

HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE

6 JULY 2023

- Present:** Councillor Eden (Vice-Chair in the Chair);
Councillors Asare, Ayub, Barnett-Ward, Challenger, Cresswell, Emberson,
Goss, Kitchingham, Magon, McCann, O'Connell, Rowland, R Singh, Tarar and
Yeo.
- Apologies:** Councillors G Dennis and Hacker

1. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of 9 March 2023 were confirmed as a correct record.

2. MINUTES OF OTHER BODIES

The Minutes of the following meeting were submitted:

Community Safety Partnership – 2 February 2023 and 20 April 2023.

Resolved - That the Minutes be received.

3. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND COUNCILLORS

Questioner	Subject	Reply
Mr Edd Street	Traveller Access to Cintra Park	Cllr Rowland
Mr Edd Street	Glass Recycling	Cllr Rowland

The full text of the question and reply was made available on the Reading Borough Council website.

4. EXTENSION OF THE CONTRACT TO PROVIDE A HOUSING REACTIVE REPAIRS SERVICE TO WOKINGHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL

The Committee received a report which sought authority for the Council to extend the current partnering contract with Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) to deliver its repairs and maintenance work to its housing stock for a further two years until 31 March 2025.

The report explained that on 31 March 2017 Reading Borough Council (RBC) had entered into a partnering contract with Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) to deliver repairs and maintenance work to its housing stock. Under the terms of that contract an agreed extension had extended the contract until 31 March 2023. WBC had been very happy with the service provided to date, however they were required to go through a process of market testing and possible re-tender of the contract which they were estimating would take approximately 24 months to complete. As the current contract had come to an end and as they had not been able to enter into a new contract at the current time, WBC had requested that RBC agree to extend the existing arrangement for a further 2 years. There would be an appropriate uplift in costs to ensure RBC were not subsidising the work undertaken for WBC.

The report explained that the benefits to RBC of the provision of this service to WBC included:

- Reducing costs for RBC tenants by benefitting from economies of scale and sharing overhead costs.

HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE

6 JULY 2023

- Putting the service on a good footing to take advantage of any new trading opportunities due to its experience in the provision of a commercial service.
- Joint learning between the authorities on tenant consultation and best practice.

Resolved -

That the Assistant Director of Housing & Communities in consultation with the Lead Councillor for Housing, Assistant Director of Legal & Democratic Services and Director of Finance, be authorised to enter retrospectively into a further extension of the Response Housing Maintenance and Response Housing Engineering Maintenance Partnering Agreement with Wokingham Borough Council for a period of two years, expiring on 31 March 2025 and to negotiate and agree various variations to the terms and conditions as proposed by both parties as detailed in the report.

5. FIRE SAFETY IN TALL BUILDINGS

The Committee received a report which provided an update on the Council's ongoing response in the private sector, following the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017. This included action taken in relation to privately-owned high-rise residential blocks within the Borough boundaries and our partnership with the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (RBFRS).

The report explained that RBFRS and the six Berkshire Unitary Authorities had signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in 2018, which had been updated in 2022 with the purpose of strengthening the draft Protocol for Fire Safety Enforcement and putting into place a joint plan of action with regards to the roles and responsibilities of each party. In Reading, four residential buildings over 18 metres had been identified as having ACM cladding which failed the required fire safety standard and this had all been removed by May 2022. As part of the government's Building Safety Programme buildings with other types of cladding systems and other external wall systems (EWS) were now being considered and 33 buildings in Reading had been identified as non-compliant and possibly requiring remedial works. The Council and RBFRS had been monitoring progress with works.

The report explained that the Council and RBFRS would continue to work on high-risk buildings which contained deficiencies related to fire safety. The Council would review on a case by case basis whether formal enforcement would be required under the Housing Act or our other powers, following the statutory guidance and the Housing Standards Enforcement Policy. RBFRS would continue to have regular communication to discuss progress with the Building Safety Programme and individual properties. The Council would continue its efforts to obtain external wall systems details of all applicable buildings in response to the request from Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities (DLUHC) and take action where appropriate. This included any new changes derived from recommendations in the final Grenfell Inquiry report and from the new Building Safety Regulator.

The report added that once this work had been completed the focus would shift to identify and work on other priority areas, which could include buildings over 11 metres tall, residential conversions or flats above commercial properties. The Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities had awarded New Burdens funding of £47,049 for financial year 2023/24 to drive the remediation of unsafe high-rise private sector buildings and some of this funding would be used to deal with backlogs in those teams where staff efforts had been diverted from their usual roles.

