

Access and Disabilities Working Group - Thursday 23 November 2023

Present

Cllr Karen Rowland Chair – Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and
Community Safety – Abbey Ward Councillor
Cllr Anne Thompson – Tilehurst Ward Councillor
Cllr Andrew Hornsby-Smith – Church Ward Councillor

Helen Bryant – Access Officer RBC
Alex Wylde – Policy and Performance Manager RBC
Sam Shean – Highways & Traffic Services Manager
Sarah Lawrence – Media and Communications Manager
Chris Brooks – Corporate Legal Adviser, Legal and Democratic Services
Gavin Handford – Assistant Director Policy, Performance & Customer Services

Terry Dixon
Bob Bristow – Chair - RAB
Shirl Scola – St Peter’s Church, The Warren
Marcos De C

Apologies

Jenny Turner – Readibus
Brian Oatway
Stuart Pearce
Peter Frewing

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Cllr Rowland welcomed everyone and asked attendees to introduce themselves.

MATTERS ARISING

Helen Bryant read the list of actions from the previous meeting and gave an update on progress.

COUNCILLORS’ DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

Cllr Rowland declared that she and Cllr Hornsby-Smith were both on the Planning Committee, with regard to the Library item.

NEW CENTRAL LIBRARY

Gavin Handford gave a presentation with slides about the plans for the new central library and talked through the designs.

All of the plans are available to view on the Planning website, available here: [Reading Borough Council Online Planning - Details](#)

Work is expected to start in the spring. More information about how services would be run whilst works were in progress would be given later in the process.

The new library will have a revolving door, and a pass door for those who can not use revolving doors.

The Registrars will be relocating and will have a dedicated waiting space, as well as a quieter space for people who were registering a death.

The library will be at the central rear of the building, and this is to include one of the courtyards, which will be covered. There will be a double height space at first floor level. There will be parking facilities for disabled drivers and passengers, as well as a coffee van.

A question was asked about a dedicated lift for the library. Gavin clarified that there will be a lift, and alternative lifts will be made available whenever that lift is closed for maintenance.

Gavin was asked how big the library will be in comparison with the existing library.

Several groups have use of the existing library. Tenants are in talks with Property Services to see where they could be placed.

It was mentioned that the PCs in the existing library were quite old, and it was hoped that there would be new ones with the latest accessibility software installed.

ACTION: Gavin Handford to clarify the size (m²) of the new central library in comparison to the existing site and whether the new library would have new computers with the latest accessibility software installed.

Cllr Rowland asked about lavatory facilities for disabled users of the new library. Gavin said that there would be a Changing Places facility, and this would be in place before the main construction.

POLLING PLACES

Chris Brooks, Corporate Legal Adviser at RBC, spoke about the recent review of the polling districts, polling places and wards.

The Electoral Commission recently revised parliamentary constituency boundaries. There were previously two constituencies in Reading: Reading East and Reading West. The new constituencies are: Reading Central; Reading West and Mid-Berkshire; and Earley and Woodley.

These changes, however, were based on the old ward boundaries in Reading. This means there are now several instances where the boundaries of the new constituencies do not align with ward boundaries. This causes issues for the administration of elections.

A consultation on polling districts, places and wards was running until 1 December. Comments were invited by post, email or online.

All polling stations were reviewed in 2021 and 2022. Many schools no longer want to be involved in polling. Schools are often good venues and are useful to help with social distancing. There had been a polling station in the existing library, and this would need to be relocated. There will be a new polling station in the Civic Centre.

Helen Bryant said that getting to polling stations could be difficult for disabled people, which was why many had postal votes. Chris said that the regulations around postal voting would be being made stricter, to prevent practices such as vote farming.

It was asked how sight impaired people were being informed about the changes. Chris said that there was a very detailed consultation by the Council.

It was raised that it would be very important to make sure that people were clear about where they needed to vote, as they might be in another constituency. Chris clarified that detailed information would be available.

