track and humanely manage any increase in rat populations in Reading?

REPLY by Councillor Barnett-Ward Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods and Communities.

The Council receives many reports of rat sightings, but there is no evidence to suggest that there has been a significant increase in rat numbers in Reading since the pandemic. The average number of complaints about rats over the last four years stands at 202, in comparison to 211 in 2020.

The Council's pest control contractor SDK noted there was an increase in treatments during the lockdown period, but no indication of a steep rise in the rat population. During lockdown, people were clearing out lofts, sheds, garages and as a result, disturbing areas of harbourage. People working from home spent more time in their gardens and were much more likely to see rats. Other wildlife such as deer, badgers, and foxes were also much more visible.

The Council are unable to actively investigate every enquiry received although a record is kept for intelligence purposes, to enable the identification of problem areas. This is in part due to volume and capacity, but also is part of a more strategic approach to management of wider scale infestations. Land owners are responsible for the treatment of infestations on their land and this includes the Council, which is responsible for any infestations on its own land. The Council promote humane steps for pest management as the first stage and there are a number of measures that landowners can take including proofing their properties to ensure that rats cannot enter, properly managing waste, keeping their food waste bins with the handle in the locked position, keeping their own garden areas clear, and checking sheds and under decking for nest sites. Prevention is key to humane rat population management but if that has failed then the Council and its contractors recommend carrying out an effective baiting programme.

The Council have powers to take enforcement action against land owners who fail to take the necessary action, and also work with the water utility company to ensure that their network is free of rats.

The advice for residents who are troubled by rats is to undertake a round of treatment with an accredited pest control supplier. The Council have agreed a reduced fee for Reading customers through SDK. In most instances, where a responsible pest control contractor such as SDK is used, the treatment will solve the problem. In cases where specialist treatment does not resolve the problem in the first instance it will however provide information on the severity of the infestation and possible causes, which enables officers to support and advise landowners on further measures.

2. Councillor Lovelock to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:
Utility Companies

Would Councillor Page update the Council on the powers we have to insist that utility companies work in partnership to ensure that those companies cause less disruption for residents and that they do not dig up the roads that the Council has just resurfaced ?

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

I thank Councillor Lovelock for her very timely question.

By way of background, Reading Borough Council conducts three different types of resurfacing:

- Micro-asphalt surface dressing, which re-seals the carriageway surface and increases skid resistance
- Replacement of the bitumen surface layer(s)
- Reconstruction of the highway, which includes the replacement of deeper construction layers

The New Roads and Street Works Act 1991 enables highway authorities, such as Reading BC, to place restrictions on certain works taking place following carriageway resurfacing, with the exception of the micro-asphalt surfacing, which cannot be protected.

Local authorities are required to issue advance notification of their intention to place a new restriction on a section of highway at least 3 months in advance of doing so. This notification details the extent of the proposed restriction, the expected commencement date and provides an opportunity for engagement by utility companies, should they have awareness of new works in the area that they have not already shared with the local authority.

The restriction (Section 58) lasts for 2 - 3 years (3 years applies to reconstruction works). However, there are numerous exemptions to this due to the nature of the variety of utility services on which residents and businesses rely. There are also exemptions for urgent works, where incidents cause a loss of services to customers or create a hazard (e.g. a gas leak).

Reading Borough Council will work with utility companies to co-ordinate all works to which both parties are aware and, where exempt utility works are planned to be undertaken, will negotiate with utility companies to ensure that the road surface is restored to a sufficiently high standard.

I can also address very legitimate concerns that colleagues and members of the public have raised about the street works and excavations being undertaken in connection with the rapid deployment of fibre optic cabling in Reading.

Last week senior RBC officers met with City Fibre and their contractor Instalcom to raise concerns about the disruption being caused by the fibre rollout programme. Specific details of breaches have been recorded and further evidence compiled by our Highways and Streetworks Inspectors has been passed to City Fibre and Instalcom.

Both City Fibre and Instalcom made a commitment at senior level to address all our concerns. They reiterated their strong desire to work with us and to assure us that they are competent and experienced in this area.

They have a 3.5 year delivery programme affecting Reading and will provide our Streetcare Services Manager with their next tranche of programme, which commences in January 2022, so that we can try and co-ordinate the works with our own extensive residential road resurfacing programmes.

They also confirmed that some of their gangs would be moving into West Berkshire shortly and the current amount of work in Reading would reduce considerably.

City Fibre's Health & Safety lead has assured us that they will put an extra resource in to ensure that the gangs on site are adhering to the full range of safety requirements, be that traffic management, PPE or dust suppression, which they take very seriously. They are also aware that the HSE are clamping down on these issues as well.

I and officers intend to meet again with City Fibre and Instalcom to review the corrective measures and promised improvements.

I appreciate and share the immediate concerns of councillors and residents. Our officers have relayed our very real dissatisfaction with the performance of City Fibre and Instalcom to date. We have warned them that should no improvement be seen then we could call them to a special public meeting of the SEPT Committee meeting which would be reputationally damaging to them. Ultimately, we could seek to remove the contractor from working in Reading. I hope this option will not be necessary but it depends on a much improved performance.

**3. Councillor White to ask the Leader of the Council:
Devastating Cut to Universal Credit**

Ending the £20 a week increase to Universal Credit will harm many people in Reading. It is wrong that this support is being cut while the cost of food and energy is rising rapidly. Green councillors oppose this cut.

Please can the Lead Councillor confirm how many Reading residents will have this money taken away from them? Can the Lead Councillor also confirm what support there is for Reading residents impacted by this devastating cut?

REPLY by Councillor Brock Leader of the Council.

