

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

21 SEPTEMBER 2022

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 1

J Wellum to ask the Lead Councillor for Leisure and Culture:

GLL - Targeted work in the community

The authority awarded a contract to manage all the authority's leisure centres to Greenwich Leisure Centres Ltd (trading as Better). Promoting use of sports and leisure facilities to potential users - "with targeted work in the community to reach those in most need and work towards reducing health inequalities" was a stated reason for awarding the contract to GLL.

What "targeted work" have Better done since taking over "management" of the four leisure centres in July 2021? Please illustrate the response with verifiable data evidencing for each activity: a brief description, the number of pre-covid visits, and number of post July 2021 visits.

REPLY by Councillor Barnett-Ward (Lead Councillor for Leisure and Culture):

Reducing health inequalities through targeted work with those residents who are most in need is a vital aspect of the council's contract with GLL. This was important when the contract went out to tender, and is even more so today as the pandemic has widened existing health inequalities.

Before this contract started free or discounted access was provided through Your Reading Passport (YRP) scheme. This did not allow for effective targeting, something that the council is seeking to improve through the new contract with revised target categories and new activities. This means that a direct comparison between numbers participating prior to contract start is not possible as the offer has been improved and expanded. In addition, all the Leisure centres have been at least partially closed for extended periods over the last year or have had periods of severely restricted access to prevent Covid transmission. Nationally facilities are operating with admissions running 60% to 70% of pre-covid figures, Reading mirrors this national picture.

A significant focus of the first year to 18 months of the contract is to improve facilities, the dated facility quality being the biggest barrier to use. Addressing this will benefit all users, targeted or otherwise.

GLL are currently providing the following:

- 12 week adult weight management classes (with free membership) introduced, so far 2 at Rivermead and 1 at South Reading, 12 attendees per class. This will grow to 8 courses per year. None were provided prior to contract.
- A Physical Activity Referral Scheme with customers progress being monitored has started. This has 176 attendees' participants join since July 2021 and is targeted to grow to 500 per annum. This is a 15% increase on the previous referral scheme

which was unmonitored, relying on a membership being offered to customers following an assessment.

- Free Ukrainian refugee memberships issued to 70 customers. None were issued pre covid.
- Healthy walks have restarted and are administered by GLL, Numbers fell to approximately 60 per week from 200 but is being relaunched by GLL.
- An over 65's club is operating at Rivermead, approximately 70 people attending every week. Attendance is lower than precontract but reflects the changes in leisure centre use being experienced nationally.
- Swimming sessions for people with Special Educational Needs and Disability are now running at Meadway and South Reading. None were offered pre contract.
- Nearly 2000 free swims were issued in the first quarter of this financial year by GLL - a continuation of the free swimming YRP initiative.
- GLL have appointed a new Health Communities Manager who will be introducing, pre and post habilitation cancer care, diabetes management and other initiatives developed with Public Health colleagues.
- Dementia friendly Audits and staff training being undertaken at all GLL Sites

Further targeted activities will be introduced as the new facilities open.

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

21 SEPTEMBER 2022

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 2

J Wellum to ask the Lead Councillor for Leisure and Culture:

GLL - Community Benefit

Greenwich Leisure Ltd is accepted by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs as a charity for tax purposes - organisations with this status have reduced tax liabilities. In the annual return to 31/12/2021 Greenwich Leisure Ltd state in section 7B that they are a community benefit society. Specifically GLL state in section 7B.3 that they "improved access to services, achieving social impact goals, reducing inequalities, promoting empowerment, integration, cohesion, health and wellbeing" and in section 7B.4 that "The society works for the general public and the communities that are local to the individual centres". The authority reports in Transparency Code 2015 section 28 that it has paid GLL around £1 million, this is in addition to the £400K covid bailout.

Please identify the local actions and value to the local Reading community that GLL have provided as monitored by the authority?

