

(C) QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

1. Councillor Cross to ask the Lead Councillor for Environmental Services & Community Safety:

Bin Collection (ultra-narrow refuse collection vehicle)

At the Council meeting in October 2022, the Lead Member provided a response to my question about bin collection issues in the narrow streets off Erleigh Road and Addington Road in Redlands ward, where crews have struggled to gain access due to cars being parked badly.

I am grateful that a number of my suggestions have now been implemented, including letters being sent to residents reminding them to park properly, leaflets being placed on the windscreens of poorly-parked vehicles prior to collections, and clearer information on the Council's web portal. I am pleased that the impact of missed collections now seems to have been reduced.

However, crews are still sometimes having issues with completing their rounds, which is understandably causing frustration for residents. Could the Lead Member for Environmental Services and Community Safety therefore please update me on the Council's progress towards implementing the proposed 'ultra-narrow' refuse collection vehicle which I have been campaigning for?

REPLY by Councillor Rowland Lead Councillor for Environmental Services & Community Safety.

Thank you, Councillor Cross for your question.

I am pleased to advise that arrangements have been made for the introduction of a dedicated narrow access vehicle with rounds for our narrow roads commencing Tuesday 4th April 2023.

The round will be serviced with a new narrow access vehicle, which is 13.4cm narrower and 3.69m shorter than our traditional RCV's.

This vehicle is on order from to deliver on 1st April. In the unlikely event of a delay, we will be hiring a vehicle to ensure collections.

Clear guidance and comms will be going out to residents within the narrow roads access rounds to take in the roads listed below:

Road/Street	Ward	Current Collection Day	New Collection Day
Foxglove Gardens	Abbey	Thursday	Tuesday
Stanley Grove	Abbey	Thursday	Tuesday
Derby Street	Abbey	Thursday	Tuesday
Francis Street	Katesgrove	Monday	Tuesday
Hill Street	Katesgrove	Monday	Tuesday
Chesterman Street	Katesgrove	Monday	Tuesday
Short Street	Katesgrove	Monday	Tuesday
Blenheim Gardens	Redlands	Friday	Tuesday
Foxhill Road	Redlands	Friday	Tuesday
Cardigan Road	Redlands	Friday	Tuesday

Hatherley Road	Redlands	Friday	Tuesday
Donnington Gardens	Redlands	Friday	Tuesday

General waste and recycling collections will take place on a Tuesday; food waste collections will remain unchanged. Several rounds of comms to residents will be going out in March, with the first collection scheduled for Tuesday 4th April.

These roads have over the years, regularly experienced failed collections as a result of the narrow road geography and access frequently impeded by poorly parked vehicles. The new narrower vehicle will be more easily able to navigate these roads, providing a far greater consistency of service delivery that our residents deserve.

Whilst the narrow roads lorry will ensure that waste is able to be more consistently collected from narrow roads, it is worth noting that the vehicle is less operationally efficient than the existing RCV fleet. Due to its smaller size, it carries only 1.3 Ton of waste, and requires more frequent visits to the HWRC to offload. The bin lifting mechanism is also operates at half the speed of the traditional fleet.

Although the vehicle will allow for greater accessibility along narrow road routes, and the change to a Tuesday collection will provide an opportunity for waste collection to be attempted again within the same working week, should the collection be prevented by an extraordinary event. The day change also minimises the impacts of rescheduled collections that result from Bank Holiday Mondays which have only exacerbated the situation over the years.

Finally, let me set the record clear. The acquisition of a narrow roads bin lorry has been an aspiration of this Labour-led Council and preceding lead portfolio colleagues for a good few years, but it has heretofore been unachievable for a myriad of challenging reasons. The work that Cllr Cross has doggedly pursued in his own ward over this past year in dealing with this situation to improve the levels of failed collections by placing letters on parked cars, improving the accuracy of communication to residents via the website, and establishing regular Friday reporting as we have implemented, have all helped greatly. However, it has also been those alterations to the service that have gone to highlight that the current use of the larger lorries is simply not a reliable resource-efficient, or a financially sustainable option any longer. Therefore, I'd like to thank Cllr Cross for all his work alongside me and our Officer team to find a solution that I hope will deliver to Redlands but also provide solutions to years of frustration for my own Abbey ward and Katesgrove ward.

