

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE - 18 FEBRUARY 2019

AGENDA ITEM NO. 4

QUESTIONS IN ACCORDANCE WITH STANDING ORDER NO 36(2)

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1.	Hilary Smart	Caversham Library	Cllr Hacker
2.	Glenn Dennis	Cultural Partnership & Cultural Education Partnership	Cllr Hacker
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	Questioner	Subject	Answer
1.	Cllr White	Accessible Playgrounds in Reading	Cllr Hacker
2.	Cllr White	Increasing Council Spend on Agency Staff	Cllr Lovelock

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QUESTION NO. 1

Hilary Smart to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation:

Caversham Library

Library opening hours have been cut in my home library in Caversham, and throughout Reading. I understand the budgetary constraints the council is operating under, but I feel strongly that the library is an important resource, and especially so for children in a time when social provision for families is being cut across the board. From observation and discussion I believe Caversham library is much busier in the school holidays than during term time, and they do a brilliant job of putting on activities that draw young people in. Do the council's usage figures reflect this, and if so would the committee consider extending library opening hours in the school holidays, which are only a quarter of the year?

REPLY by Councillor Hacker (Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation):

The Library Service budget has reduced in recent years in order to contribute to savings which have been necessitated by a combination of reduced Government funding over a number of years and increasing demand for services.

However, in spite of this, the Council has been able to keep open all seven branch libraries through making more effective use of community buildings, co-locating libraries with other services; introducing self-service kiosks; reducing to single staffing in most neighbourhood branches (enabled by co-location and self-service); and reducing opening hours.

Opening hours reflect levels and patterns of use, as well as customer feedback from consultation. A number of considerations have informed the pattern of opening hours including trying to ensure that they are consistent and memorable.

Caversham Library is open 27 hours across four days of the week, which includes Thursday evening and a Saturday morning. Reading Central Library (which includes the Toy Library) is also open five days a week, including Mondays and Thursday mornings when Caversham Library is closed.

Libraries are very popular with children and overall library issues are made up of 46% children's books, the figures rising to 50% of issues if Central library is excluded - and 53% at Caversham. Children are among the biggest groups of library users. The library service provides a wide range of activities for children across all of our libraries, including popular preschool rhymetimes and craft sessions.

The busiest period for all libraries in Reading is across the summer when the national Summer Reading Challenge runs and all libraries participate.

The cost of increasing hours during school holidays would not be possible within existing service budgets, the annual cost across all branches would be at least £20,000. If hours were to be increased on a branch by branch basis, the service would look to prioritise those areas where the greatest impact could be made to support children's reading.

It is an aspiration of the service to open libraries for longer if funding allows in the future. Whilst this is not currently possible, should a community organisation come forward with proposals for extending the opening hours of any branch to enable access to the service *outside* of core operating hours, this would be welcomed and explored further.*

**Proposals may be subject to further approval by members and would be subject to compliance with the Council's legal duties.*

QUESTION NO. 2

Glenn Dennis to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation:

Cultural Partnership and Cultural Education Partnership

Reading currently has the Cultural Partnership and the Cultural Education Partnership, could the Lead Councillor both clarify the differences between them and outline the links between them?

REPLY by Councillor Hacker (Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation):

Thank you Mr Dennis and as your question infers the two Partnerships are different but linked.

The Cultural Partnership is the overarching one that embraces the whole remit of promoting culture and heritage and continuing to develop the Reading 'offer' in line with the Culture and Heritage Strategy - including acting as the 'Board' for our Great Place Scheme 'Reading, Place of Culture'. To this end, and following a review of membership, the Partnership is currently in the process of developing an action plan based around the following core themes:

- Building strategic partnerships and networks;
- Widening participation and engagement;
- Developing cultural spaces and infrastructure;
- Growing resilience and innovation; and
- Raising profile and reputation

The Cultural Education Partnership (CEP) is specifically focused on young people and has the principle aim to allow every child and young person in Reading to have the opportunity to aspire, achieve and participate in high quality arts and culture, and to develop a collaborative, sustainable infrastructure to maintain such engagement. This links directly to a key priority for the Arts Council and Cultural Education Partnerships are being established in many parts of the country with the support of the Arts Council's 'Bridge' organisations - in our case 'Artswork'. Reading's CEP has a very good reputation both regionally and nationally and continues to work with Artswork to generate additional resources for youth focused work and to deliver enhanced opportunities for cultural engagement, especially for those young people who otherwise might be denied such opportunities.

