

## COUNCIL MEETING - 31 JANUARY 2023

### (A) PETITIONS

None

### (B) QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

None

### (C) QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

1. Councillor Keane to ask the Lead Councillor for Education and Public Health:

#### A Request for 'Period Products' to be made available in Public Buildings and Toilets in Reading

Recently Oxford City Council agreed to provide free sanitary towels and tampons in the city's public buildings for women and girls to be able to access as and when necessary. This should be a basic right for all who need them. It seems very sad that we even have to ask this but after 12 years of austerity and the economic crisis effecting household incomes so drastically that we should provide this support to protect the dignity and the health and well-being of women and girls. Therefore, please can the Council commit to providing sanitary towels and tampons in public buildings and toilets in Reading ?

**REPLY** by Councillor McEwan Lead Councillor for Education and Public Health.

I thank Councillor Keane for her question.

Sanitary products have been made available in all schools/colleges in Reading under the Government's period product scheme in England. This means that all state schools in the Borough, including academies and further education institutions, can access support to provide products, such as pads and tampons. This may include where individuals have forgotten their products, cannot afford products, or have their period unexpectedly.

There is also currently provision for products in the Civic Offices ground floor facilities on an ongoing basis, which is currently supplied and paid for by Corporate Facilities within the building budget. I would encourage other building operators in the town centre - especially our retailers and shopping centres - to follow our example.

Being conscious that some residents will have difficulty accessing or affording sanitary products on a regular basis, Readifood and other food banks in the area include the provision of sanitary products in every toiletry bag requested by vulnerable and homeless women and girls. These partners also provide sanitary stock to other charities around Reading whenever they request it, including for example REHAB who reach vulnerable women who are sexually exploited and are victims of human trafficking. This includes free sanitary products to homeless hostels and other charities that support

vulnerable women and girls. The Council also supports partner organisations to ensure that those who would rely on free access via their school are still able to receive products during school holidays

The Berkshire West Director of Public Health's annual report about workplace health incorporated action and messages about period poverty and incorporated recommendations to other local employers in Reading about taking responsibility and action to mitigate its impact on employees. The Council's Public Health team have incorporated the challenge into the Health and Wellbeing Strategy for Reading. We also continue to support the Trade Unions' Period Dignity campaign and promote it via RBC communications channels with the aim of reducing period stigma and shame.

2. Councillor Williams to ask the Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Community Safety:  
Council Response to Knife Crime

In the year ending March 2022, police recorded around 45,000 offences involving a knife or sharp object in England and Wales. Knife crime is an issue all Councillors are concerned with, and you only have to watch the video on the Council's website to hear the thoughts from Olly Stephens' parents, Amanda and Stuart, to know how vitally important this is.

Greens stand alongside Councillors from all parties in the campaign against knife crime and want to see Council and police work together to find practical solutions to take dangerous knives off our streets.

Can the Lead Councillor update us on the knife amnesty programme initiated some 16 months ago, how many knives have been handed in, and has the programme been a success ?

**REPLY** by Councillor Rowland Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Community Safety.

The knife amnesty bin initiative was initiated by Thames Valley Police and supported by Reading Borough Council in 2021. Six community knife amnesty bins are in place across areas in Reading to allow members of the public to safely dispose of knives and bladed articles anonymously. The knife amnesty bins are emptied each week, however, due to the nature of the collection process, the refuse team carrying out the collections are not able to count the actual number of knives from each bin. We do know that the amnesty bins are used regularly, although the number of knives collected is somewhat low. Nonetheless, there are no current plans to eliminate them at this time.

