

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE 9 MARCH 2023

QUESTION NO. 1

Jennifer Leach to ask the Chair of the Housing, Neighbourhoods & Leisure Committee:

Reading Festival

This year's Reading Festival attracted very bad publicity nationally and internationally, on account both of its ecocidal aftermath, and too the lawless behaviour in the campsites, leading to injuries amongst innocent young people caught in their tents. What is the line that RBC will finally draw in the sand, the line that says to Festival Republic, 'no, this is not acceptable and you take responsibility and you take remedial action, or you take your festival elsewhere'?

REPLY by Councillor Hacker:

I invite Councillor Rowland, the Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Community Safety to make the response on my behalf.

REPLY by the Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Community Safety:

I'd like to thank Ms Leach for her question and for her never-ending support for the environment and ensuring that we all are taking proper heed of the Climate Emergency. It is a passion I can assure her that we all share.

I would like to draw Ms. Leach's attention to the report on item 9 of this evening's agenda which outlines positive forward initiatives for the 2023 event in more detail. I have ensured that Ms Leach has a copy of this and would refer her to that and to invite her to stay if possible for the democratic discussion later this evening. It is only right and proper that that is the forum to go into any specifics.

Whilst it is agreed that there were concerns following the 2022 event, this was an over-riding factor in why Cllr Hacker and I, along with our Labour colleagues, pressed for an early public discussion with Festival Republic at this Committee this past November. That meeting was very fruitful to have so early on and tonight's report bears the fruit of that useful discussion.

No one will disagree that the reports seen in the press were concerning and sad to read and our sympathy very much goes out to those that were affected. However, what was seen presented in the press was not typical of the event as a whole.

As ever, a full debrief has been held with Festival Republic, RBC and other stakeholders including Thames Valley Police, and plans have been reviewed ahead of this year's event taking these concerns into account looking to areas where significant strides forward could be made.

A good deal of work goes into the Festival across many teams at the Council and with external stakeholders. Both the Council and Festival Republic accept there are always improvements that can be made, and this is taken on board and implemented to ensure the event continues to improve and be a success. Given the significant positive strides that have been made towards the shaping of this year's Festival, I am positive that the relationship we have with the Festival is bearing results for the future.

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QUESTION NO. 2

Rona Robinson to ask the Chair of the Housing, Neighbourhoods & Leisure Committee:

Allotments

When I started working on my allotment in the 1970s, a plot measured 10 Rods, that in today's measures is 50 metres according to the internet. Today it seems that a plot is only half of those 25 metres, now you want to split it again, is that the same throughout the borough? At least that gives you twice and now 4 times as many plots.

25 sqm is too small for a proper size plot, let alone 12.5 sqm, when do you say enough. Instead of doubling then quadrupling your number of plots by splitting them again, don't you think it time that the Reading borough used some of their waste land to invest in more 25 sqm plots or are you frightened of using some of those £million Reading borough have in saving accounts around the world?

Request for information?

How much area in Reading borough is devote to allotments in, 2023 - 2000 - 1970 - 1950

What is/was the population in the same years, 2023- 2000 - 1970 - 1950

How many people were on the waiting list in the same years, 2023 - 2000 - 1970 - 1950

How many people were on the bread line in those same years, 2023 - 2000 - 1970 - 1950

I think if you look at the statistics for those years, you'll find that the borough of Reading is seriously lacking in its Statutory Duty to Provide enough Allotments and to let them to residents who want them. And has done for many years.

In my opinion. The borough of Reading or the committees that run it, is far more interested in charging more money for services and selling land for building than they are in helping both the environment or the poor that want to live and eat healthily.

When I see individuals that have 3 or more allotments to themselves, and others that have nice Summerhouse on pretty grass lawns with overgrown fruit trees and no edible food on, or enclosed allotments where some of the people that have adjoining property have gates into the allotments. I think the idea of having self-management is really good.

REPLY by Councillor Hacker:

I invite Councillor Rowland the Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Community Safety to make the response on my behalf.