2. Councillor Cross to ask the Lead Councillor for Environmental Services & Community

Safety:

Bins Left on Pavements

A small number of streets in Redlands, such as Blenheim Road and Hatherley Road, have persistent problems with people leaving their bins out on the narrow pavements between collections. This causes difficulties for pedestrians, including disabled people and parents with pushchairs, who are forced to walk in the road.

There is a high density of houses in multiple occupation in this area, with associated bin issues. I have been working closely with the University's Community Relations Team, who have contacted students about waste problems - many of these have now been resolved, but the issue with bins being left on pavements persists.

Clearly most households in Reading manage to bring their bins back in after collection. However, given the local circumstances, will the Lead Member consider formalising an approach in these streets whereby the crews return the bins to just inside the property boundary?

REPLY by Councillor Rowland Lead Councillor for Environmental Services & Community Safety.

I'd like to thank Councillor Cross for his question.

His concern about access on our pavements is an issue we all share and one that we have been delivering with the Disabled Access Working Group over the past year in progressing the return of food bins to a safe location to improve accessibility. We know Cllr Cross' concern has been challenging for some time and he is right to ask for a better solution.

In Redlands, a compounded situation exists with narrow roads access by waste vehicles and the parking of cars halfway up on pavements due to the narrow road width. This creates a knock-on effect when bins are left out for missed collections or by busy students for days on end. There are pavements where you simply cannot squeeze through between a car and a bin on many of these pavements as a result. Everyone (able-bodied or not) is forced out into the road, which is unacceptable.

Now with Labour's persistence in securing the narrow roads bin lorry, we have the bandwidth to look strategically at a resolution to this issue. I'd like to thank Cllr Cross and his local Labour colleagues for the very detailed charts they have sent on, by cataloguing pavement widths, photo-documenting issues and presenting Officers a prioritised, realistic list of streets where access is at its worst.

Regrettably the structure of fixed penalty notices within this transient student area has not elicited the results to make a substantial difference and Officers therefore agree with Cllr Cross that trying to work towards a bespoke solution to improve accessibility on the worst of these streets is in order.

Successfully delivering waste collections, whilst a task performed by humans, is a critically timed effort and every extra second costs money, resourcing, and expense that this Council cannot bear. To place a bin back within the curtilage of a property, depending on the complexity of stepped landings and locked gates, can easily take an additional 5-8 seconds per bin. Multiply that time by the number of properties on a road, this can lead to cascading, unacceptable service failure.

Fortunately, with the narrow road bin vehicle introduction on the 4th of April, there does lie scope for tackling this issue with households on those roads with the most impassable situations. Although the vehicle will be less operationally efficient, we will be monitoring and assessing those rounds as they embed themselves in and we will be able to consider any surplus capacity for teams that may exist such as when the lorry heads off for more frequent tipping at Re3. Anticipating that capacity, we will look to trial an approach of returning all bins to within the curtilage of properties on specific roads that Cllr Cross has cited as the worst roads.

That trial period of placing bins back in the curtilage of those streets will run during May after the initial embedding in of the narrow road lorry service. Consideration will be given to the sustainability of that trial. This trial will be rolled out starting with 2 roads that are known to be of greatest concern, Blenheim Gardens & Foxhill Road. If proven/successful, the method

of working will be adopted as standard practice on that round for those streets and further streets can be considered.

Out of an abundance of concern to improve accessibility, officers have agreed to investigate this as a *bespoke solution* for these roads to improve accessibility. This Council has a duty to run an efficient service and to provide approximately 7 million collections a year for this town within a service budget that has extreme pressures right now. I wish to reiterate that the Council is not here to - or in the position to- perform actions for residents who are not doing their part under the rules sent out. Residents will be informed and asked again to play their part in making this trial successful and hopefully deliver a solution that has been years in coming.