REPLY by Councillor Barnett-Ward (Lead Councillor for Leisure and Culture):

GLL are working with Reading Borough Council on the delivery of a brand-new state of the art leisure facility at Rivermead Leisure centre, and a brand-new community pool at Palmer Park Sports Stadium along with improved gym and fitness facilities. Both centres include information hubs, children's soft play centres and cafes for families to enjoy.

There have been extensive improvements at South Reading Leisure Centre with the gym, reception, class area and dry side changing rooms all benefiting from refurbishment and improvement. The wet side changing rooms at South Reading will also be improved in 2023.

Meadway Sports Centre has had an extensive refurbishment of the gym, reception and changing areas whilst creating a new welcoming fitness class studio. Refurbishments to the wet side changing areas will take place in 2023 as well.

GLL have continued to provide free swimming to users of the former Your Reading Passport (YRP) with 1,943 free swims taking place between April and June 2022 alone. There is a vast swimming programme across Rivermead, South Reading and Meadway with over 1,900 children in the swim school programme.

GLL have launched the Healthwise programme, which supports Reading residents with medical conditions that prevent them from becoming physically inactive. Over 300 referrals have been received from GPs and hospitals to the Physical Activity Referral Scheme (PARS), Adult Weight Management classes (AWM) and Cardiac programme.

GLL have Real Living Wage accreditation as well as offer an apprenticeship programme to encourage work opportunities.

GLL have built on existing relationships with local sports clubs and user groups such as Reading Swimming Club, Reading Athletics and Palmer Park Velo and Reading Road Runners to name a few. Additionally, the GLL Sports Foundation, which supports talented athletes across the UK with financial, training memberships and sport science, has supported 8 local athletes to date.

GLL continue to offer a competitive, affordable membership and activity price. The Council are working continuously with GLL to improve services and monitor GLL regularly against a range of indicators to ensure quality of service.

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

21 SEPTEMBER 2022

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 3

J Wellum to ask the Lead Councillor for Leisure and Culture:

GLL - Financing

Financing the contract between GLL and Reading Borough Council, including the development programmes at Rivermead and Palmer Park, is a complete mystery to local ratepayers. Prima Facie ratepayers pay twice. All ratepayers pay through their council tax and pay directly to GLL through membership and specific activity charges. Please explain in “plain English” how provision of leisure facilities by GLL is financed?

REPLY by Councillor Barnett-Ward (Lead Councillor for Leisure and Culture):

I will start by referring you to the report to Policy Committee on 20 January 2020 that approved the £40m investment in leisure facilities. This report included a detailed financial analysis of the estimated costs of the project, including the cost of financing the capital expenditure.

I won't repeat the detail in that report but, in summary, it shows that the cost of financing the capital investment in our leisure centres will be more than covered by the savings being made through the contract with GLL.

In terms of the revenue costs of running the centres, you will be aware that all council services are funded through a variety of sources, including council tax, business rates, government grants and charges made to the users of those services. That is true whether those services are delivered in-house by the Council or whether they are contracted out to a third party.

The full detail of how the council's budget is calculated is detailed in the report to Council on 23 February 2022.

This report includes the methodology the Council uses to calculate how much Council Tax it needs to raise annually. In simple terms this is done by estimating the cost of providing Council services and then netting off our estimated income, including the fees and charges paid by the users of our leisure centres. In future, those service users will be paying GLL, rather than the council and GLL will then be making payments to the council estimated at more than £16m over 25 years.

As you can see, this means that council tax payers are not paying twice for these services as any income raised by such fees and charges is excluded from the council tax requirement.

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

21 SEPTEMBER 2022

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 1

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Leisure and Culture:

When will Palmer Park swimming pool open?

It is almost 6 years since Arthur Hill swimming pool in east Reading was closed. Green councillors and residents are looking forward to the Palmer Park swimming pool opening. Please can the Lead Councillor confirm when this will happen?