REPLY by the Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Community Safety:

I would like to thank Rona Robinson for this question, which provides an opportunity to highlight the important work of our StreetScene Team and the Allotment Project Officer.

The Council owns and manages 20 sites, currently with 1,415 worked plots across 41.5 hectares of land. There are currently roughly another 70 or so plots that we are still in the process of returning back to lettable condition. Half are Statutory sites and thus have some protection under the Allotments Act 1925. In 2000, there were 42 hectares of allotment land and in 2022 there were 41.5 hectares of allotment land.

There are currently approximately 900 individuals on the waiting list for Reading Borough plots. The reduction of that waiting list number from around 1500 in 2021 has been arrived by counting individual applicants rather than adding the total applicants for each of the 20 sites together. In the latter, one applicant who selected all 20 sites would have counted as 20 applicants. Demand has increased because of Covid and that interest has not reduced. However, we have taken better charge of our list and refining it by contacting individuals to ask if they still want a plot, and we are removing those with no further interest off the waiting lists. This Committee approved changes to the waiting list policy in January this year that “bands” applicants according to the proximity of their home to a specific site. We will be contacting those in Bands B and C (out of catchment area, and out of Borough respectively) as to whether they still wish to stay on the waiting lists. In a small footprint borough like Reading with no excess of unused open space, we need to prioritise Reading residents.

As we have been able to employ the services of an Allotment Project Officer over the last two and a half years, we have seen a remarkable improvement in maximising the usage of our 20 sites in bringing derelict or squatted-on plots back into the system and quickly moving them forward to those next on the waiting list. The work towards the creation of self-management societies, has also helped us to clear and rent sites more quickly.

For the sake of clarity, the question quoted size of plots of 25 and 12.5 square metre plots which is inaccurate, as the Council only have a very limited numbers of very small or “starter” plots, the very smallest being 33 square metres.

Allotments are traditionally measured in either “Rods” or “Poles.” A “Rod” is the linear measurement equivalent to 5 metres and a “Pole” is an area measurement equivalent to 5m x 5m or 25 square metres.

Although there are no official guidelines dictating the size an allotment should be, the accepted measure of a “Full” plot is 10 poles, approximately 250 square metres or about the size of a “doubles” tennis court. This size however was based on

guidance set out in 1949 by the Allotments Advisory Body, as a sufficient size needed to feed a family of four all year round, if maximised and worked properly.

For clarity these are the Sizes and numbers of plots offered by Reading Borough Council:

Full plot <i>255 Plots</i>	250+ square metres	Full plots are for experienced plot holders, it's a big commitment because they take a lot of time to cultivate.
$\frac{3}{4}$ plot <i>156 Plots</i>	150 to 200 square metres	Larger sized plots that still require a lot of time to cultivate.
$\frac{1}{2}$ plot <i>816 plots</i>	100 to 125 square metres	Most plots in the borough are half plots. They're more manageable and suit people with limited time to supplement fresh vegetables consumed by the family.
$\frac{1}{4}$ plot <i>111 Plots</i>	60 to 70 square metres	Aimed at new plot holders that might want to up-size in the future, or existing plot holders that want to downsize. There is no restriction on the length of time to stay on these plots. However, they must reach a suitable level of cultivation after a year to move to a larger plot.
Micro plot <i>15 Plots</i>	50 to 25 square metres	Aimed at new plot holders that might want to up-size in the future, or existing plot holders that want to downsize. These sizes of plots are manageable for older tenants or people with limited mobility who want to grow their own crops.

To the statistics you have asked for, unfortunately, the Council haven't retained historical data relating to the some of the requested information in the question. Information retrieved from the Census relates to Reading's household growth.

