

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING & TRANSPORT COMMITTEE: 16 NOVEMBER 2021

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 1

Peter Bowyer to ask the Chair of Strategic Environment, Planning & Transport Committee:

Instalcom

Residents throughout West Reading have had to tolerate the activities of Instalcom, working on behalf of CityFibre to install fibre-optic cables, for the past few months. Whilst some disruption is inevitable, it seems that the contractors have no regard for the inconvenience they cause to residents, businesses and traffic of all types by their actions. Their traffic management measures are haphazard to say the least, closing roads with no advance warning or signage, operating vehicles in a manner that blocks roads with no mitigations in place. They seem to ignore the advance planning that has obviously been done by the evidence of temporary parking restrictions and plough on regardless of the dates that the parking restrictions are advertised for. We see long stretches of empty parking bays with no work going on around them, and then streets with road works intertwined with parked cars. Major roads such as Oxford Road have been subject to one-way working with 4-way temporary traffic lights for several weeks, blocking access to businesses and closing side roads. Thankfully the streets around my house have now largely been vacated and the crews have moved on to create chaos elsewhere. Council officers have responded well to complaints, for which I thank them, but despite their best efforts there has been no observable change in behaviour from the contractors. What steps can the Council take to force Instalcom to operate in a more considerate and safe manner, in order to deliver a less chaotic and frustrating experience to residents, businesses and vehicles in the rest of the Borough as the work progresses?

REPLY by the Chair of the Strategic Environment, Planning & Transport Committee:

I invite Councillor Page, the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport to make the response on my behalf.

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

I thank Mr Bowyer for his question.

Senior officers have met with City Fibre and Instalcom where they expressed the Council's deep concerns caused by the rapid deployment of fibre optic cabling through Reading. These concerns raised by me, my colleagues,

Council officers and the general public covered a range of issues including temporary traffic management setup, site safety and resident communication. I have also complained to Greg Mesch, City Fibre's Chief Executive Officer, and attach my letter of 20th October and his reply of 4th November.

City Fibre and Instalcom should now be very clear about the level of dissatisfaction with their operations to date and the reputational damage that this will be causing them.

They have been given a short opportunity to rectify matters, failing which we would seek to exclude Instalcom from conducting further works in Reading. Both City Fibre and Instalcom made a commitment at senior level to address all the concerns and reiterated their strong desire to work positively with the Council and its residents. They have also provided an improvement plan that includes additional staff training, increased supervisory site cover and an improved communication plan and we would expect to see a speedy improvement over the coming weeks.

They have a multiple-year delivery programme affecting Reading that we will seek to co-ordinate with our own extensive residential road resurfacing and pavement improvement programmes. Officers are in discussions with City Fibre and have requested their full Reading delivery programme to ensure that the necessary improved coordination can be achieved. To date this request has not been met.

Officers will continue to meet regularly with City Fibre and Instalcom and the Council's Highway Inspectors will continue to monitor their performance on our highway network and will raise defects and issues with them, as and when they occur. I would again urge colleagues and residents to report any further concerns.

City Fibre also confirmed that some of their current Reading workforce will be deployed to other areas of new fibreoptic rollout and that the current amount of work in Reading would reduce considerably as a result.

ENDS

Mr Greg Mesch
Chief Executive Officer
CityFibre Holdings Limited
15 Bedford Street
London
WC2E 9HE

Tel: 0118 959 5687
Email: tony.page@reading.gov.uk

Deputy Leader of the Council
Lead Councillor Strategic
Environment, Planning &
Transport

Your Ref:
My Ref: tp/ka
Date: 20 October 2021

Dear Mr Mesch

CONDUCT OF CITYFIBRE AND CONTRACTOR INSTALCOM IN THE READING BOROUGH AREA

I am writing in my capacity as Deputy Leader of Reading Borough Council and the Lead Member for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport to register a very strong complaint with you about the failure of CityFibre and Instalcom, your Highway Contractors, to perform to required standards in the Reading area.

Last week a meeting took place between Senior Highways Management of Reading Borough Council and representatives of CityFibre and Instalcom to raise concerns about the poor work practices and consequential disruption being caused by the fibre roll-out programme. Specific details of breaches have been recorded and passed to CityFibre and Instalcom.