Resolved – That the position be noted.

HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE
6 JULY 2023

6. HIGHWAY MAINTENANCE UPDATE: NATIONAL HIGHWAYS GRANT FUNDING ALLOCATION FOR READING 2023/24 & 2024/25

The Committee received a report that updated the Committee on the National Highways Grant Funding Allocation of £250k per annum for Reading Borough Council to invest on Highway Assets on the M4 Motorway designated diversion route through Reading for 2023/2024 and 2024/2025 financial year periods.

The report explained that Reading had an opportunity to secure funding from National Highways, who manage the Strategic National Roads including the M4 for a project in relation to the upgrade of Highway Assets on the tactical diversion route between J11/M4 and J12/M4. This diversion route was from Junction 11 of the M4, north along the A33, left onto Rose Kiln Lane, left onto A4 Berkeley Avenue, left onto A4 Bath Road and back to Junction 12 of the M4 Motorway.

The report stated that the Council would undertake works to maintain Highway Assets along this strategic diversion route within the Borough and National Highways were funding works in respect of the Project on the terms and conditions set out in the Funding Agreement which were intended to ensure that the Funding was used by the Recipient for the purpose for which it was awarded.

The report also explained that works would include carriageway resurfacing, road marking refreshing using longer life cold applied Methyl Methacrylate (MMA) paints, preservation materials to extend the life of bitumen carriageway surfaces and the upgrade of strategic directional gantry signage. Works up to the maximum value of £250kpa would be delivered by the Council in a combination of either highway maintenance contracts that the Council would be tendering for the 2023/24 & 2024/25 financial year periods or by the Council's own in-house Highways & Drainage Operations Team.

The Committee noted that the Highways team had won the Best Council Services Team at the Municipal Journal MJ Awards in June in recognition of the quality and breadth of services provided to residents. The Committee thanked Sam and the team for all their hard work and congratulated them on their success.

Resolved:

- (1) That the National Highways Grant Funding Allocation of £250k per annum for Reading Borough Council to invest on Highway Assets on the M4 Motorway designated diversion route through Reading for 2023/2024 and 2024/2025 financial years be noted;**
- (2) That the formal funding agreement between the Council and National Highways be noted, and that officers proceed with delivery of the approved schemes;**
- (3) That the Highways team be thanked for all their hard work and success in winning the Best Council Services Team at the Municipal Journal MJ Awards.**

7. HIGHWAY MAINTENANCE ASSET MANAGEMENT UPDATE

The Committee received a report setting out the approved 2022/2023 Annual Status Options Reports (ASOR) for carriageways, pavements and structures and gave an update on the proposed inspection regime for the Public Rights of Way (PRoW) in Reading.

The report explained that the Asset Management tool was used by the Council to report on the condition, the asset value and future funding requirements of the public highway maintainable

HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE

6 JULY 2023

structures, carriageways and pavement assets. The ASORs included the historical investment in maintaining strategic highways and assets and calculated future funding requirements. The tool provided a clear picture of funding levels to improve areas of most need. The approved ASORs were appended to the report as follows:

- Appendix 1- Carriageways
- Appendix 2 – Pavements/footways
- Appendix 3 - Structures

It was noted that the Residential Unclassified Carriageway ASOR showed a significant improvement. The Council had achieved 80% good condition (green) following the £9m Council funded Residential Roads & Pavements 3-year investment programme (2020/23), an improvement from 35% good condition (green) prior to the investment. Subsequently this brought down the number of customer complaints relating to potholes by 44% over the last three years.

The Council had also committed to further investment of £8m over 5-years to further improve the network. This additional funding would also allow a trial to support more cost effect solutions for road resurfacing to provide more preventative rather than reactive measures.

The Committee were also provided with information on Public Rights of Way (PRoW). The Council had a duty under the Highways Act 1980 to ensure that access was maintained and to ensure that PRoWs were kept clear and unobstructed. The Highways team ensured that the PRoWs were inspected on a cyclical basis and that maintenance and clearing works were carried out as necessary by adjacent landowners. The proposal was to align the PRoW inspections with the public highway inspections, to be carried out by the Highway Inspectors to help maximise resources. The inspection results would be brought to a future Committee to set out the hierarchical status of the PRoWs and the proposed future inspection regime. A list of all PRoWs was provided in Appendix 4 to the report.

