

Access and Disabilities Working Group - Thursday 3 March 2pm

Minutes

Present:

Cllr Sophia James, Chair - Katesgrove Councillor
Cllr Karen Rowland - Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation - Abbey
Ward Councillor
Helen Bryant - Access Officer RBC
Bob Bristow - Chair Reading Association for the Blind
Alice Carter - Trustee, Reading Families Forum
Brian Oatway - Member of the Public
Tom Lake - Member of the Public
Stu Pearce - Guide Dogs - Guide Dog owner
Georgios Sergakis - Member of the Public

Nina Crispin - Information & Engagement Officer Public Health and Wellbeing Team

Apologies

Cllr Gul Khan
Cllr Rose Williams
Cllr Helen Manghnani - Tilehurst Ward
Clare Muir
Nigel and Barbara McAlister

1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Cllr James welcomed everyone, and asked people to introduce themselves.

2. MATTERS ARISING

None

3. COUNCILLORS' DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

None

4. COMMUNITY SAFETY SURVEY

Jo Anderson was unable to attend. Helen Bryant had shared the results of the survey. Councillor James explained that this was a breakdown of figures from 2021 and also a comparison with other years, the survey was done every other year. The overall response rate was slightly smaller than last time. The top 5 priority issues had changed, and were now: drugs, parking issues, motorbike and vehicle nuisance, fly tipping and burglary.

50% of the respondents said that they thought that the level of crime was high or very high, and that had increased quite substantially. There were additional questions about reporting of crime and anti-social behaviour - around a third of respondents was unsure of how to do so. Around 50% of respondents felt that anti-social behaviour had increased in the borough. Cllr James was curious to know how lockdown had affected the levels of crime; during lockdown burglary reduced because everybody had been at home.

Helen Bryant said that she had predicted at the last meeting that there would be a perception of the increase of crime, because of high-profile cases in the news, particularly of violence against women and had been proved right. Women would probably be more worried about crime, and this was only to be expected.

Tom Lake said that there were two kinds of fly-tipping: amateur and professional. There had been an incident in the Hexham Road area where a lorry had dumped 6 tonnes of rubbish in the garage area on the estates. Those areas were very susceptible to this sort of behaviour.

Brian Oatway said that he recalled that the survey was conducted on a form with topics on it, and a section which was named "other", which in his opinion meant that respondents were led to their answers. There had been no mention, for example, of the danger which many disabled people faced from cyclists. He said that he had recently had a near-miss on the Wokingham Road. The cycle lane went onto the pavement, the cyclist was going very fast, and he was only narrowly missed.

Cllr James acknowledged this and said that her partner was Deaf and had had similar issues with cyclists. It was very difficult for people who could not hear or see cycles. Cyclists needed to be aware of the needs of pedestrians they might be passing.

Cllr James said that there was a diversity breakdown of the respondents, but disability had not been included in this. It was a shame that officers were not present.

Helen Bryant said that Jo Anderson said that this would happen next time. Cllr James was pleased that feedback had been listened to and welcomed the decision.

Stu Pearce said that walking the streets at night as a blind person was extremely disturbing and it made him anxious. The perception was that, because he was male, he would be all right. This was a disability issue, and it was often forgotten. Cllr James said that that there had been a marked increase in people saying that they were more worried about going out at night compared to during the day. This may have been because people had been going out less generally during the pandemic. The usual default position was that women were the ones who were warned not to go out at night, or to always get a taxi, and to be safe and careful, yet young men were statistically more likely to be attacked.

5. TOUR OF THE TOWN

Cllr Rowland said that it would have been useful to have more people to facilitate the tour, and to assist, but that it had been very useful to make officers aware of the problems faced by disabled people. Sam Shean had made lots of notes. The group had talked about crossings and surfaces and the difficulties that people who were blind, deaf or wheelchair and scooter users faced. She said that the Council would be looking to fund tactile paving, among other things, throughout borough during the year. She said that it should be repeated. There had been 8 people in attendance, on a cold, windy day. Cllr James said that this was a good result.

Helen Bryant said that it had been very positive, and she said that she had been very happy to be able to go completely over the podium in the middle of Broad Street, which used to have steps on one side, and had been a problem for many, many years. She had reported problems with it in the past and she said that she knew someone who had been hurt because of it. Helen had thanked Sam, both at the previous meeting and on the tour. Cllr Rowland thought it was interesting to find out how wheelchair users found safer routes round the town to avoid known problems. Sam Shean had been particularly surprised by one member of the group saying that she used one crossing that wasn't an official crossing, because it was where there were two dropped kerbs opposite one another, and so it was convenient.