Notwithstanding a commitment by your representatives to address our concerns, and a strong wish expressed to work with us and to deliver safe and responsible working, performance continues to be erratic and most unsatisfactory.

We are advised by your company that there is a three-and-a-half-year delivery programme planned for Reading and, on current performance, this prospect fills myself and colleagues with absolute horror.

Based on the current unsatisfactory performance I am proposing to hold a special meeting of our Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport Committee to which you and Senior Management will be requested to attend to answer questions about the current performance of CityFibre in Reading.

Subject to the conclusions of this Committee we will reserve our position as to whether we request the formal removal of CityFibre and Instalcom from future work in Reading.

I hope you will treat this matter very seriously, as the concerns are genuine and widespread amongst local elected Members and the general public.

I look forward to hearing from you urgently.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tony Page', written in a cursive style.

Councillor Tony Page
Deputy Leader of the Council
Lead Councillor Strategic Environment, Planning & Transport

Cllr Tony Page
115 Castle Hill
Reading
RG1 7SY

4 November 2021

Dear Cllr Page,

Thank you for your letter regarding your concerns about the work we are undertaking within the Reading area.

Firstly, I would like to apologise if at any time you feel the standard of our work or conduct of our build partners has fallen short. I take Health and Safety issues very seriously and as a company it is our top priority. As you know, our £58m investment in the city is a large and complex infrastructure programme. While some disruption is unfortunately inevitable, we are committed to maintaining high standards as well as working closely with you to minimise disruption and resolve issues as and when they occur.

I know we have had a good relationship with the local authority, with regular fortnightly meetings to review problems. As soon as we became aware of these recent concerns, our local team met with your teams to get a full understanding of the issues. The senior CityFibre team including the City Manager, Stacey King, and Regional Delivery Director, Roy Griffin, are taking your concerns very seriously and as a result we have an agreed package of immediate and practical measures.

From 18th October, we have therefore:

- **Reduced the amount of work taking place**
Until these issues are resolved we have taken the drastic step of reducing the amount of work carried out in the city. Instalcom have reduced the number of gangs down to 16 and improved the supervisor to gang ratio to ensure we can maintain tighter control on the quality of work. We do not take this step lightly as it naturally disrupts the wider build programme. In this instance, however, we believed it was a necessary step.
- **Increased audits to better monitor and address performance issues**
Instalcom have had their health & safety officer on site all week carrying out audits. These audits are reviewed by both CityFibre and Instalcom to highlight any additional areas that need to be addressed. Our own CityFibre Safety, Health, Environment & Quality team has also increased the number of audits within the Reading build.
- **Increased and improved training**
Instalcom have conducted additional training for the on-site teams, in particular on the use of CAT & Jenny. We are also increasing the frequency of our 'toolbox talks' to keep emphasising the standards that are expected and to catch any developing issues early.
- **Improved data & communication**
We are jointly improving our communication with your Highways Team to share formal reporting of issues, as well as joint site visit with council inspectors. We believe this will help identify any underlying issues with our performance which can be put right, and more quickly resolve issues that do arise.

We are keeping these measures under constant review to ensure they have the desired outcomes and are working closely with your teams to monitor this and provide continual improvements where necessary.

I know that Stacey, Roy and the whole Reading team are working hard to ensure that our rollout in the borough is of the highest standard and would encourage you to speak directly to Stacey if you or your fellow councillors see any issues or have further concerns about our work. I know Stacey has been in touch with you and would welcome a meeting with you to discuss these issues directly.

I hope this letter goes some way to assuring you that we take these concerns very seriously and demonstrates our absolute commitment to providing Reading with a world-class digital infrastructure. Our £58m investment will make the borough an even better place to live and work and will help Reading to attract further inward investment.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Greg Mesch", is located below the "Yours sincerely" text.

