

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING & TRANSPORT COMMITTEE – 13 MARCH 2024

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 1 in accordance with Standing Order No.36

Councillor Singh to ask the Chair of Strategic Environment, Planning & Transport Committee:

Sinkholes and Subsidence Issues

Sinkholes and subsidence are becoming a persistent issue in Tilehurst, and I appreciate the efforts of Highway Inspectors.

However, residents are becoming increasingly concerned with the recent surge in sinkholes and road dips, particularly in the Tilehurst area. The prolonged repair times for issues on Oaktree Road, Dudley Close, and previously Armour Hill are causing significant disruptions to residents' daily lives.

What lessons have been learned from the prevalence of voids, subsidence, and sinkholes? What proactive steps can the Council take to address these issues, knowing that they are likely to occur, and to avoid lengthy repair times that affect the community?

REPLY by the Chair of the Strategic Environment, Planning & Transport Committee:

I invite Councillor Ennis, the Lead Councillor for Climate Strategy and Transport to make the response on my behalf.

REPLY by the Councillor Ennis, Lead Councillor for Climate Strategy and Transport:

I thank Cllr Singh for his question.

Tilehurst, Reading and much of the South of England is underlain by a bedrock of chalk and limestone, which is covered in some areas by varying depths of clay and gravel cover deposits.

In these areas, the interface between the chalk and the cover material deposits presents favourable conditions for natural, geological features known as 'solution features' to develop. It is important to understand that these features have developed over geological time (hundreds of thousands of years) and may lay in a metastable, but dormant, state if left undisturbed.

The formation of 'sinkholes', as they are commonly known, results when the metastable material within the solution pipe is disturbed and washed out. This may occur as a result of external factors like excess water from leaking drainage (see Armour Hill), intense periods of rainfall (see Dudley Close), sudden localised concentrations of water (soakaways), or a change in load at the surface.

For solution pipes to develop, certain favourable geological, hydrogeological and geomorphological conditions need to be present. The reason more sinkholes and instability

episodes occur in some areas of Reading is because it is in an area where many of these favourable conditions are present; one that has permitted solution pipe formation, and the subsequent development of sinkholes.

Tilehurst is not the only area of Reading susceptible to the formation of such features which have required extensive ground stabilisation works. In the last 25 years, there has been several solution feature collapses for example the Field Road collapse, which was related to mining of chalk in the distant past, and the Sandcroft Road collapse in Caversham, which was due to a Thames Water main burst that was allowed to run for more than 11 hours resulting in the destabilisation of a solution feature and subsequent sinkhole that required extensive stabilisation by Thames Water.

The Council is taking on valuable lessons learnt following the Oak Tree Road solution feature collapse and are preparing framework contractual arrangements to onboard both specialist consultancy and ground stabilisation contractors. Industry lead-in times must be appreciated as there is a limited number of available contractors, as must the time required for our consultant to interpret data to make informed technical decisions. By developing these framework agreements, the procurement of industry leading geohazards specialists will expedite the process, thereby reducing the time it takes to start detailed ground investigation works and any necessary stabilisation work that may subsequently be required.

I can confirm that ground Investigation works are already underway in Dudley Close, which is being done within a couple weeks since the road closure was installed to keep residents and users of the public highway safe. Previously it would have taken months to arrange before these vital investigation work would have started. The Council is also preparing the contract for a possible ground stabilisation scheme, should it be required, which will further reduce the long delays these type of schemes generally experience.

The Council fully appreciates and understands the frustration of residents following the Dudley Close closure and the extreme difficulty residents are experiencing by not being able to bring their vehicles past the closure point. Please be assured that the Council are working as fast as we can to safely deliver a scheme and to re-open the road.