Stu Pearce said that he had find the tour very useful and that he was also very pleased that the podium had been made safe; it had looked nice, but it would

trip you up. He had been pleased to be able to talk to Sam Shean, and to show him the problem areas, and to find out what could be done. Bob Bristow said that it had been useful to point out crossing points that were good for people who could see but were not good for people who were blind or visually impaired. He had mentioned that there was still too much pavement furniture. Bob was pleased that Sam Shean had taken notice of what was being said, which was very positive. Cllr James said that she felt that there was an openness from Highways to make access to the town centre better.

6. DISABILITY PRIDE

Helen Bryant said that there had been real progress with this, and that it was going to go ahead. Cllr James said that Cllr Rowland had had a lot to do with this progress. She said that there had been events for other minority groups in the town, such as Pride, but nothing much for disabled people had been held. Cllr Rowland said that there was more work to be done but a small event would be launched this year, to get people used to such an event and have something bigger next year. The events held in Brighton were a good model to follow. There were to be stalls run by various associations, charities and other groups such as Reading Association for the Blind, but also there was to be some entertainment on a stage(s) to highlight that disabled people of all kinds mattered and could contribute to society. It was probably to be held in Broad Street. Reading UK and Readipop were both enthusiastic about it. Each performance group would include disabled people. It was in the spirit of “nothing about us without us”. Disabled people were to be presented in a positive light and make their presence felt.

Alice Carter asked if Brighter Futures were to be part of the event, as they were involved with disabled children’s services, and that Reading Families Forum would want to be involved too. Cllr Rowland said that it was still very early in the planning stages, the key people were signed on, and now was the time for others to be involved. She said that Helen might wish to share the video from Brighton Pride. Helen agreed and said that the Reading event was on in September: Reading UK had said that it would be a good idea to hold Reading Disability Pride in tandem with another event that was happening in town that month.

[Disability Pride Brighton](#)

7. TAXIS IN READING

Helen said that unfortunately no-one from Licensing was able to attend, but she was aware that Mark Groves, Senior Licensing & Enforcement Officer, wanted to get more wheelchair accessible taxis in the town. There were very few electric Wheelchair Accessible Vehicles (WAVs) available, and those that

were available were very expensive, which taxi drivers would find difficult, and they would probably be resistant to the change. Alice said that she knew that electric vehicles were a good idea, but she said that only one electric WAV was available and the down payment on the Motability Scheme was £46,000, which was far too expensive for many. She was worried that if the Council said that there were only going to be electric taxis allowed in the town it would make it even more difficult for people with large power chairs. "One size fits all" fitted nobody. Buses were not perfect either. Wheelchairs were getting larger and did not all fit in Hackney Carriages. She said it would be interesting to know how many WAV taxis were in Reading, and how they could be booked. Helen said that Reading taxis and Yellow Cabs had been very good in the past. Stu said that Yellow Cabs had once rescued his mother in Basingstoke because her mobility scooter had broken down, so he could recommend them.

Cllr Rowland said that she was on the Licensing Committee and although they were promoting turning all stock to electric by 2030, no taxis were cheap, and the taxi industry was struggling, probably because of COVID-19. She said that she would bring the matter up, and there may be funding streams that could be used. Cllr James reminded the Group that Readibus was still available. Tom said that charging time was quite long on electric vehicles, which would take taxis out of service for long periods if they needed recharging during the day. Hydrogen fuel cells, as used in some buses in London, and a train in Germany, meant that charging times were less.

Helen said that Mark Groves wanted to get volunteers to try some taxis out; she had already sent an email asking for people. If anybody wanted to join, or knew anybody who would like to be there they should contact her. Wheelchair users were to be the focus, but others should also join in.

8. AOB

Cllr Rowland said that if anybody was connected with a charity or organisation who would be interested in having a stall they should email her -

Karen.Rowland@reading.gov.uk and c.c. Helen Bryant - Helen.Bryant@reading.gov.uk

Cllr James said that a group called The Engine Shed operated out of the Katesgrove Children's Centre and had model trains; they worked with children of all abilities, so they might wish to be involved.