- 1961 38,061 Households
- 1981 48,063 Households (NB 1974 boundary changes)
- 2001 57,877 Households
- 2021 67,700 Households

The National Allotment Society in 1995 estimated that the average national number of plots per thousand households was 15 plots per thousand. Although that number is likely only to have decreased, in Reading we are currently above that nationally quoted average at 20.9 plots per 1,000 households. Once the remaining 70 are

returned to lettable condition, we will have 21.9 plots per 1,000 households. Those plots primarily are found in the Oak Tree Road and Bulmershe allotments and we are also creating new plots at Henley Road. We are returning these remaining plots back into lettable condition as soon as we are possibly able and there is no intention from this Labour-led Council to reduce site quantities.

I assume your other query was asking about those on receipt of financial support (Benefits) or 'low-income households' that participate in allotments. We do not have access to historical data that can be compared due to changes in the welfare threshold, nor do we record 'low income' status on the Tenant Register. The sole indicator of financial hardship that we have is the number of plot holders receiving the 84% Rent Discount by virtue of being a Concessionary Your Reading Passport holder. However, it must be noted that the Concessionary YRP can be claimed by anyone in receipt of benefits, with a disability, or aged 60+, noting that some of these applicants are not in financial hardship. With that in mind, we do know that 21% of plot holders currently claim Concessionary YRP.

Following the peak of 1,400,000 allotment plots across the UK during the 2nd World War, there has been a sharp decline in allotment provision nationally to around 500,00 plots in the 1970s. The decline continued during subsequent decades but at a much slower rate. In today's post WWII world, the need for allotments to provide all grown food for the family has changed dramatically, with readily available vegetables in markets far more accessible than they were at that time. However, we will never discourage those that wish to or feel the need to make a go of being fully reliant on their allotments as a significant food source and we do have plot sizes to accommodate that need. For many, especially with the current Cost-of-Living crisis, this can also be a practical cost-saving option to the family budget and we certainly aim to accommodate that desire. However, allotments are also a critical component to provide other health benefits for our residents that being outdoors brings, such as leisure exercise and a sense of community. For those whose chief use of an allotment is for that purpose, we offer smaller plots.

As such, Reading Council's experience is that most people anymore, are daunted by the idea of tending to a "Full" plot of 250 square meters and it's far more common for people to request half or sometimes even quarter-sized plots. As such, our allotment plot sizes reflect that change of request and lifestyle from allotment growers.

When RBC gain possession of a "Full" vacant plot (250sqm), and subject to the Allotment Societies view and accessibility, it is now the general practice to split the plot into 2 x 125m² plots. Some allotment societies have been requesting 'starter' plots (60 m²) or to divide a full plot into 'starter' beds for rent by 'the bed'.

Regarding multiple plots: The situation of multiple plots is a legacy from the early noughties period of low demand. This Committee in Jan 2023 agreed that second plots would no longer be let in order to maximise use for others.

Regarding recreation plots: The new Tenancy Agreements are more detailed than the current TA. Plots will be required to be "in proper cultivation". Children's play equipment will not be allowed nor is using a plot to run a business from.

Whilst your point is more than likely asking Reading to increase the amount of its allotments, a desire that I know we all have much sympathy for and agreement with, one must take into consideration the high density and small footprint of Reading and the very clear priority put forward by this current government to increase housing - and regrettably, not allotments. This is the harsh reality of a growing population on a relatively small island, and our need to prioritise brownfield sites in high density urban areas for that requisite-built environment, so that our greenfield areas can continue to be protected. However, let me reassure you that this Labour-led Council remains committed to the retention of our open space and to the future of our allotments for all the benefits that it can bring as we are able to in this town. Interestingly, we are aware that a private allotment company called Roots Allotments that are actively seeking sites in and around Reading to develop new private allotments, which can produce more sites.

I am encouraged that you write you are in favour of the idea of allotment self-management. This is exactly what the Council is working towards to ensure we maximise our allotments across the town for the use of as many as possible and I would refer you back to the Allotment Update Report to this Committee in January for an excellent example of the Oak Tree Road allotment site's application of self-management.