Cllr Rowland said that organisations such as Reading Association for the Blind might want to let their users know.

The question was raised about how the Council decides who is vulnerable and who is not, and whether information was being sent out about postal votes. Chris said that Electoral Registration reacted positively and helpfully when they were informed that disabled people had individual needs, especially elderly people.

There was a further question about communication between teams about these needs, and whether that information could be better shared between council services. Chris said that there could be problems with doing this because of confidentiality and our legal duties regarding data protection.

Cllr Hornsby-Smith remarked that the new boundaries had not long been established, and wards had changed. The changes had caused problems for some people, and they did not always know which ward they were in.

READING SAFE SPACE

Sarah Gardner gave a presentation about the new Safe Space in Reading town centre. This is part of the Community Safety Partnership.

The partnership is overseeing the delivery of funding to reduce crime and increase safety for women and children.

The Mayor opened the Safe Space in October. It is based in St Mary's Butts, next to Bill's restaurant. It is the base for the First Stop service, which has been running for the previous ten years. They offer first aid support from 9pm to 3am on Friday and Saturday nights. Paramedics at the Safe Space have treated people for minor injuries and triaged to A&E. Over 20 trips to A&E have been averted so far. There are also Reading Street Pastors, who gave support.

It is a place of refuge, where people could have support with mental health issues. There was support for victims of crime, and No 5 Youth Counselling were partners, along with Brighter Futures for Children. Other partners are being sought.

The building has disabled access on the ground floor and there is a ramp to the door, and plenty of space inside. There is also an accessible toilet in the building.

Access for wheelchair users was good, but the entrance was quite tight, and there is a slight step at the threshold. Sarah said that an extensive risk assessment had been carried out, and there were plans to remove the flower bed and rehang the door, which, if approved, would make access easier. Helen Bryant suggested that possibly some training for manual handling of wheelchairs could be done and said that she would look for threshold ramps.

ACTION: Helen Bryant to provide further information on threshold ramps that could be used at the Safe Space building.

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HIGHWAYS, READING STATION SUBWAY, DROPPED KERBS AND HANDRAILS

Sam Shean attended to give an update on work to improve road and pavements in Reading.

He explained that the subway at Reading station did not belong to the Council, but it was designated as a public highway. The ceiling is too low and is vulnerable to vandalism. The Council have some Section 106 funding to raise the height of it. This will be happening next February. The contractors

will only be closing the subway where there is no alternative. The rest of the time there would be access, through a narrower passage.

If someone who is disabled requires access to go through the station, they need to apply to the Council for a pass. They should contact Helen Bryant in the first instance.

The subway will be more robust after the works are completed. It is too narrow for segregated cycling. Lighting is also going to be looked at. Handrails and tactile markings will also be needed.

Sam said that there was Community Infrastructure Levy funding to pay for things such as handrails. He said that his team are already aware that there are places in Reading where there were no handrails on steps and are working to rectify this. Sam requested that if people knew of any more places, to let his team know via Helen Bryant.

In addition, there is another programme for dropped kerbs and tactile crossings – 70 sites have been identified by local Councillors.

ACTION: Helen Bryant to circulate the list of sites where accessibility work is planned to the group for review and comment.

Cllr Rowland asked about the possibility of another tour of the town, to show where there were any problems for access. Sam said that he was keen to do this and was willing to look at problems further away from the town centre.

DISABILITY PRIDE DAY 2024

Helen Bryant gave an update on preparations for Disability Pride Day 2024. Lots of groups, including unions and businesses run by disabled people could be involved. Helen explained that the Council's Physical Disabilities and Sensory Needs Network had arranged awareness days in the past.

Marcos de C said that he had a background in organising events, and he had some contacts who would be interesting speakers for the next Disability Pride events.

AOB AND CONCERNS

None.

The meeting ended at 4.05.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

THURSDAY 29 FEBRUARY 2024 – in the Civic Offices and on Teams