

COUNCIL MEETING – 27 FEBRUARY 2024

(A) PETITIONS

None

(B) QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

None

(C) QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

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

More Free Bulky Waste Collection Slots Needed

Green Councillors have campaigned against fly-tipping in the town for some time. We were pleased when the Council introduced a free bulky waste collection service. However, unfortunately when residents bring this up on the doorstep and in my own personal experience it is very difficult to get a slot and you can try numerous times and still fail.

Does the Council have any data on how many times people are trying to book this service and failing ?

What plans has the Council got to reduce the number of times a resident has to try to successfully book a slot ?

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

Thank you, Councillor White, for your question and for your party's support of yet another Labour-led initiative to assist residents in this town, especially those with limited means around bulky waste removal and our efforts to reduce items that may be potentially fly-tipped. As I am sure you will observe from this evening's budget considerations, we are really pleased to provide any free service at all in such a financial climate. The service currently costs circa £250k pa and provides approximately 4,500 collections per year (18 per day).

Unfortunately, shortly after the launch of our offer, the Government announced new structures about the way POPS items must be dealt with. POPS stands for Persistent Organic Pollutants and these are found commonly in domestic upholstered items. If a request comes in to remove an old dresser, a broken table and a sofa, that means two trips for our removal Teams, as the POPs item must be segregated from all other items and dealt with separately.

I am sure you can imagine, our programme's costs rose significantly from what we originally programmed as a result. Furthermore, I am sure you can also see from the pages before you, that there is no "magic money tree" to increase funding and capacity for this very popular free programme. I am afraid, we are, at best, forced to live within the budget we have.

We have no captured statistics on numbers of failed booking attempts, but we do accept that a free service that provides 18 collections a day for appx 180K residents in the midst of a cost-of-Living crisis is going to be extremely popular.

I am also sorry that residents are having difficulties in booking, but with 4,500 bookings a year, equally, many residents are successful. The process in place is on a first come, first served basis which is the most equitable method we can have in place.

Booking slots are made available daily, two weeks in advance. For those with digital exclusion issues, we retain 12 slots per week for telephone bookings.

Slots are regularly booked within an hour of becoming available. Our advice to residents is that they should attempt to book the service as close to 5pm as possible to ensure the greatest chance of success, which is the current release time for booking slots. There may be a need for residents to persevere with the process to ensure success, and to repeatedly clear any caches on their machine.

Given the obvious facts ahead of us at budget setting, regrettably, this Council is not currently in a position to increase capacity for any free service, no matter how desirable or justified it may be.

We will be looking at a wide variety of options in order to maintain this service, even as it is, by possibly varying times of booking releases, limiting collections to once per year per resident, or targeting low- utilisation areas in order to ensure that as many residents as possible can benefit.

We would also like to remind the public, that there are many alternative solutions for the disposal and or recycling of unwanted bulky household items such as:

- Donation to charities;
- Freecycle online;
- Make arrangements with landlords for clearance;
- Taking the item directly to Re3 on Island Road;
- Arrange the collection and recycling of white goods with the retailer when purchasing a new item;
- And finally, with the Council's own reasonably priced paid bulky waste collection service.

Additionally, legislative change, requiring manufacturers and retailers to take back end-of-life products are being discussed. If this happens, demand may change and our offer may need to evolve in the future.

Ultimately, I feel sure that all colleagues across the chamber will see the fragility of a free offer as we seek to set the budget this evening. Nothing that is free is really free, Cllr White, and I am sure even the most level-headed resident can see the significant struggles that lie ahead for Local Government and for this Council as it continues to do all it can for our residents.

2. Councillor McElroy to ask the Lead Councillor for Climate Strategy and Transport **Single-use Plastics Still used in Council Venues despite nearly five years passing since their Commitment to go Plastic Free**

In 2019 the Council pledged to go plastic free ([Council Pledges to go Plastic Free \(reading.gov.uk\)](https://www.reading.gov.uk)). The pledge claimed this would be achieved by:

- phasing out the purchase of single-use plastic products through services commissioned by the Council where possible and as soon as practicable.
- Bringing regular reports to future committee meetings, describing the Council's plans to eliminate single-use plastic from the organisation, including a timetable for doing so.
- Working with Reading's businesses, community groups and residents to share advice, ideas and best practice on using sustainable alternatives

- Working with schools to support the aspiration of Reading's young people to eliminate plastic waste from our environment.
- Seeking to work with neighbouring Councils to tackle single use plastic use across the wider Berkshire area.

Can the Lead Councillor for Climate Strategy and Transport please update us on the council's progress against these commitments?

REPLY by Councillor Ennis Lead Councillor for Climate Strategy and Transport.

Since declaring a climate emergency in 2019, this Council has continued to strive towards reducing its carbon emissions to reach our target of a net zero Reading by 2030. Whilst the Council has reduced its own carbon footprint by 74% in 14 years and is one of only 119 towns or cities around the globe that is recognised for taking bold leadership on environmental action, we recognise there is more to be done.