Greg Mesch, CEO

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING & TRANSPORT COMMITTEE: 16 NOVEMBER 2021

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 2

John Booth to ask the Chair of Strategic Environment, Planning & Transport Committee:

Air Quality

NO₂ concentrations illegal and WHO Guidelines tightened: Local Transport Plan 'Next Steps' document presented to SEPT on 30th June included worrying news on Air Quality - Business as Usual modelling for a possible Clean Air Zone showed NO₂ concentrations in 2023 in least two locations around Caversham Road would exceed the national annual Air Quality Objective of 40 ug/m³ and another nine locations were above 36 ug/m³. What sort of vehicles were most responsible for the high levels of NO₂ in the modelling? What sort of Clean Air Zone conditions would enable Reading to comply with the national annual Air Quality Objective? In September the WHO Air Quality Guideline for NO₂ annual average concentration was reduced from 40 ug/m³ to 10 ug/m³. <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/what-are-the-who-air-quality-guidelines> So Reading's NO₂ concentrations are likely to be four times the new WHO Air Quality Objective ... what is the Council's response to this? What are the likely health implications of these levels of pollutants?

REPLY by the Chair of the Strategic Environment, Planning & Transport Committee:

I invite Councillor Page, the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport to make the response on my behalf.

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

I thank Mr Booth for his question.

Our data shows that diesel vehicles produced over 90% of NO_x emissions.

Diesel cars were the single most significant contributor of local NO_x emissions at 43.2%, with petrol cars only producing 7.6%.

HGVs were also a significant contributor at 23.7% of all NO_x emissions, especially considering these vehicles make up only 9.5% of the vehicles at this location (IDR).

Diesel LGVs are another significant contributor, making up 20.7% of NO_x emissions.

Buses and Coaches only made up 2% of NO_x emissions, which underlines the environmental benefits of using sustainable public transport options, such as Reading Buses.

The modelling that was conducted showed that, even if the Council were to implement a Clean Air Zone in Reading, the strictest category which impacts those drivers of EURO V and under diesel vehicles, and EURO IV and under petrol vehicles, there would only be an average reduction of 0.5µg/m³ NO₂ levels.

Although this would help us to get closer to compliance with the NO₂ objective, it would not be significant enough for compliance with objectives at all locations.

Whilst the Council would like to implement a CAZ, it is, at present, too expensive to consider without significant external funding. Other councils that are implementing CAZ's have been awarded central government funding to do so.

Reading BC has not been awarded funding and if we were to finance this ourselves through our own borrowing would have to find the estimated £12.5m of capital funding and £2m - £4.5m of revenue costs for what would be a very low 'return on investment'.

It should be noted that this modelling was carried out before the Covid-19 pandemic, during which air quality improved. Pollutant levels have not yet returned to their former levels, and it is yet to be seen if they will, or whether they will settle at a 'new normal' below the national objective levels.

As you will be aware, the publication of the draft Local Transport Plan (LTP) has been delayed to better enable us to consider the impacts of the pandemic and how we build back better.

The new WHO guidance levels are a sobering reminder that air pollution causes a health impact on us all, especially the vulnerable, at much lower levels than everyone used to think. It shows that we must continue to work to reduce air pollution levels beyond the current target values, to ensure that the burden on the cardio-respiratory health of the residents of Reading is minimised as much as possible.

The Council has an ambitious Local Cycling and Walking Improvement Plan, has just published its Bus Service Improvement Plan (which is agenda item 11 later this evening), and is finalising its Electric Vehicle Strategy. All these are important in supporting a shift to more sustainable transport and which, with the support of residents, visitors and businesses, will accelerate improvements in air quality.

ENDS

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING & TRANSPORT COMMITTEE: 16 NOVEMBER 2021

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 3

John Booth to ask the Chair of Strategic Environment, Planning & Transport Committee:

Cross River Traffic and Congestion

Anecdotally traffic congestion is now worse in Reading than before the pandemic - what are the figures ?

Local Transport Plan 'Next Steps' document presented to SEPT on 30th June said insufficient data was available to generate proposals for tolling of the two road bridges over the Thames to reduce through traffic. When will the Council re-assess this, and will the assessment include the impact of traffic levels on air quality and carbon dioxide emissions as well as congestion costs?

REPLY by the Chair of the Strategic Environment, Planning & Transport Committee:

I invite Councillor Page, the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport to make the response on my behalf.

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

I thank Mr Booth for his question.