In response to the new "Serious Violence Duty", Reading has established a Serious Violence Steering Group, which reports into Reading's Community Safety Partnership, on which I sit as Vice-Chair. That Group will oversee an action plan to respond to Reading's Community Safety Partnership's Community Safety and Serious Violence Strategy 2023 - 2026 knife crime priority. The Community Safety Partnership is currently in the process of establishing its action plan mechanisms to deliver that strategy which was adopted at the Housing, Neighbourhoods and Leisure Committee meeting on

the 3 January this year. It is anticipated that there will be a focussed Knife Crime delivery group, involving the Council, Thames Valley Police, Brighter Futures for Children, Health Services, and Public Health, which will oversee the Partnership's action plan to tackle knife crime. Amongst the bigger picture challenges that it will deal with, the plan will include monitoring the use of and impact of the knife amnesty bins.

Additionally, I'd like to let you know that Officers from the Thames Valley Violence Reduction Unit, Reading Borough Council and Thames Valley Police have been working with local community groups to look at ways to remember those who have lost their lives or been injured as a result of knife crime, as well as inform the public and offer pathways to support. This has resulted in these organisations exploring opportunities to actually use the knives that have been collected from the knife amnesty bins to create an art installation with the plans to install that sculpture this Spring at the Oracle Shopping Centre. Whilst I can divulge no more, I have to say, the designs that I have seen, created by an artist who has worked extensively in Reading and has lived experience of knife crime, I feel are truly evocative and will cause each of us to pause and reflect on the devastating impact of knife crime within our communities.

**3. Councillor McElroy to ask the Lead Councillor for Planning and Assets: Estate Agent Signs**

I understand that at the end of 2014 estate agents agreed to a voluntary removal and ban on signs (which had proliferated across so many roads) for a six month period (at the end of 2014, beginning of 2015). Almost all the agencies complied, presumably under the threat of (regulation 7) statutory action, which would have seen the Council applying to the Secretary of State for powers to actually ban such advertising signs.

The situation has deteriorated since, with forests of signs littered across East Reading. Could we please try the voluntary ban again, or follow through with a (regulation 7) statutory action, if it is still an available option?

**REPLY** by Councillor Leng Lead Councillor for Planning and Assets.

Thank you for your question.

**For context The Town and Country Planning (Control of Advertisements) Regulations 2007 governs the display of advertising. The display of estate agent boards is controlled by Class 3 of Schedule 3 of the regulations, which relates to "An advertisement relating to the sale or letting, for residential, agricultural, industrial or commercial use or development for such use, of the land or premises on which it is displayed". The display of Estate Agents Boards has express consent and, generally, does not need permission**

The most salient points of the legislation relating to the problem with To Let/Let By boards advertising in parts of Park and Redlands wards are;

- 1. Boards may be displayed only on, or within the curtilage of, the property to which they relate. Boards displayed elsewhere (e.g. on the Highway or attached to street furniture) are unauthorised.**

2. **Only one board is permitted per property and the first to be displayed is taken to be the one permitted (i.e. all other boards are unauthorised).** However, in cases where a property comprises flats, Reading Borough Council will allow one board per flat to be displayed provided that each board clearly identifies the relevant flat.
3. **Boards indicating that a property has been sold or let must be removed within 14 days of the date of completion of the sale or the signing of a tenancy agreement.**

Boards which do not comply with the above, including other types of board (e.g. 'Managed By' boards) and boards displayed on properties that are not currently available for sale or to let, are unauthorised and their display constitutes an immediate criminal offence.

In view of the number of properties involved and high turnover of tenants monitoring compliance with the requirements is difficult and therefore in 2014, in order to limit the harm caused to amenity by the high number of 'To Let' and 'Let By' boards that have been displayed in various parts of Redlands and Park wards (see plan below) the Council sought a voluntary agreement with the majority of local estate agents that boards in connection with the letting of residential properties will not be displayed in those parts of the Borough. The display of For Sale and Sold boards is not affected.

If the voluntary action was not effective the Council could consider applying to the Secretary of State for a Regulation 7 Direction to remove the deemed consent for such advertising within the target area.