The Council remains committed to reducing its use of single use plastics in its venues as part of becoming single use plastic free. That said, it is worth acknowledging that the need to respond to Covid and the resultant wider increase in single use for personal protection and hygiene reasons had an impact on the immediate momentum to implement the 2019 pledge. The idea of refilling and reuse has taken a while to recover.

Some of the actions the Council has taken includes:

- For the buildings we manage, it is considered in our procurements, raised in building user meetings and included in the building management handbook.
- At the Council's theatres, single use plastics have been substantially reduced.
- The **Hexagon, Town Hall and South Street** phased out all products supplied in plastic drinks bottles in 2019, in favour of canned and glass alternatives.
- The Pantry at the Town Hall uses recyclable or compostable coffee cups, cardboard containers, and paper bags.
- All forms of takeaway packaging is compostable including the coffee cups and lids.
- Ice creams are supplied in cardboard packaging and recycling is encouraged throughout the venues.
- The Hexagon is continuing to work on a sustainable and safe solution during events where glass is not permitted due to safety concerns. The current plastic cups are made from recycled plastic, but we are working towards a paper alternative.
- South Street are developing a Green Rider to share with visiting artists and hirers, to request they try and share some of our environmental aspirations.
- The **Council's leisure partner GLL** is committed to reducing and/or eliminating single use, non-recyclable, plastics from its premises.
- GLL are trialling phasing out plastic overshoes at Palmer Park Leisure Centre & Stadium, instead asking customers to remove shoes prior to entering the changing rooms. In the meantime, the other centres are only using suppliers that can guarantee their product is recyclable. Bins are situated under the overshoe dispensers for used overshoes and these are reused until they are considered no longer fit for purpose.
- Water stations in the leisure centres are available for customers to fill their own bottles; disposable cups are not provided.
- **New Directions College** have phased out single use plastics as part of a robust Sustainability Strategy to embed delivery of Education for Sustainable Development across the College's operations, programmes and partnerships, reaching all the College's adult learners. There is a lot more to do. The College is very much on a journey. But, as a place-based institution, keen to share learning.

- The Council is **working with other event organisers, including Reading Festival**, to develop more sustainable festivals and events and urging festival goers to take action and say no to single use plastics and take their tents home.
- The Council has been invited by **Vision 2025** to be part of a pilot project to test use of the **Green Events Code** along with 9 other Local Authorities. The Code of practice was officially launched as a 'working standard in development' at the Sustainable Events Summit, 19th October 2022. The Code focuses on seven key areas where positive environmental change can be achieved: governance, energy, travel & transport, food & drink, waste, water, and influence. And also aims to eliminate the use of single-use plastic by 2025.
- **Reading Libraries and Reading Museum** have significantly reduced single use plastics.
- Reading Museum work with community through Our Green Stories strand to promote the UN sustainability goals and encourage discussion and best practice including eliminating single use plastic climate action.
- The Museum shop have actively stopped stocking plastic products of all kinds where there are alternatives, we try and stock cards without plastic wrapping and ask suppliers to look at alternatives.
- In addition, within the re3 waste partnership, the council is working towards further enhancement of the plastic recyclability. A new trial for the kerbside recycling service for plastic bags and wrapping has been introduced in Reading Borough. Starting from September 2023, 4,000 households have been able to recycle plastic bags and wrapping which are collected as part of the normal recycling collection service. The trial is a part of national FlexCollect project, that is looking to gain an understanding of the best methods to collect plastic bags and wrapping from homes.
- We have been successful in removing the use of single use plastics in our schools. A particular success has been through our school meals contract, which stipulates that the provider should ensure that wherever possible, single use plastic is eliminated from use in both the kitchen and dining hall. Meals are served with reusable crockery and cutlery and we have eliminated the use of single use plastic bags for 'grab and go' items, which are instead served on crockery or with a napkin. In Primary and Nursery schools, drinks in single use plastic bottles are not available to purchase and water dispensers are provided instead. In the kitchen, the provider also takes steps to minimise the use of single use cling film.
- We have made further good progress in education settings and other settings for children in reducing the use of plastics. The Council has supported early years settings to reduce single use plastics. The Early Years team has developed and delivered a sustainability workshop for childminders and childcare providers and are liaising with nurseries who are leading the way with financial, social and environmentally sustainable practice to present their work to the sector in Reading to agree further actions.
- Reading's short breaks children's homes have removed use of single use plastics at mealtimes and have reduced the use of single use plastics in PPE; for example instead of single use over-shoe covers, using washable ones.

The Council has made great strides to become single use plastic free; we know more needs to be done and we remain committed to continue with this ambition.

Background

- Reading Museum Our Green Stories have had blogs, displays and activities see <https://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/get-involved/our-green-stories>
- Reduce, reuse, recycle blog <https://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/blog/our-green-stories-reduce-reuse-recycle>
- Reading Museum also worked with local schools on Gaia and our Create a Buzz project <https://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/our-green-stories-create-buzz-2023>