Traffic congestion is a major issue for Reading which impacts our quality of life in a variety of ways. The additional carbon emissions generated as a result of congestion contribute to the Climate Emergency, alongside other emissions which worsen air quality. In addition, the impact of congestion on productivity will hinder the economic recovery and one of our key objectives, namely to reduce inequalities in the borough.

As set out in the report approved by this Committee in June 2021, regarding next steps for the new Local Transport Plan, the changes in travel behaviours resulting from the pandemic are still emerging and will not be known until well into next year. It is therefore too early to finalise our strategy at this point including any measures relating to traffic over the River Thames.

Nevertheless, we are continuing to monitor traffic levels on the road network and the trends to date do indicate that overall levels are broadly similar to those seen before the pandemic. However, traffic levels during

the morning and afternoon peaks appear to be slightly lower, and inter-peak traffic slightly higher, in comparison to pre-pandemic levels.

Specifically regarding possible options for reducing traffic congestion on the River Thames crossings, the Council continues to actively engage with neighbouring authorities through the Cross-Thames Travel Group to agree the next steps for this important area of work.

A key objective of this Group is to investigate measures that will reduce the air quality and carbon dioxide emissions resulting from traffic congestion on the river crossings.

I also recognise that some of Reading's arterial roads, and both our bridges, carry a large number of cars and lorries (perhaps as high as 20-25% of vehicles on the IDR) that are using the town as a short-cut between various parts of the national motorway network. These vehicles contribute only congestion and pollution and bring no economic benefit whatsoever to Reading. I remain determined to focus on what options we might bring forward to deter these journeys.

ENDS

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING & TRANSPORT COMMITTEE: 16 NOVEMBER 2021

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 4

John Booth to ask the Chair of Strategic Environment, Planning & Transport Committee:

WHO Guidelines for PM2.5 Concentrations Tightened

In September the WHO Air Quality Guideline for micro-particles PM2.5 annual average concentration was reduced from 10 ug/m³ to 5 ug/m³. <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/what-are-the-who-air-quality-guidelines> .

The WHO document says “Exposure to PM_{2.5} can cause diseases both to our cardiovascular and respiratory system, provoking, for example stroke, lung cancer and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).”

In 2018 RBC estimated (in a response to a question to November SEPT) that annual average PM2.5 concentration was 16.1 ug/m³ on Caversham Road.

So Reading’s PM2.5 concentrations are likely to be around three times the new WHO Air Quality Objective ... what is the Council’s response to this? What are the likely health implications of these levels of pollutants?

We would be interested to the assessment for excess deaths as a result of small particulates.

Does RBC plan to adopt laser diffraction apparatus to better estimate PM0.1, 1.0, 2.5 and PM10 - to identify and evaluate particulate hot spots which are currently not monitored ?

REPLY by the Chair of the Strategic Environment, Planning & Transport Committee:

I invite Councillor Page, the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport to make the response on my behalf.

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

I thank Mr Booth for his question.

The WHO guidelines are designed to offer guidance in reducing the health impacts of air pollution based on expert evaluation of current scientific evidence. Although it has been known for some time that PM2.5 is a non-threshold pollutant that can impact health at any concentration, the updated guidelines reflect the growing scientific evidence for the health benefits of reducing PM2.5 levels.

Where levels are higher than this guideline, which is most of the UK, there are likely to be cardiovascular and respiratory health impacts.

The information available on deaths due to PM2.5 pollution comes from the estimate given in the Public Health Outcomes Framework. This is given as the fraction of mortality attributable to PM2.5 pollution, which in Reading is 5.6%. This is comparable with Windsor & Maidenhead (5.6%), lower than Slough (6.3%), but higher than the average for the South East of England (5.1%)

Because PM2.5 is a transboundary pollutant, with approximately a third coming from Europe and around 15% from naturally occurring sources, there are limitations as to what Reading Borough Council can achieve when trying to reduce PM2.5. However, key local sources of PM2.5 that we are working to reduce are those from solid fuel burning and vehicle emissions, including tyre and brake wear as well as tail pipe emissions.

In relation to particulate monitors, the Council would very much like to introduce more of them, but they are expensive to purchase and maintain, so their introduction is very much dependent on finances. Our most recent bid for Air Quality Grant Funding includes the purchase of some air quality sensors which would monitor PM2.5.

ENDS