

**HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE
10 MARCH 2022**

Present: Councillor Davies (Chair);
Councillors Barnett-Ward, Emberson, Hacker, Hoskin, Leng,
McGonigle, Mitchell, Mpofu-Coles, O'Connell, Rowland, Rynn, R Singh,
Sokale and J Williams.

27. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of 10 November 2021 were confirmed as a correct record.

28. MINUTES OF OTHER BODIES

The Minutes of the following meeting were submitted:

Community Safety Partnership - 11 November 2021.

Resolved - That the Minutes be received.

29. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND COUNCILLORS

<u>Questioner</u>	<u>Subject</u>	<u>Reply</u>
Jennifer Leach	Reading Festival Waste	Cllr Barnett-Ward

The full text of the question and reply was made available on the Reading Borough Council website.

30. READING FESTIVAL 2021

Further to Minute 21 of the meeting held on 11 March 2020, James Crosbie, Assistant Director of Planning, Transport and Regulatory Services, introduced Noel Painting and Victoria Chapman of Festival Republic who gave a presentation on the 2021 Reading Festival. The presentation particularly focused on the issues of safeguarding, welfare and sustainability:

- Festival Republic had concentrated on providing a safe and secure festival and had introduced robust Covid-19 policies;
- Pre-event communications had included low carbon travel, a tent-buying guide and other sustainability measures that could be taken by festival-goers, all of which had been underpinned by the Take It Home message;
- Carbon emissions had levelled over recent festivals, although in part this could be attributed to the significant increase in capacity;
- The communications had made it clear that only tents which had been packed away and handed in could be re-used by charities;
- Food and beverage vendors had used only recyclable items included food packaging and cutlery. There had been a deposit on drinks cups, which led to six tonnes of cups being collected for reuse or recycling;
- Artists had supported and promoted sustainability during their sets;
- Peer to peer engagement had worked well to normalise sustainability among festival-goers;

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- Safeguarding partner agencies had worked well together to provide a safe environment for festival-goers. There had been plenty of signage to the right areas and agencies to help attendees find the support they needed easily and quickly;
- The relatively short lead-in time before the festival had led to some issues with lack of appropriately trained staff;
- The intention was to build on the successes of the 2019 and 2021 festivals to deliver further sustainability measures and ensure the safety and well-being of all attendees.

The Committee discussed the presentation and took the opportunity to ask further questions of Festival Republic which covered the following areas:

- Front of House drug-testing could be introduced. There was a risk that it could lead individuals to have a false sense of security especially as most recent drug-related deaths at various festivals had been due to mixing drugs or mixing drugs and alcohol, although this could be covered by providing clear information and advice at the testing point;
- Festival Republic had set up a working group with the appropriate partner agencies to deal with the unlicensed and unregulated water taxis operating during the Festival, to further protect attendees as they travelled between sites;
- Festival Republic were continuing to investigate measures to encourage people not to abandon tents and other camping equipment when they left the site. As well as the Take Your Tent Home message they had been considering having initiatives such as people on the camp-sites helping to take tents down, competitions to pack away pop up tents in the fastest time and increased tent rental offers;
- Further measures aimed at reducing carbon emissions included a move to use more power from the grid to reduce reliance on generators, continuing to promote green travel as Reading had such good transport links, reducing the carbon footprint of the food served by vendors, use of accredited suppliers and targeted communications to festival-goers.

Resolved -

That Noel Painting and Victoria Chapman be thanked for an interesting and informative presentation.

31. READING RENT WITH CONFIDENCE SCHEME

Further to Minute 18 of the meeting held on 10 November 2021, James Crosbie, Assistant Director of Planning, Transport and Regulatory Services, presented a short video which demonstrated the customer-facing side of the Council's new Rent with Confidence website.

The video showed the various stages that both tenants and landlords would go through to search available properties or to market their properties to prospective tenants. The aim was to encourage landlords to work with the Council to provide good quality accommodation to its tenants in the private rented sector and make it easier for the tenants to find a suitable and safe home. The video showed the steps that the Landlord

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would need to go through and the information that they would need to provide before advertising their properties, and the checks that officers would undertake to verify the information.

The website also contained links to the various pages on the Council's website to help both tenants and landlords, including the Safety Shaun videos, the Rent Guarantee Scheme and to other agencies that could help tenants if they were struggling to pay rent, reducing the risk of eviction.

There would be a programme of communications when the scheme was launched later in 2022, and it was hoped that Councillors would direct their constituents to the scheme to assist residents in finding safe and suitable accommodation.

Resolved - That the presentation on progress of the Rent with Confidence website be noted.

32. READING, PLACE OF CULTURE EVALUATION REPORT

Further to Minute 20 of the meeting held on 10 March 2021, the Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services submitted a report which informed the Committee of the successes of the Reading, Place of Culture project, sought agreement for the proposed Action Plan and authority for the Assistant Director for Culture, in consultation with the Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation, to incorporate the actions within existing or emerging delivery plans.