The Cultural Education Partnership is represented on the Cultural Partnership and I as Lead Councillor currently Chair both so the two Partnerships are very well connected. It is also worth noting that all three of our National Portfolio Organisations (CultureMix, Readipop and the Museum's Partnership Reading) are all represented on the Cultural Partnership and as NPOs also have a specific focus on young people as part of their work.

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QUESTION NO. 3

Richard Stainthorp to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:

Prison Site

Will the Lead Councillor for SEPT provide an update in respect of the future of the Prison Site, and any timetable that the Ministry of Justice has indicated for its disposal?

REPLY by Councillor Page (Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport):

I thank Mr Stainthorp for his question.

The Council has for some significant time been seeking a clear timetable for the disposal of the Prison Site. On 15th January 2019 Matt Rodda MP wrote to Rory Stewart MP, the Minister of State for Prisons, seeking not only a timetable but also information on the disposal process proposed by the Ministry of Justice. He has yet to receive a reply.

I share many people's frustration about the continuing delays. Following the recent restoration of the Abbey Ruins, Reading Gaol is the key historical and cultural asset to which Reading's residents are potentially being denied access. The Council will continue to press the MoJ for early clarification about these important issues so that we can secure the future of this site.

It is this Council's ambition to deliver maximum public access, whilst safeguarding the historic prison building and the wider area of significant national heritage along with its rich history and archaeology. This would be a fitting legacy and one that the people of Reading deserve.

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QUESTION NO. 5

Roger Lightfoot to ask the Leader of the Council:

Sale of Arthur Hill Pool

The paper considered by Policy Committee in July 2018 regarding the sale of Arthur Hill swimming pool gave "the Director of Environment and Neighbourhood Services delegated powers to reengage with the second highest bidder or remarket the property for disposal at best consideration" in the event of the Purchaser not performing to an acceptable timescale.

What does the Council consider to be not performing to an acceptable timescale?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

An acceptable timescale is one where both parties are negotiating in good faith and resolving issues to ensure that a disposal is achieved as expeditiously as possible.

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QUESTION NO. 6

Peter Burt to ask the Leader of the Council:

Sale of Arthur Hill Pool

When Arthur Hill Swimming Pool was placed on the property market in January 2018 the Council published, as part of the bidding pack for potential buyers, a bidding process for local voluntary organisations which wished to submit bids for the pool and a scoring sheet explaining how bids would be assessed.

Why, therefore, was no quantitative assessment or scoring of bids conducted to enable Policy Committee to make an objective comparison between bids?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

Third Sector Bids - prospective third sector bidders received a copy of the Application to Bid, Bidding Process and Scoring System. Two third sector bids were received and evaluated by the Council in accordance with the criteria and scoring system.

Commercial Bids - these were evaluated by the Council and its retained agents, Savills. The evaluation of the commercial bids was based on the level of offer, commercial acumen and ability to complete the purchase.

The Report to Policy Committee provided a summary of all the bids and narrative based on the above points.

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QUESTION NO. 7

Peter Burt to ask the Leader of the Council:

Sale of Arthur Hill Pool

What steps did Reading Borough Council take to establish whether those controlling the company it has selected to purchase Arthur Hill Pool are fit and proper people to buy the property? What background checks were conducted on the Company Directors, and did this include a criminal record check?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

The sale is to a limited company (OOAK Developments Ltd) and is not to the individuals of the Company. Financial checks were carried out on the Company and all legal due diligence has been undertaken.