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QUESTION NO. 3

Marg Cobb to ask the Chair of the Housing, Neighbourhoods & Leisure Committee:

Flytipping at public bins

“Residents in Katesgrove ward have concerns about the issue of fly tipping and rubbish being disposed of at public bins. What environmental and enforcement action has the council taken to prevent and deter this scourge?”

REPLY by Councillor Hacker:

I invite Councillor Rowland the Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Community Safety to make the response on my behalf.

REPLY by the Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Community Safety:

I would like to thank Marg Cobb for this question, which provides an opportunity to highlight the breadth of work of our Environmental Enforcement Team.

Fly-tipping of waste around public bins is an offence that is enforceable under S.33 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. Any party that can be evidenced to have committed such an offence may be subject to a £400 fixed penalty notice (FPN).

In respect of Katesgrove ward, the team have issued 15 fixed penalty notices for waste deposit offences (litter & fly-tipping) within the past year. The majority of these fixed penalty notices have been linked to residential addresses, rather than commercial. I will come back to these residential infractions in a minute.

Concurrently, over the last 12 months the Enforcement team in Katesgrove have completed trade waste duty of care inspections under S34 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 at businesses along Whitley Street, Pell Street, Basingstoke Road and London Street which is part of our wider-range work to ensure that retail areas around the town are properly disposing of and have proper regimes in place to handle their rubbish.

The Environmental Enforcement Team regularly conduct inspections of waste found to have been deposited around public bins. Where evidence attributing the waste to a named individual or business premise can be found, the team may take enforcement action in the form of a fixed penalty notice and/or prosecution all of which will take place alongside education about proper recycling and waste management.

Where there is a pattern of behaviour or recurrence of issues in a specific location, the team are able to erect signage to act as a deterrent to the behaviour. This signage advises of the offence and the penalties that those that engage in the activity of fly-tipping may face. New stickers have recently been designed to be

placed on litter bins as an advisory deterrent for leaving rubbish next to public litter bins and those are being applied around the borough.

Alongside enforcement being applied where justified, education is a very integral part of the work we do with our Enforcement Team.

Wherein fly-tipped waste has been determined to have come from residential properties, it has been noted that such bags frequently contain items that could easily have been recycled. This is indicative of a household that is likely not managing their recycling correctly, which if applied properly, should create ample room in their grey bin, or it can be from a large single-family household or an HMO or multi-tenanted situation, where there may be issues that justify the need for a larger capacity bin. Officers, when alerted, will provide a bin audit to a residence exhibiting capacity issues to determine whether the householders are maximising all recycling possibilities.

Issues such as you are describing are often, but not exclusively, found in highly transient areas of the town. Additionally, English-language-only communications may not be sufficient to educate all residents about proper recycling and rubbish collection. Landlords and agents are expected to play a role in that, but frustratingly with some, that has proven to be an unreliable source of information sharing.

The team have printed educational material that can be shared with residents to encourage responsible waste disposal behaviours such as the proper use of household waste bins or taking their rubbish to the tip. Recycling guides have been translated into multiple languages including Romanian, Polish and Nepalese and we are looking at increasing our reach of information in other languages, as being able to reach all residents is an on-going challenge in a town like Reading which openly welcomes diversity into our town.

In respect of enforcement, in extreme cases, the team has mobile CCTV cameras that can be deployed to monitor a hot-spot area and attempt to capture footage that would support a successful prosecution. CCTV cameras however, are most effective when they can be used in fly-tipping hotspot areas where waste is deposited from vehicles as registration plates are the most-clear-cut way to identify individuals. It is obviously harder to capture random more widely spread random fly-tipping by residents often under cover of night, and on foot by this method.

The work is ongoing in a town that sees new residents everyday, and the team is here to educate as well as to prosecute those offenders who know better but continue to disrespect the structure in which we recycle and collect rubbish. We will continue to investigate waste deposit offences and duty of care breaches. The team will always seek to engage with residents, businesses, and private landowners regarding their waste management responsibilities, doing what we can to ensure public awareness and by application of fines, where warranted, promote a change in the behaviours in those that may consider committing such an offence.