The report explained that Reading had been awarded £558,400 through the Great Places Scheme for delivery of outcomes from 2017 to 2021 of the Reading, Place of Culture project (RPoC). The project had aimed to foster a culture of collaboration across sectors - where caring for, and engaging, people would be achieved in partnership between the public, private and voluntary sectors, and specifically targeted health and mental wellbeing and employment outcomes. The report set out the outcomes and successes of the five strands: Festivals, Cultural Commissioning Programme, Research, Culture and Business Engagement, and Reach and Engagement. Key outcomes had included:

- Developing strategic partnerships;
- Increasing arts, culture and heritage engagement;
- Increasing pride and perceptions of Reading's offer;
- Strengthening the arts, culture and heritage sector;
- Creating evidence, tools and models to show the value of culture;
- The benefits of cross-partner and cross-project working.

An action plan, which set out conclusions and recommended legacy action was included in Section 5 of the report. The actions would be incorporated into existing and new service plans as appropriate, to ensure that the legacy of the project was embedded into the Council's work going forward.

Sam Lloyd, Starting Point, attended the meeting and explained how Reading, Place of Culture had helped with the work of the organisation reaching young people facing disadvantage and delivering real world projects.

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Resolved:

- (1) That the successes of the Reading, Place of Culture project (Great Places Funding) be noted;**
- (2) That the action plan set out in section the report be agreed and the Assistant Director for Culture in consultation with the Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation, be authorised to incorporate the actions within existing or emerging delivery plans.**

33. LOW CARBON HOUSING ACTION PLANS

Further to Minute 9 of the meeting held on 6 July 2021, the Executive Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services submitted a report seeking agreement for the Low Carbon Housing Action Plan for RBC housing and the Low Carbon Housing Action Plan for private sector housing, which were attached to the report as Appendices 1 and 2 respectively.

The report explained that the Council had a role to play in leading by example, demonstrating to other property owners in social and private sectors how emissions from housing could be reduced, especially as it owned approximately 10% of the housing stock in Reading. Making these improvements could also stimulate local supply chains and skills. The Council's influence over, and the resources it had available to devote to, improvement of its own housing were significantly greater than it could devote to the private sector, and this was reflected in the relative scope of the Action Plans. The report added that funding a programme of the scale required remained the key challenge but by combining the Council's resources with grant funding, officers could begin to scale up existing efforts. The report noted that Reading's climate emergency declaration had made it clear that additional powers and resources would be needed from Government to enable the achievement of net zero by 2030, and private sector retrofit remained one of the key policy areas where this was still the case.

Resolved: That the Low Carbon Housing Action Plan for RBC Housing and the Low Carbon Housing Action Plan for Private Sector Housing be noted and endorsed.

34. HOUSING UPDATE AND PROGRAMME OF WORKS TO COUNCIL HOUSING STOCK 2022-23

The Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services submitted a report which highlighted key achievements of the Housing Service over the past financial year and set out the work programme for the Council's housing stock for the next financial year. The following documents were appended to the report:

- Appendix 1 - Works to Housing Stock 22/23 Housing Revenue Account (HRA);
- Appendix 2 - Works to Housing Stock 22/23 General Fund;
- Appendix 3 - Works to Housing Stock by Ward 22/23.

The report stated that over the past year, the achievements of the Service had included:

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- No homeless children had to spend Christmas in shared Bed and Breakfast and no homeless families had been placed in shared Bed and Breakfast accommodation for the 4th year running;
- A new campaign to prevent homelessness had been launched 'Click Before You Evict' to encourage landlords to engage with the service rather than evicting their tenants;
- The Housing Service had won the Council's Team Award in the Team Reading People's Choice Awards in National Customer Services Week for the wholesale response to rough sleeping during the pandemic;
- Delivery of 40 modular homes for people with a history of rough sleeping incorporating 24/7 intensive support on site provided by the Council's commissioned service provider, St Mungos;
- A new Housing Allocations Scheme had been adopted for implementation later in the year;
- Provision of continued support and debt advice to our tenants had helped to maintain top quartile rent collection levels of over 97.7 % despite increasing financial pressures due to the pandemic;
- Installation of the Council's first domestic air source heat pumps: 40 had been installed in properties in Granville Road Southcote;
- The refurbishment of 12 properties in Kentwood to reduce carbon emissions and improve energy efficiency, including the installation of new external wall insulation and render, triple glazed windows and mechanical ventilation with heat recovery systems;
- The Local Authority New Build Programme had delivered 22 new homes and a Community Centre, all built to the Council's standards for low carbon homes. There were also a further 272 homes in the pipeline to complete over the next 4 years;
- The service had won Homebuilder of the Year (16,000 or under) in the National UK Housing Awards.

The report also updated the Committee on the results of the Tenant Satisfaction Survey which had been carried out during April and May 2020, which found that although satisfaction levels were still generally high, there had been a reduction in some areas.