REPLY by Councillor Barnett-Ward (Lead Councillor for Leisure and Culture):

The Council's website contains up-to-date information on the progress of Palmer Park Swimming Pool, including the projected opening date. Construction projects, especially during times where unanticipated global events have an enormous disruptive effect upon supply chains, are complex, but the facility remains on course for a winter 2022 opening.

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

21 SEPTEMBER 2022

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 2

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Community Safety:

Cleaning Graffiti Tags On Phone Cabinets

Residents often raise graffiti tags on phone cabinets. Council officers have informed me that they used to have enforcement powers to make utility cabinet owners remove graffiti, or the council could do it and recharge the owner, but this is no longer the case. Is it possible to give the relevant team these enforcement powers again?

REPLY by Councillor Rowland (Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Community Safety):

I thank Councillor White for his question.

There is no doubt that residents are frustrated about what appears to be persistent graffiti on utility boxes and phone kiosks. As Cllr White is aware, graffiti is an act of anti-social vandalism and the Council, has within the past two years, established a Graffiti Removal Policy, and continues to appropriate funds through CIL funding, in responding to this issue. This has been working well, although there are a number of factors that we are seeing that make graffiti an ongoing source of frustration and concern.

For clarification, our Graffiti Removal Policy allows us to remove up to 1 square metre free of charge from private property with the owner's permission. We will either 'paint out' the graffiti or use a chemical removal process. Graffiti above 1 square metre is chargeable, and we will provide a quotation and will attend once payment has been received.

The Council will remove graffiti and spillages from the public highway free of charge. This service also includes the cleaning of road signs and name plates. Racist or offensive graffiti is removed free of charge within 24hrs of notification.

The persistence of graffiti not only in Reading, but across the country has been one of some concern. As our Policing teams are continually strained with lack of resourcing not being provided by the national Government and Councils work with our own reduced staffs to pick up the slack around persistent anti-social graffiti, we are also faced with increasing statutory companies adding even more utility boxes to this picture. An excellent example of this is the current installation of City Fibre boxes around the town by Instalcom; yet another company to have to put pressure on to take proper care of their utility boxes.

The Council will of course continue to work with all of these businesses and Statutory Undertakers, including these Utility companies, Network Rail and defined educational establishments such as Schools and Colleges, as appropriate, to remove and/or prevent graffiti, for a charge.

It is worth noting, that all Utility companies have a legal obligation to keep their utilities safe, functional and in good repair. The Council has over many years been in dialogue with Utility companies to assist with the removal of graffiti from their apparatus, admittedly not always successfully. This is frustrating for everyone, when the law and their obligation clearly states that they need to be attending to this.

It has always been the Council's main objective to work with the utility companies to ensure that their apparatus is kept in an acceptable condition. Over the years, there have been a number of attempts to set up maintenance agreements, but utility companies have generally resisted this in favour of national contracts within their own teams to ensure that utility boxes and kiosks are kept in good condition and clear of graffiti.

I also wish to be clear here with your query: Enforcement powers have always been available to Officers under Sections 48-52 of the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003. I have tried to bottom out the information that you seemingly received which has led to your query and your assertion that Officers "no longer have those powers" and that we should look to re-establish them; something that is unnecessary as we have never lost these powers. I can only understand that in a recent shift of responsibilities for tackling anti-social graffiti within the Team that this information was given to you during that shift and thus caused the confusion. Those powers remain with our Officers.

Residents can report incidents of graffiti directly to the utility company, online or via telephone. Reports via the Love Clean Reading App will be referred to the appropriate utility company for removal, if the works are not carried out within a specified time Enforcement Officers will issue notice to begin the legal process for its removal.

Should a Utility company fail to remove a reported graffiti after a reasonable amount of time, the Council can investigate the possibility of issuing a 'Defacement Removal Notice', these are notices that Local Authorities can serve on the owners of street furniture statutory undertakers, whose property is defaced with graffiti.