Firstly, and to be entirely clear, the Government's cut to Universal Credit is a thoughtless and counterproductive act that is going to force more families in Reading and across the country into poverty. It comes at a time of rising fuel prices, rising inflation, and rising National Insurance bills, all of which will be placing pressure on household budgets. I am pleased that Cllr Terry is this evening bringing forward a motion opposing the cut.

The Council cannot possibly hope to fully mitigate the impact that the Government cut will have on families across the town - we simply do not have the financial resources to do so. Nonetheless, there are a number of ways in which we are directly and indirectly supporting those impacted by the £20 cut to Universal Credit.

As universal Credit is administered by the Department for Work and Pensions, we are not able to say with absolute accuracy how many Reading residents are impacted. However, the Office for National Statistics' latest data, from May 2021, gives the total number of households on Universal Credit in Reading as 11,510 in payment.

We are in the process of actively contacting our Council tenants to discuss their options and signpost them to the Money Matters pages on our website. This section of the website provides information and advice on how to seek support.

The DWP made an announcement that a one-off Household Support Fund would be provided to LA's to support communities over the winter months. The amount allocated to Reading is just over £1.13 million and the fund must be spent by 31st March. Ostensibly, the Fund is new, but in practice it appears to replace previous funding.

Because the grant funding was announced very late, the Council is eager to get the money into the hands of residents as soon as possible. In the main, our local scheme will support 5200 school children on pupil premium free school meals allowance with a £20 food voucher for the school holidays including October half term, two weeks of Christmas, and the February half term. The scheme is administered directly by BFFC and schools.

Clearly there will be a particular challenge around paying household energy bills this winter, and I am therefore keen to bring forward specific support around this. An energy voucher scheme will also be provided for those on the Local Council Tax Support Scheme. 1965 families with children will receive two £49 vouchers and a further 5975 individuals will receive a £49 voucher. This second cohort includes both working and non-working age residents. The vouchers will be directly sent to those residents, and there will not be an onerous application process or eligibility hurdle to get through.

A further scheme is being developed with the remaining fund, circa £200,000, which will provide targeted support to those that may not be in the above cohorts of residents. Further details on this will follow, however the aim will be to tackle acute needs around food and fuel as well as other hardship needs identified, and we are keen to work with our Voluntary and Community sector partners to support this piece of work.

**4. Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing and Sport:
Increased Cost of Sports Centre Memberships**

How does increasing the cost of membership to leisure facilities increase participation and physical activity amongst Reading residents currently least likely to use our facilities? And what happened to the discounts, free sessions, and concessionary price structure?

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

One of the key aims of the new investment into our leisure facilities in Reading is to support and inspire the communities we serve to lead healthier, more active lives, and to increase participation in sport and physical activity to improve people's well-being. Closing the inequalities of health outcomes that scar our town is a paramount public health priority and that public health agenda has helped to inform our approach.

We are investing over £40 million in modern new leisure facilities - including a new flagship leisure centre at Rivermead and a brand new swimming pool at Palmer Park, as well as investment into South Reading Leisure Centre and the Meadway Leisure Centre - delivered in partnership with our new leisure provider, Greenwich Leisure Ltd (GLL).

The membership charge for all members who transferred from the Reading Sport and Leisure facilities has been held at the same price with effectively no inflationary change in 3 years. In addition, all members of the Your Reading Passport scheme who were receiving free swimming continue to do so.

Reading benefits from a “Better Reading” membership which is offered at a reduced rate of £40 per month compared to GLL’s “Better Health UK” rate of £60 per month. Reading’s membership fees are competitive when compared to other similar providers. For example, GLL charge £40 per month for multisite access to all four sites, whereas in Wokingham the equivalent membership is charged at £49 for multisite access. GLL also offers a single site membership at £28 per month.

It is worth stressing that the context of massive government cuts to local government funding and public health funding over the past decade. A recently published report by Swim England sounds the alarm about the dramatic decline in public swimming pool facilities due to underfunded councils and predicts a fall of 40 per cent by 2030. I’m pleased to say, with our new facilities on track, Reading will thankfully buck this trend. Despite the unprecedented challenges of the past year, the Council and our leisure partners, GLL, remain fully committed to delivering the modern leisure facilities a town of our size and status deserves.

Instead of blanket free swim schemes, which are often used by residents who can afford to pay, we are focussing our limited resources on increasing participation and physical activity on those who are least active at the moment with contractual targets that align with our public health priorities.

A concessionary pricing structure is available to all Reading residents through GLL’s free residents Pay and Play Card, which offers a discount of up to 30% off non-member prices, similar concessionary rates are available for people with disabilities, those on low incomes and for people who have completed a GP exercise referral programme. The schemes GLL are implementing and developing offer a more effective and targeted concessionary access, supporting increased physical activity for those who will benefit most, which include:

- Expansion of 60+ activities and clubs across all leisure centres in Reading
- FREE resident play and pay card offering up to 30% off the cost of non-member price
- £25.75 Non-resident Better Pay & Play adult card offering up to 30% off the cost of non-member price
- £27.95 Better Health and Fitness membership (39% discount)
- Better Club games providing new opportunities for many 60+ club members
- Development of Falls Prevention Scheme
- Development of social prescription working closely with Reading Voluntary Action and Age UK
- Development of walking sports in partnership with Age UK, University of 3rd Age and National Governing Bodies
- Dementia friendly sessions, centres and trained staff
- Linking activity and core leisure centre timetable to health programmes e.g. social prescription, exercise referral, Falls prevention etc.
- Offer free trials, taster sessions and open days
- Discrete pool lifts to aid access for the less mobile
- Free access to carers/helpers accompanying people with a disability
- Community outreach programme targeting priority groups via key partners and delivering monthly sessions in community settings e.g. parks, estates, community centres
- Developing and supporting walking clubs