

COUNCIL MEETING - 21 MARCH 2023

AGENDA ITEM: 6

QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

1. Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Community Safety:
Tackling Fly Tipping

Dumping of rubbish is out of control in some bits of Reading. Please can the Lead Councillor confirm how many fines the Council has issued each year for the last 5 years? Please can this be broken down by type of fine. Can the Lead Councillor also confirm what additional action is being taken to tackle dumped waste?

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

I'd like to thank Councillor White for his question, which provides me with an opportunity to highlight the excellent work of our Environmental Enforcement Team.

The Council has a team of Recycling & Enforcement Officers that investigate litter, fly-tipping and other waste offences around the borough, whilst also engaging with, and educating residents regarding recycling and appropriate waste management/minimisation. The team was formed in November 2019 and is comprised of a Senior Officer and 4 Officers. It is worth noting that for a substantial portion of this current year, the team has been at half-capacity due to resignations, but as of the end of 2022, that team has returned to full capacity and we now have a bright, energetic, and eager team.

The team has dual responsibilities between recycling and enforcement. As such, they undertake recycling initiatives alongside any fly-tipping investigations. The team have also been integral in the rollout of food waste collections across the borough; conducting the early-adopters trial in late 2020, the rollout to houses in 2021 and phase 2 to blocks of flats, which launched in June 2022, involving bespoke solutions to embed success.

Education and informing residents and businesses of their obligations in the proper management of their waste has also been prioritised this year, such as our partnership work in the University residential area of Redlands. The team has focused on information being shared repeatedly in areas of high-turnover and on reaching residents for whom English is not a first language.

Please refer to the below table for a full breakdown of Fixed Penalty Notices from the previous five financial years, as requested:

Financial year (April to March)	Fly-tipping FPNs (S33 EPA 1990)	Littering FPNs (S87/88 EPA 1990)	Trade waste duty of care (S34 EPA)	Total FPNs issued	Variance
2021/22	353	28	14	395	59
2020/21	224	110	2	336	176
2019/20	40	99	21	160	160
2018/19	No data	No data	No data	No data	N/a
2017/18	No data	No data	No data	No data	N/a

Where fly-tipping is investigated by the team and the origin of the waste can be identified, enforcement action is taken as appropriate in the form of a Fixed Penalty Notice (FPN). We ask that residents and Councillors report any fly-tipping activity to the Council via the Love Clean Reading app, our website, or the contact centre, so that it can be brought to the teams' attention and promptly investigated.

Where there is a recurrence of issues in a specific location, the team will often choose to install 'no-fly tipping' signage to advise of the offence and the penalties that fly-tipping may face. These signs are a proven deterrent in many locations.

New stickers have also been recently designed to be placed on litter bins as a deterrent for leaving rubbish next to public litter bins.

Where fly-tipped waste includes bulky waste, garden/green waste, or construction material it is likely that no evidence of its origin would be found on investigation. In these instances, we are reliant on witnesses coming forward or capturing the incidents on CCTV surveillance.

The team operate three sets of CCTV cameras for fly-tipping purposes; a fourth camera is on order being allocated in the recent budget. These are placed in frequent fly-tip hotspot areas and are monitored regularly, although it is important to note that CCTV cameras come with a sizeable resourcing commitment for the team. Where waste is deposited from a vehicle and the registration is identified, enforcement action is taken against the vehicle's registered owner.

Residents can help with the identification of fly-tippers with information that identifies an individual. Residents are asked to provide a formal witness statement describing what they have seen, and copies of any footage or photos to be submitted as evidence. Once identified, FPNs are often given to the offender.

Finally, at the direction of this Labour-led Council, throughout the current fiscal year, the team has undertaken additional work on improving rubbish and collection issues along our secondary commercial streets such as the Oxford Road, Whitley Street, Basingstoke Road, and the Wokingham Road. As a result of this focus, there has already been a two and half fold increase in Sec 34 FPNs handed out to commercial properties this year alone; 34 and still counting this year, compared to 14 total last year. The team will always seek first to advise and work with those properties, however, barring success with that method, FPNs appropriately applied usually manage to achieve the action needed to improve our environment.