Resolved:

- (1) That the approved 2022/2023 Annual Status Options Reports (ASOR) for carriageways, pavements and structures be endorsed;**
- (2) That the proposed inspection regime for the Public Rights of Way (PRoW) be endorsed.**

8. ALLOTMENTS – CONSULTATION – FEES & CHARGES REVIEW

The Committee received a report which set out progress of the Allotment Rent Review and a consultation on changes to allotment discounts and rents.

Since 2020 the service had sought the opinion of tenants on potential rent and discount changes through the August 2020 Allotment Consultation and ongoing work on the Allotment Self-Management Project while calculating what charges would meet service needs without causing major hardship to low-income tenants.

It was reported that Council currently subsidised the service by £45k per year and rental received was dependent on the two levels of discounts that plot tenants could claim via the Your Reading Passport (YRP) scheme. The discounts were:

- General Discount (10%). Tenants claim the 10% discount by virtue of residency in the Borough being a YRP holder.
- Concessionary Discount (74%). In addition to the General discount, YRP holders who were aged 60+, on low income or with a disability could also claim for this additional discount giving them a total discount of 84%.

HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE 6 JULY 2023

Of the Council's 1,413 current allotment tenants, 509 (36%) claimed one of two discounts available.

The aims of reviewing allotment discounts were as follows:

- To continue to use Discounts to support tenants in financial hardship.
- To simplify the Rent Matrix. Removal of the 10% General Discount would cut three lines from the Rent Matrix and simplify the application and billing processes.
- To standardise the number of Discount levels with other Council Discount schemes, which only offered a single level of discount.
- To align Discount levels with national averages.
- To contribute to the Council Medium Term Financial Strategy.

It was considered that the 84% concessionary discount was generous when benchmarked against discounts offered by other local authorities. A consultation would be undertaken on two future discount schemes which would bring Reading in line with other local authorities and simplify the rent matrix. The consultation would begin in July 2023 for 6 weeks and a report would be brought to the Committee in November 2023 advising of the consultation results and recommending a rents and discount option to be applied from 1 April 2025.

Resolved:

- (1) That the proposed rationale for increasing allotment rents and reducing related discounts be noted;**
- (2) That the Allotment Rent & Discounts Consultation Plan to commence in August 2023 be approved;**
- (3) That a further report be brought back to a future HNL Committee for approval on the new proposed Allotment Rent & Discount structure following the consultation exercise being completed. This is required to give plot holders 12 months written notice of the new rent/discount structure to be implemented.**

9. WEED CONTROL MANAGEMENT – TRIAL OF MARKET AVAILABLE OPTIONS

The Committee received a report which provided an update on trials that took place between May 2022 and October 2022 to explore the alternative to the current weed control practice of using glyphosate to control unwanted vegetation across the borough.

The report explained that the Council remained committed to reducing the use of herbicides across its public estate wherever possible and had over previous years reduced its use considerably. It was noted that the reduction of herbicide complimented the Wildflower Plan to help improve the environment. However, there was a need to provide effective weed control to protect the carriageways and footpaths in the borough, especially following the Council's significant capital investment into resurfacing the boroughs residential roads and pavements.

The trial of alternative methods was carried out on Northumberland Avenue, Rabson's Recreation Ground and Cintra Park. The alternative methods used were:

1. Fatty Acid (Pelargonic Acid) spray.
2. Hot water and steam and manual removal.
3. Hand removal.
4. Glyphosate.
5. Acetic acid Spray.

HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE
6 JULY 2023

The results of the trial showed that glyphosate was the most effective and efficient weed control method used. Whilst hot water and steam produced effective results it was unsustainable and not as efficient as the other methods tested. Hand weeding had the least environmental impact but was not a sustainable option. Pelargonic and Acetic acid treatments produced quicker results but was less efficient, more costly and required the use of more chemicals.

It was noted that if any new alternatives became available then these would be investigated. Officers would also consider how other Councils deal with weed control and continue to explore how to reduce the use of glyphosate and increase rewilding of the public realm.

Resolved:

- (1) That the current position on the Trial of Alternative to Glyphosate be noted.**
- (2) That the continued controlled use of glyphosate as the most cost effective and efficient method for the control of unwanted vegetation on paved areas and in and around grass verges be approved.**
- (3) That any new contract issued include a requirement for the successful bidder to work with the Council to seek a suitable alternative to glyphosate be agreed.**
- (4) That the Streetscene Team continue to explore and monitor the 'Herbicide Market' for any suitable new alternatives to glyphosate. The Streetscene Team would also remain vigilant as to how other councils are dealing with the issue be agreed.**

(The meeting opened at 6.30pm and closed at 7.45pm).