The Council can take action if there is a recognised breach of the Advertising Regulations (e.g. if Let By signs are displayed in excess of 14 days) but as the ban on To Let and Let By signs being displayed in accordance with the Regulations was voluntary, we do not have any power to have these removed and can only ask the individual estate agents politely to take them down.

Enforcement officers used to conduct regular monitoring visits of the area to see if the voluntary ban was working and whilst doing that gather information on possible breaches of the regulations. This stopped in 2020.

However, given the concerns raised Officers have confirmed that it may be timely to contact the relevant letting agents again to refresh the agreement.



4. Councillor Singh to ask the Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Community Safety:

Accessibility in the Town Centre

Accessibility is the key to an inclusive town centre

People with disabilities are excluded further if the town centre is designed and planned poorly.

Disability group members invited me for a walkabout in the town centre and its quite frustrating to see first-hand how elderly, parents with pushchairs and wheelchair users struggle at the crossings, particularly on St Mary's Butts near the Metro bank where buses are given priority over pedestrian by this Council.

Besides this, if not for the shops there are no easily accessible disabled toilets in the town. I visited Basingstoke town centre they not only have easily accessible disabled toilets and safer crossings but a library and a swimming pool in the town centre.

Can the Council Leader confirm he is aware of these issues and what measures he thinks should be put in place in the Reading town centre to improve access for the elderly and visitors with disabilities?

**REPLY** by Councillor Rowland Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Community Safety.

Thank you, Councillor Singh for your question. For clarity, these issues fall primarily within my portfolio area and your question has therefore been allocated to me.

The Council is aware of concerns that have been raised in the past regarding Target Junction, the intersection to which Councillor Singh refers. Changes were made to the Target Junction at the September 2015 Traffic Management Sub- Committee, and this Council is rightly proud of its record of consultations and engagement undertaken to reach that decision. A trial switch-off period was in operation during the consultation to enable evaluation and public feedback. Two special Access and Disabilities Working Group meetings were held, regional and national groups fed into the decision process and a special on-site workshop session was attended by a large number of local organisations. I attended that on-site consultation myself in 2015 as a Trustee of the Reading Association for the Blind.

The on-site workshop session was particularly useful and as a result, the signal crossing on the western approach was retained along with the formal pedestrian crossing on that side and the narrowing of the southern junction. The junction is within a 20mph zone and there are also traffic restrictions when approaching this junction particularly during peak times. It is a raised junction which provides 'at grade' level pedestrian crossings and recent changes to the Highway Code further support pedestrians crossing at this location. The adopted system has shown that pedestrians and vehicles can safely use this junction without the aid of the previous cluttered junction controls. Councillor Singh, I would ask that you ensure that all disabled residents know they can easily raise their concerns at the Council's Access and Disabilities Working Group meeting which is open to the public. I sit as Vice Chair of that Group and having been involved in that meeting for the past three plus years, I cannot recall any concerns raised about the intersection at that meeting during that time.

With regards to Councillor Singh's concern over the provision of accessible toilets in the town centre, he should know that both the Broad Street Mall and Oracle have fully compliant 'Changing Places, accessible facilities' which cater for the broader needs of the disabled population, providing more space and extra features. Toilet provision across the Borough was the subject of a review with decisions made at Policy Committee in 2021. No Town Centre provision was removed under that review and where possible, investment was made in the existing provision.

Section CC7 of our Local Plan firmly sets out this Council's policies to ensure accessibility for our public realm and buildings. Last year, the Access and Disabilities Working Group arranged a Town Centre walk-about with our Streetcare Services Manager, myself and a large group of disabled persons using wheelchairs, mobility scooters, walking canes and sight dogs which made our way all around the Town Centre highlighting specific issues of concern. From that meeting a working list was created that is constantly seeing requests completed. I receive updates regularly on that list and we will be looking to have a follow up session again this Spring. I'd be happy to be contacted by yourself, and any residents with concerns are obviously more than welcome to join us for that.