These notices oblige the recipients of the notice to remove the specified graffiti within 28 days or the local authority can remove it and recover the costs. The Council will, of course, continue to liaise with Utility Companies to keep tackling graffiti as it occurs. We also are looking to tackle the root causes and challenges of persistent anti-social graffiti with the Police and our own ASB Team and to sidelining perpetrators as they are caught.

Finally, we are also supportive of the Local Art Groups who have, with the apparatus owner's permission, used street art successfully to reduce the amount of anti-social graffiti to these utility cabinets. Those joyful expressions that unite our communities can only be seen as a positive on top of the challenges that we face in tackling the anti-social graffiti issue.

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

21 SEPTEMBER 2022

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 3

Councillor White to ask the Leader of the Council:

Providing Warm Spaces This Winter

Even with the government's recent announcement on capping the price of energy for households many people will be unable to afford to heat their homes adequately this winter. Other councils such as Gateshead are working with the voluntary sector to provide a network of warm spaces for residents unable to heat their homes. These warm spaces will be open and accessible throughout the week - libraries, community centres and other venues. Will the Council commit to taking the lead on this in Reading?

REPLY by Councillor Brock (Leader of the Council):

The Council is very aware of the concerns of residents about the rising cost of living as we approach the winter months, and of course provision of warm spaces is one of the options that the Council is already considering, alongside other opportunities to either provide more direct support to residents or enable them to reduce their living costs. Naturally, we will be looking to co-ordinate our efforts with community groups and faith organisations, among others across the borough, who are similarly considering offering such help during the coming months.

But I want to be entirely clear that provision of warm community spaces as a method of making an intolerable situation very slightly more tolerable is not something that we should be celebrating or heralding as a solution. It is a national disgrace that we, by which I mean local government and our communities, are having to embrace proposals that seem barely fit for the nineteenth century. Independent of the Government's rather belated, but welcome, announcement on energy bills, their failure to treat the crisis as a systemic failure in need of a systematic solution will have a real human cost. The thought of people across the country, in whatever numbers, having to shelter from the cold in a library or a community centre when they should be enjoying the safety and security - in the broadest sense - of their own home must be recognised as a national failure.

I am therefore focused on those things we might do in Reading to help keep residents safely and securely in their homes. We have already, in our Budget, enhanced the local Council Tax support scheme, currently benefitting almost 8,000 households across the town. The Revenues and Benefits team are undertaking a targeted exercise to encourage residents who may be entitled to the reduction to take it up. We have also put support in place to directly help residents with utility costs via an energy voucher scheme, with over 13,000 issued in the past twelve months. We have also held our Council Home rent increases below their permitted rise. I would appeal to the Government for more funding and more powers to allow us to do more.

Council Officers and partners from the voluntary and community sector have quickly established a Cost-of-Living Task & Finish Group to co-ordinate our support to those at risk of experiencing hardship due to rising prices. This is in addition to the broad range of advice and guidance on energy efficiency offered by the Council and local voluntary

sector. And because I am not ignorant of pragmatic realities, we have also put more resources into supporting local foodbanks, the provision of warm clothing and blankets, and community groups providing meals to residents.

The Council has also recently commissioned a number of voluntary organisations operating under the umbrella of the Tackling Poverty Partnership to provide targeted support for residents across the borough who are experiencing financial hardship, as well as commissioning a new debt advice service. Next week, I will be meeting with a local community bank to discuss ways in which we might collaborate to help residents receive sustainable financial support via the credit union model.

Finally, it is crucial that our residents are able to easily find out about what help and support is available to them if they are experiencing financial difficulties or hardship, and I would urge anyone who wants information about this to visit our Money Matters website (www.reading.gov.uk/money-matters) so they can get in touch with the right person or organisation to help them, or to contact the Council. Tenants of Reading Borough Council who are struggling financially can contact our in-house advice team on 0118 937 2197 or via debt.advice@reading.gov.uk.