Brian Oatway mentioned the issue of cars and vans parked on drives but partly on pavements, where there were double yellow lines on the road; he asked if the council vans with cameras caught these instances, because his understanding was that this was still against the law. Brian also said that overhanging branches on pavements were a problem, as well as overgrown hedges. Every time he had asked at the Council if something could be done he

had been told that it was bird nesting season. This was said every time he reported it but it could not be bird-nesting season all through the year. Cllr James said that she would investigate the problem of cars on pavements.

Cllr Rowland said that she had gone round with Georgios Sergakis, and there were lots of areas where wheelchair users had had to go off the pavements because of vans and cars blocking them. She said that there needed to be a way to report the problem and have it reported as a problem for wheelchair access (or with a pram or mobility scooter). It was an urgent problem. Bob said that wheelie bins were still in the way in Alpine Street, and it was causing problems; pushchairs could not get through. Cllr James knew that this was an issue and she had knocked on doors to ask people to return their bins - sometimes they were out for a week. She said that she had asked if stickers could be put on bins causing obstructions. Bob said that there were bins on the pavements on a junction off Southampton Street; pedestrians almost had to go into the road to get past them. Cllr James said that the storms had knocked some bins over in that area and there had been rubbish all over the streets. Education was needed. Rented accommodation was a problem because not all housemates were as virtuous as others when putting out and taking in the bins.

Alice Carter asked what progress had been made with Prospect Park. Cllr Rowland said that she was unsure, but the mini-golf was being put in and was to have been finished. They were on course to be on schedule. Further discussion needed to be had with the Working Group and the Task and Finish Group for Play. Alice said that there was a lot of scope to benefit a lot of people, so it was an important park to get right. Cllr Rowland agreed and said that at the major destination parks there needed to be something special. There was something for disabled people in most parks now. Cllr James said that the parks were a credit to Cllr Rowland, and she said that the Parks Team deserved credit too.

Tom mentioned the issue of discretionary disabled bays outside people's houses for those with Blue Badges; these were not enforceable. He had spoken to some people who said that they had had to give up the use of their vehicles because they were unable to park outside or near to their house. He said that this was something that the Council should deal with. Matt Rodda MP was taking it very seriously. One woman with a disabled child had paid for a bay outside her house but often found that she could not use it because someone else was using it. It was worse on estates, but terraced streets were also a problem.

Helen said that she thought that those bays were always going to be discretionary; and this was throughout the UK. Tom said that in London ways had been found to solve the problem.

Tom also said that the dropped kerbs outside people's drives caused problems because they cover the whole pavement, but they didn't need to. Stu said that it could be a trip hazard, especially if you were blind. Bob said it would depend on the width of the pavement. People would scrape the bottoms of their cars. Narrow pavements could be a problem. Cllr Rowland asked Tom if he could send in some pictures of these dropped kerbs.

Tom said that there was a national consultation about cars parking on pavements; the problem was out of control. If there were a way of putting a line on the pavement stating that if you crossed the line with your car, you got a fixed penalty for crossing it it might help. Stu said that Guide Dogs had been campaigning that there should be no parking on pavements, unless necessary as it was in London; it was against the law there. It worked there because where there was a narrow street, there was a line painted to leave just the right amount of space for someone to get through on the pavement if a car is half parked on it, but it also allowed emergency vehicles through. It was going through Parliament, but the process was taking a long time: it was not considered important enough. Tom said that he was not aware of this. Cllr James had seen this before; drivers did not want to get their wing mirrors clipped; it was unreasonable to block off houses. Stu said that at 3pm, when schools were emptying, it was very difficult near Pottery Lane; he was often abused by parents if he asked politely if cars could be moved. Bob said that this was a very long-standing problem. Stu said that it was illegal to drive on the pavement, but not illegal to park on the pavement.

Tom said that there were some areas where the refuse crews were supposed to return the bins to the properties, but this did not always happen. This was a quality issue. Cllr James said that the team had had people off sick and capacity had been low, hence the suspension of the green waste service. Cllr James said that support was offered to some people to move their bins.

Georgio Sergakis and Nina Crispin introduced themselves. Georgio said it was a pleasure to be in the group.

Cllr James said that she would no longer be Chair of the Group, but that she might join in the Group at some point. She would be attending the Reading Pride event. She thanked the group. Helen thanked Cllr James for all her work. The Group would miss Cllr James, and she said she would miss the group.

Cllr Rowland said that Highways should be brought forward to the next meeting; Sam Shean was good at listening and understanding the needs of disabled people.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

23 June 2022 - in the Civic Offices and on Teams.