The report explained that Housing Property Services had a responsibility to ensure that the housing stock was well maintained in accordance with the Decent Homes Standard and that Council homes were safe and healthy places to live, including the improvement of the thermal efficiency of its stock in line with the Council's Climate Change ambitions ensuring homes could be heated efficiently and cost effectively, thus reducing their carbon footprint and reducing fuel poverty. The service also worked to improve the wider environment on housing estates to meet the needs and aspirations of both the Council and the tenants. Appendices 1 and 2 set out details of the works to be carried out and the associated costs for the Council's HRA stock and the General Fund Housing Stock respectively for 2022-23. Appendix 3 gave a breakdown of the programmes of work by ward.

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Resolved:

- (1) That the key achievements of the Housing Service in the past financial year and the planned programme of works to Council Housing stock for 2022/23 be noted;**
- (2) That the Assistant Director of Housing & Communities, in consultation with the Lead Councillor for Housing, be authorised to: (a) tender; and (b) enter into all necessary contracts for individual schemes within the 2022/23 work programme as set out in Appendices 1 and 2 of the report subject to sufficient funding being available in the approved Budget to meet the cost of the schemes.**

35. ALLOTMENTS SELF-MANAGEMENT PLAN

Further to Minute 24 of the meeting held on 10 November 2021, the Executive Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services submitted a report which updated the Committee on the progress towards establishing self-management as an option for managing the Council's 20 allotment sites. The following documents were appended to the report:

Appendix A: Allotment Action Plan 2022;

Appendix B: Allotment Self-Management Plan and Case Studies.

The report explained that project implementation had increased since the temporary appointment of an Allotment Project Officer in October 2021. Progress and further action would be split into three Plans: Self-Management, Site Maintenance, and Tenancy Management. These Plans overlapped and were inter-related but had been split to provide a clearer picture to specific stakeholders of activity that was relevant to them.

The report added that to date 14 of the Council's 20 allotment sites were currently engaging with the self-management programme and the Allotment Project Officer would working with the remaining six during Spring 2022.

The report also explained the activities that would count as acts of self-management that each site was either currently carrying out or was expressing interest in doing. The first steps a site group must take would be to collate its own tenant contact list and enhance their on-site communication, then appoint a Council Liaison Rep through whom communication would flow. Appendix B to the report also set out three case studies from Goddards Farm, Scours Lane and Newcastle Road, which were sites that were advancing well.

Resolved: That the progress of the Allotments Action Plan and Allotments Self-Management Plan, and the further work required to develop greater levels of self-management across all Council allotment sites be noted.

36. REWILDING AND THE WILDFLOWER PLAN. INCREASING BIODIVERSITY ON HIGHWAY VERGES AND OTHER PUBLIC LAND

Further to Minute 8 of the meeting held on 15 December 2020, the Executive Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services submitted a report which gave details

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of the Rewilding project results to date, the operational changes that had been necessary to achieve the results and set out the recommended next steps contained in the draft updated Wildflower Plan which was attached as an Appendix to the report.

The report explained that following recommendations in the Wildflower Plan, these changes had been made in 2021

- Some sites had been sown with locally sourced wildflowers and cut only at the end of the season to allow establishment;
- Additional marginal rewilding (changing the mowing regime around parks boundaries and margins) had been trialled at 12 locations in parks, adding around 2ha (5%) to the current area, 41 hectares, of conservation grassland already managed by the Council;
- The Council had agreed to work with business partners to create enhanced-flowering, wild-looking commercial centre schemes that would raise the profile of the rewilding initiatives and contribute to refocusing perceptions of Reading as a 'green/wild town'.

The report also explained that an assessment of the Year 2 programme was included in the revised Wildflower Plan attached in the Appendix. However, monitoring carried out over the course of the year indicated that there was public support for marginal rewilding in parks and that there was no noticeable improvement in species diversity from sowing wildflower seed on poorer sites. It was too early to assess the effectiveness of the BID-funded 'enhanced' schemes in Reading, because the flower-rich turf had only been laid in the autumn and would be assessed over the extended flowering season from spring to autumn 2022. The planned change from an annual cut-and-collect to a three-times-a-season cut-and-collect on those sites with less diversity of flora had not taken place because of difficulty in securing the right machinery and a bid had been made to purchase small cut-and-collect mowing equipment to enable this to start in 2022. A further result of the rewilding project had been the spontaneous involvement of residents in the creation of local wild areas

The appended Wildflower Plan recommended the continuation of the current programme on highways verges and in parks. The Plan also included looking at the margins of allotments sites for future rewilding, as not only did allotments sites offer potential for biodiversity enhancement, but there were clear synergies between habitat for pollinators and the presence of pollinators for growing fruit and vegetables.

Resolved:

- (1) That the progress of the Re-wilding experimental project in 2021 be noted;**
- (2) That the recommendations set out in the Wildflower Plan be endorsed.**

(The meeting opened at 6.32pm and closed at 9.17pm).