An update on the success of the trial will be provided following its completion.

3. Councillor Singh to ask the Lead Councillor for Corporate Services & Resources: Reading Council's Staff Well-being

The Reading Borough council staff's extraordinary willingness to go above and beyond to meet the needs of the town's residents makes the Conservative group incredibly proud of them.

Yet, according to the Reading Borough Council's staff survey from 2019, 1 in 10 employees reported being bullied. Not enough done on employee development, and a third of respondents to the study felt that the council's leadership wasn't sufficiently visible. Some council employees confided in me privately that they were feeling overworked.

What noteworthy have structural and cultural adjustments been made since the previous survey that has helped the Reading Borough Council workforce feel engaged and well cared for?

REPLY by Councillor Terry Lead Councillor for Corporate Services & Resources.

I would like to thank Councillor Singh for his question.

I and my colleagues in the Labour Group join Councillor Singh in being incredible proud of the hard work of our staff which ensures we meet our residents' needs.

Councillor Singh quotes statistics from the 2019 staff survey. Much work to improve staff wellbeing has been done since then and there have been more staff surveys. I will in a moment bring Councillor Singh up to speed with the priority areas and the associated work arising from the last survey.

But first let me address the statistic quoted on bullying. Councillor Singh noted that in the 2019 survey 1 in 10 employees reported being bullied. Staff surveys look at bullying and harassment together. In the 2021 survey, only 44% of the total staff complement of 1720 responded to the relevant question. Of that 44%, 34% said they had seen bullying or harassment at work. In 2022, 20% of those who answered the question said they had experienced harassment or bullying at work.

In the same year, 2022, over 70% of staff said that they felt confident to raise issues of bullying and harassment. So it is good to know that the majority of staff feel they can raise such issues and it is also interesting to note that even though most people feel comfortable reporting bullying, this year the Council have only seen 4 cases of bullying being raised.

Of course, any bullying and harassment is unacceptable, so the Council continues to focus on this area.

The Council is also very much committed to the wider matter of our employees' success at work and their well-being. To ensure the Council is performing as a responsible employer, a staff survey is undertaken each year. The survey allows the Council to identify areas of focus to make it a better place to work for everyone. The latest results are from 2022.

The positives to maintain and build on were:

- 95% of employees agreed that they make a valuable contribution to the success of the Council by doing their job.
- 87% agreed that Annual Reviews are constructive, and they can discuss the issues they want to raise.
- 87% agreed that their team work well together and support each other to do their jobs well.
- 91% agreed that their line manager is approachable and supportive.
- 92% agreed they knew the four Team Reading values.

The areas for improvement are:

- 33% reported that they do not feel the pressure of work is manageable
- 53% agreed that leadership is positive and supportive, however we believe there is more we can do in this area.
- 47% do not agree that pay is fair given responsibilities.

49% of staff took part, which is slightly less than 2021. The results were reviewed, as well as individual comments from employees, and four priority areas were identified to ensure the Council can address the main concerns raised and continue our journey of improvement.

The four priority areas are as follow:

1. Workload. One third of responders said the pressure of work is not manageable and a number of comments expressed concerns for too few staff and too many priorities with overlapping deadlines.

- 67% of responders agree workload pressure is manageable
- 83% agreed that they have regular one to one's and annual reviews
- 88% agreed that they can discuss their workload with their managers and management show a genuine interest in their well-being
- 87% agreed that one to one's and annual reviews are constructive and they can discuss issues they want to raise (up from 72% in 2021)

For the annual review period January-March 2022, the Council launched an enhanced performance management framework creating a new policy, a one-to-one form for all employees to use to hold meaningful discussions including reviewing workload and priorities, wellbeing, skills development workshops and sessions provided to staff. During 2022/23, 450 employees have attended sessions on getting the most from our new process and 80 managers have attended additional skills development workshops.