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QUESTION NO. 8

Amjad Tarar to ask the Leader of the Council:

Retention of Business Rates

What is happening regarding the retention of business rates to fund local government services in the future?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

The Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government, MHCLG, confirmed in the December Local Government Finance Settlement their intention to increase the amount of Business Rates to be retained by local government to 75% from 2020/21. As part of the Settlement they published a further consultation for councils and other interested parties to respond to by 21st February.

The consultation explores how an extended localised business rate scheme can:

- Give local government greater control over the money it raises;
- Incentivise local authorities to support local economic growth;
- Transfer an appropriate share of risk and reward to local authorities for business rate growth; and
- Mitigate volatility within the system and provide suitable levels of protection for significant reductions in business rate yield.

The proposals as set out in the consultation would not deliver additional funding for local government, but have the potential to change the distribution of overall business rate income across individual local authorities.

As well as examining the operation of the business rate retention retained share and benefits that may be achieved by promoting higher business rate growth, the government is at the same time consulting on a Fair Funding Review, which has the potential to re-set the baseline funding position from 2020/21 and which includes the development of new indicators and methodologies to determine underlying relative need and resources. This has the potential to impact on the future period of time existing benefits from growth in business rates may remain in the system as well as the starting assumed funding levels going forward.

MHCLG recognise that any reset of Baseline funding levels has the potential to see significant changes in core funding levels and loss of previously earned growth reward could have a "cliff edge" impact if the changes were applied in full and with immediate effect, and as part of the consultation process have asked local

government for their views on what damping arrangements, if any, may be put in place over the life of the next funding review period.

Finally, the future operation of the localised business rates retention system and funding allocations is likely to be affected by the next Comprehensive Spending Review, currently commenced by HM Treasury and likely to be published in the late Autumn of 2019.

The Council, along with its partner authorities within Berkshire, have been successful in retaining "Pilot" status for 2019/20 for business rate retention - one of only three equivalent pilots from 2018/19 which were successful in being continued for a second year.

I very much hope that after all the delays we will finally get some clarity on the future funding for local government. It been a difficult time for all councils and completely unsatisfactory to expect local government to produce 3 year plans when the government has failed to conduct a timely review of their future plans for funding vital local services. For Reading's funding to have dropped from £58million to nothing has been a disgrace. We wait to see if all the pleading from councils of all persuasions will result in fairer funding for local government.

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QUESTION NO. 9

Anne Green Jessel to ask the Leader of the Council:

Sale of Arthur Hill Pool

The redacted Policy Committee report from July 2016 released by Reading Borough Council under pressure from campaigners raises as many questions as it answers:

On what basis did the Council select a new operator with no track record as its favoured purchaser, when other applicants are known to have considerably offered more money for the site or proposed to retain it for community use?

On what date will the sale price be made public so that members of the public can hold the Council to account on its promise to use the income towards construction of a new swimming pool?

Given that the pool frontage has a local listing, what safeguards are in place to ensure that it remains protected in the face of the purchaser's proposals to change the use of the site to housing development, and what penalties would the developer face for failing to preserve the frontage?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

Policy committee considered all of the bids which were received following the marketing of the property. There was a range of offers made, both on a conditional and unconditional basis from commercial and third sector organisations and for a range of uses. The recommendation to dispose to Oak was made following an evaluation of their offer and their ability to deliver.

The sale price will be made available to the public after completion of the sale.

The locally listed status of the front building would be taken into account in the assessment of any planning application for the redevelopment of the property.

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COUNCILLOR QUESTION 1

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation:

Accessible Playgrounds in Reading

Quite a few playgrounds in Reading aren't accessible to wheelchair users because of the surface - sand is impossible for wheelchairs, and bark chippings are not easy and often too difficult for children to manage. Basket swings can be good but a disabled child who is too heavy for parents to lift might not be able to climb into it, and some parks have an "accessible" basket swing which you can't get close to in a wheelchair because the playground is surfaced with bark.

Can the Lead Councillor tell me what policies Reading has to ensure that playgrounds are accessible to all, and what action is being taken to make sure these policies mean that all children can play together ?

REPLY by Councillor Hacker (Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation):

Cllr White is correct that many play areas in Reading have access problems for children with mobility problems and other disabilities. This is true not only of children in wheelchairs, the problems for whom he highlights, but of children with a range of physical and mental challenges.