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

Tree Strategy Monitoring Failure

Having declared a climate emergency and recognised the impact that trees have on our climate and on our resident's well-being, two years ago the Council adopted a Tree Strategy. This included the objective to monitor progress against our targets - to record and report net tree gain in the Borough on an annual basis. In the two years since no monitoring process has been set up so this hasn't been done. Can the Lead member tell Councillors why they have failed to meet this objective, and what they have done to ensure that this will be met as soon as possible ?

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

The Council adopted a new Tree Strategy in March 2021 that contained ambitious proposals for tree planting and expansion of tree canopy cover in Reading up to 2030.

Within the Strategy, paragraph 3.119 states that *“It is our aim to publish annual figures on our website to demonstrate our net gain in tree number in the Borough”* and whilst that aim to publish remains, annual reporting is a significant resourcing and practical challenge. In hindsight, we are reviewing how best we can report and show positive tree gain and canopy cover in the borough. Let me clarify that challenge. There are three methods of increasing tree cover in Reading:

- (1) Encouraging residents and businesses to plant more trees, not to fell them on their own private property- and continue to request reporting of any tree gain/loss to the Council;
- (2) Securing and monitoring an overall tree gain from development sites over the year;
- (3) Ensuring the Council continues to lead by example in increasing tree cover on our own land as set out in the Strategy.

The subsequent paragraphs make clear that any accurate reporting can only be made up of the information that is *available* to the Council to monitor, specifically the Council’s own tree planting and net gain on development sites.

Regarding tree planting from third-party/other sources, it is worth reiterating what the Tree Strategy says, which is that *“Individual residents, private landowners and organisations are encouraged to let us know when they undertake planting so we can record this”*, which should be done by contacting the Planning Natural Environment Team. It is clear that public/private party reporting will never be completely accurate, that there will always be an absence of knowledge and that information will always remain an estimate.

Establishing monitoring systems to record the number of trees planted on development sites has been one of the more difficult aspects of monitoring tree planting within the Borough. It is a relatively straightforward matter to record the number of trees agreed to be felled and planted on development sites within planning permissions but recording the changes that have actually taken place on such sites requires resource to set up the systems and undertake site visits. This is why figures could not be produced for the first monitoring year after adoption of the Tree Strategy, in 2021/22. However, the recording of tree planting is now able to be incorporated into the annual development monitoring site visits to be undertaken in April 2023, covering the 2022/23 year and due to be reported in the 2023 Annual Monitoring Report.

Most importantly, the Council continues to lead by example in hitting its targets for tree planting on its own land. The Tree Strategy set out a goal for the Council of 3,000 trees planted over 10 years to 2030 (or 300 trees a year on average). This was a significant increase from our previous target of 200 a year.

Last year, the first year of the Strategy, 351 new trees were planted on Council land. This year, in the 2022/23 planting season, 387 new trees planted on Council land. The number was greater this year to offset the extreme drought that took 46 trees last summer and a further 36 felled for various other reasons. Whilst we are proud this work has elicited a net positive gain of 305 trees on Council land this year, we are currently exploring an additional programme that could substantially increase those net gains on Council owned land in the future.

As we can see, therefore, an accurate annual count of tree numbers in the Borough will never be achievable and will only ever be able to represent completely a total of both the Council's own planting and planting on development sites secured through permission, both of which we know are returning positive net gain results. However, we know that tools such as iTree Canopy Cover provide us a far better methodology for monitoring canopy cover increase, the needed response to the Climate Emergency. As such, we are looking at the resourcing available to undertake that Borough-wide at regular advisable intervals, which will give us the best insight to our success and direction over the longer term.

Whilst we explore the best approach to reporting, the Council will continue to deliver positive tree cover on its own land, best exemplified by the dirt under my fingernails from joining in planting a new orchard in Whitley today; and as I join Whitley Labour Councillors again tomorrow, along with local schoolchildren, to plant this season's last trees.