As part of the development of the Corporate Plan refresh and service planning, we are currently looking at dependencies across plans and where resources will be needed so we can smooth out when major initiatives are delivered to ensure our staff can cope with competing pressures.

2. Cost of Living: This crisis is having a major impact on people throughout the country and, consequently, is likely to adversely impact the wellbeing and productivity of the Council's workforce. Supporting employees to have good mental, physical and financial health is the bedrock of a successful wellbeing strategy.

We have drafted a report that proposes a range of additional employee benefits that would enhance the comprehensive benefits package that the Council already offers. It also supports the People Strategy aim for the Council to be an employer of choice. The proposals include employee and employer funded benefits as follows:

Employee-funded:

- Health Cash Plan
- Plan4Life Cancer Care Plan
- Care4Life Insurance Top Up Plan

Employer-funded:

- GP Helpline
- Wage Stream App

The report is tracking to Personnel Committee on 15 March 2023 for approval.

3. Leadership. We have seen a decrease in the number of people who agree that leadership is positive and supportive, and we are looking at how to address this.

Since 2019, learning and development budgets have been distributed to each Directorate to enable them to manage and allocate funds to employee and team specific learning needs.

The central corporate learning and development team and budget is used to focus on core skills development both through online, virtual and face to face programmes e.g. health and safety, safeguarding, leadership development, performance management and apprenticeships.

The 2022 survey does not have a specific question on visibility, however results from the survey on leadership are as follows:

- 85% agreed - I have confidence in my line managers leadership skills
- 53% agreed - Leadership by the Senior Leaders is positive and supportive
- 54% agreed - I have confidence in the leadership skills of Senior Leaders

We have successfully delivered a mandatory leadership development programme to 400 leaders throughout the Council starting in 2020 with 320 leaders and currently a second phase for approximately 80 new leaders. We support leadership development through an on demand central learning resource to help embed learning from the programme.

4. Behaviours. This priority covers many areas including culture, working environment, decision making and ensuring that nobody feels bullied or harassed at work.

In 2022 we revised the Bullying and Harassment Policy to include examples of micro-aggressions and highlighting RBC's zero tolerance of bullying and harassment.

A Bullying and Harassment Workshop is being developed that will help managers to understand the policy and how to support staff who are experiencing unwanted behaviour.

Other structural and cultural changes helping the workforce and engagement are as follows:

- Redesign of services; reviewing roles and priorities to ensure structures support corporate plans and Reading's vision.
- Quarterly Team Talks for all managers, where key issues are discussed, and networking is encouraged.
- All staff and Directorate briefings.
- Reading's Wellbeing Strategy and action plan which commits to ensuring a healthy and safe working environment which supports all staff in maintaining and enhancing their personal health and wellbeing at work. We do this by placing importance on preventative health initiatives, providing the tools and support to encourage managers and staff to stay fit, happy and healthy in order to improve individual and organisational performance.
- Team Reading Values launched within our performance management process; ratings given on what (objectives) and how (values/competencies).
- Leadership and management behavioural framework within the performance management process (again outlining what is expected of leaders).

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

Blocked Drains and Road Safety

The number of blocked gully reports that Reading Council has received is enormous. Blocked drains rapidly degrade our roads and raise the risk of accidents for pedestrians, especially for the elderly and those with disabilities.

Section 39 of the 1988 Road Traffic Act mandates that Reading Council, a primary agency for road safety, "take action to decrease and avoid accidents."

Could you kindly confirm the actions the council is taking to clear the clogs in the drains or make repairs to them in order to increase road safety and provide a timetable for doing so?

REPLY by Councillor Rowland Lead Councillor for Environmental Services & Community Safety.

I thank Cllr Singh for his question and agree that all forms of weather, especially extreme weather events like the drought of last year, closely followed by a very wet period, then straight into a prolonged cold spell before Christmas has and will continue to put a huge burden on our highway road network.