The Council is aware of these issues, and has been seeking consciously to address this over the past two decades.

The play infrastructure is historic, and it is not possible to make overnight changes to every site to make it fully accessible to people of all abilities. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995, and subsequent amendments, explicitly recognises the investment burden involved in transforming all infrastructure, and the requirements of the Act are that all future changes need to account for the accessibility requirements of all users. All new investment made in play areas in Reading is DDA-compliant.

Major advances were made in 2008-10 with the injection of government funding under the Playbuilder scheme. The Council used the resources to invest significantly in accessible play equipment and natural play facilities at various locations across the Borough. The most important of these is the day-out play location at Christchurch Meadows for families who have children with various challenges. Advice was sought from charities concerned with days out for disabled children, and all advice was taken. All new play equipment can be used by children of all abilities, so that disabled

children can play with those who are able-bodied. Some equipment is designed for a parent to be able to play with children (like the double width slides, large rope swinger and basket swings). In addition, items of equipment were located away from the main play area to accommodate children with mental health issues who want to play in play areas but away from the melee of other children.

Significant DDA-compliant investment was also made at Rabsons Recreation Ground and at Palmer Park. At Palmer Park, the play area was enlarged to allow for more free play; basket swings were dotted around the site, on grass, which is accessible by wheelchair; a large new rope swinger, on which parents can play with (and therefore hold) children with mobility problems, was installed; and trampolines were introduced, where disabled children can be bounced by an adult. Other equipment aimed at children with a range of challenges was installed. This was intended as a significant improvement on the old ERAPA playground, which effectively segregated disabled children from other children. Now that the old ERAPA equipment is becoming obsolete new accessible equipment is planned.

In June 2016, local parents of disabled children were requested by the Play Team to complete questionnaires assessing six of the Council's major play areas for access issues. The results are being used to guide further investment in these sites.

In September 2017, the Council's Playground Officer met with the Access Forum specifically to discuss problems that parents are having with access, and to discuss improvements being made. This is an ongoing dialogue, with an annual report to the Forum on progress that is being made. One of the most important of these is the ongoing replacement of loose-fill safety surfacing with a rubber bonded product. This is very expensive, and one or two sites are being converted each year.

In 2018, a full review of all playgrounds was carried out, highlighting all investment needs, and in December 2018, a capital bid for £2.8million was submitted to fund the current investment gap. Much of this funding is specifically intended to improve further access for all to the Council's playgrounds, a point that was emphasised in the bid.

Council will be asked to approve the Capital Programme next week and there will be public consultation on all plans for new equipment in our parks.

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COUNCILLOR QUESTION 2

Councillor White to ask the Leader of the Council:

Increasing Council Spend On Agency Staff

Green councillors have been increasingly concerned, at a time of savage cuts to services, about the increasing spend on agency staff by this Labour Council. In particular temporary senior managers on approaching £1000 per day and the use of temporary social workers because the Council's plan to recruit permanent social workers has historically failed. Please can I get the updated figures for each directorate, for each year from 2016/17 to the current year, including the forecast spend to the end of this financial year?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

The Council uses temporary staff for a variety of reasons, including vacancy cover, long term sickness and those occasions where it is more cost effective to procure specialist skills for short term projects and it would not be feasible to employ full time staff.

It is important to note that all staffing has a cost, and that temporary staff are not necessarily more expensive than permanent staff especially when on-costs such as national insurance and pension scheme contributions are factored in.

This table totals the net figures; the difference in cost between the agency staff engaged by the Council and the cost of equivalent permanent staffing.

	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019 forecast
	£000	£000	£000
Resources	237	782	189
DACHS	533	398	363
DCEEHS/BFFC	1,596	1,188	1,617
DENS	-165	-299	-117
Total	2,201	2,069	2,052

Of course permanent staff are preferable, unless someone is needed for a short term project.

Senior Management are actively managing the use of temporary staff and have put in place robust workforce strategies which are helping to deliver a reduced temporary worker spend.