For clarity purposes regarding Cllr Singh's concerns, I can assure him that we all share those concerns about safe passage on our roads for the elderly, those with disabilities and indeed any able-bodied resident and our duty to minimise those risks. I am pleased to say that there have been no claims for injury or damage relating to blocked drains or gullies within the past year.

I am also delighted that the Council's 3-year £9M Residential Roads & Pavement programme 2020/21 to 2022/23 has gone a long way to reversing the deterioration of one of our most valuable assets, along with the further £8M 5-year Council investment programme of 2022/23 to 2026/27 that will not only keep our roads in an acceptable condition, but further improve them and eradicate the backlog that was caused by years of government underfunding.

The Council has 18,857 road gullies that we are responsible for, including the lateral connection between these gullies and the Thames Water main surface water sewers. Cyclical cleaning of these Council gullies and lateral connections takes place using our in-house Highways & Drainage Operations Team.

The Council received 343 enquiries concerning either a blocked gully or damaged gullies and / or lateral connections during the last year, which represents a 1.82% blockage rate over our entire drainage asset network. These were all attended to by our Drainage Crew and dealt with appropriately.

It is important to note that the Council's gullies can only operate efficiently when the Thames Water Surface Water Sewers are in good working order and silt free in order for them to take the 1 in 30 year rainfall events that they are designed for. Many of the reported blockages received by the Council followed intense rainfall events where the Thames Water Sewers could not cope with the volume of rainfall, which subsequently surcharged through the highway gullies onto the roadway. It is standard practice to allow up to 2 hours following such rainfall events for the water to dissipate before reporting them, as often they are found to be clear and running when the Drainage Crew arrive on site.

While we understand the pressure that Thames Water have been under following the drought last year that resulted in a huge number of watermain bursts Boroughwide caused by the heave in the ground conditions, and the need to focus on emergency repairs, they have not had the resources to fully carry out surface water sewer cleaning, which is impacting on Reading's road network. The Council will continue to press Thames Water to repair and clean those surface water sewers that persistently surcharge and raise Section 81 Defect Notices on Thames Water should they not comply.

The Council is also in the process of collecting condition data for all our road gullies using our Highway Asset Management System, where the Highways & Drainage Operative will record the condition of the gully and lateral during the cyclical cleaning programme. This will make our gully cleansing programme more efficient, allowing the Council to target those gullies that require additional and more frequent cleaning and help reduce flood risk.

The Council will continue to investigate all occurrences of flooding, as per our Flood & Water Management Act 2010 obligations, to ensure that the source of flooding is understood, and appropriate action is taken to reduce the risk of future flooding. The Council will, as ever, continue to repair any of our damaged drainage assets, as well as continue to communicate with Thames Water over their obligation under that Act to maintain their main surface water sewer assets. I'm sure that Cllr Singh would concur that after all the solid investment we have been making on our road surfaces, that we have every interest in ensuring that all that effort does not fall victim to a clogged drain.

Any residents that observe a clogged gully or drain should flag it on our Love Clean Reading app, report it directly to the Council's online reporting service or if that is not possible, call the Council directly to alert us to an issue.

**5. Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Housing:
Rough sleeping increase in Reading**

Green Party councillors are concerned about rough sleeping in Reading. Every person sleeping rough is an individual with a story. But it is also important to look at statistics and trends. Every year the council counts the number of people sleeping rough on one day. This number doesn't represent the absolute number of people sleeping rough (which will be higher) but it highlights the trend. This year the number of people sleeping rough in Reading at the annual headcount was 36. This is up 64 percent from the previous year when 22 people were identified as sleeping rough on the headcount day.

Why has the number of people sleeping rough in Reading gone up so much when in nearby Slough it only went up from 17 to 19 people and in Southampton it went down from 19 to 9 people? Have any of our statistical neighbours had an increase in rough sleeping as large as the one in Reading?

REPLY by Councillor Emberson Lead Councillor for Housing:

Thank you Councillor White, for your question. I agree that every person sleeping rough is an individual with a story and appreciate the sentiment that it is important to look at statistics and trends. Though, I believe your understanding is misguided as Reading's annual count does reflect accurately, the rough sleepers in our town.

As you will know, Housing Officers offered a briefing to all Members on 15 February and I believe you are referencing the comparable local authority count figures shared as part of this briefing.

The rough sleeper annual count figures have been released today and Officers will be working on analysing the data. It is sad to see that there has been both a national and region by region increase in the number of those rough sleeping.

Firstly, the figures you refer to for Slough and Southampton are for 2020 and 2021. Slough's figure for 2022 is 21, representing an increase of 11% and Southampton's figure for 2022 is 27, representing an increase of 200%.

I believe you are right to point out in your question, that annual counts do not always represent the absolute number of people rough sleeping. However, as noted at the briefing, different local authorities opt for different methods for their official annual headcount figure. In 2022, we used an intelligence led approach, i.e. going beyond those just found on the night. The 36 rough sleepers noted in our annual return therefore represents an accurate picture of those rough sleeping in Reading. We accounted for people we were aware had slept on the streets previously, even though they were not found on the night. Teams also looked beyond the town centre, using intelligence gathered by our commissioned service, who are out at least twice a week to locate and support rough sleepers. Slough and Southampton also opted for this approach whilst, some of our other neighbours opted for different approaches, including Bracknell, Oxford and Windsor and Maidenhead. I also note Brighton opts for the count approach.

Whilst the Reading figure has increased, I would point out that more than two in three had no connection to Reading or, had no recourse to public funds.

As Councillor White knows, there is a significant level of provision across statutory and voluntary sector services for rough sleepers in Reading, with 274 bedspaces available for those rough sleeping. Our significant level of provision can and does attract people to Reading from other areas, where there may be less service provision available. The briefing also noted that there are lots of begging opportunities in Reading and Officers are exploring a

charitable giving scheme so that our generous residents can donate direct to homelessness charities, offering tangible support for those rough sleeping.

It is reassuring to me that all the 11 of those verified on the count night with a confirmed connection to the town, were known to services and had been provided with support to move away from rough sleeping, either with an immediate accommodation offer, or as a priority for forthcoming temporary or supported accommodation bed spaces. Unfortunately, some of the 11 chose to continue bedding down on the streets, despite the Council's offer of accommodation, the 11 also includes some rough sleepers who had accepted an offer.

Councillor White will be aware that Rough Sleeping is a complex issue, and it can sometimes take multiple attempts before people are ready to engage with support being offered.

In analysing the statistics, it is reassuring to note that the number of women sleeping rough remains low, with the percentage of women rough sleeping out of the total verified rough sleeping number, from 2021 to 2022, down 9%. The Council believes is attributable to the success of the Nova Project - a specialist women only supported accommodation provision that the Council commissions its partner St Mungo's to provide.

Moreover, the Council acknowledges the need to address empathetically those rough sleeping in our town with no local connection. The Team intends to create new roles aimed at helping people reconnect with their hometown, where they are eligible for support.

Furthermore, a new 'navigator' post has been created to work intensively with people who sleep rough who do not hold an immigration status and have limited access to public funds, directing them toward support available.

A cross-Berkshire strategic role has also been created to support with reconnecting rough sleepers in Reading across neighbouring local authority borders.

This increase in specialist staffing is possible thanks to a successful government bid received last year for £2.8 million. This was awarded through the national Rough Sleeping Initiative (RSI) 2022-25 to fund new and continued services and interventions for a further two and a half years.

The funding will go a long way in strengthening our existing provision of 274 bedspaces with support, including an expanded Housing First service to make at least 20 properties available for clients with multiple and complex needs.

I have no doubt Officers will review the qualitative and quantitative data made available today and will communicate with other local authorities to understand the context they are working in. It also goes without saying that Officers will continue to work hard to support those rough sleeping in our town in conjunction with our wonderful voluntary sector and commissioned partners.