

## COUNCIL MEETING – 19 MARCH 2024

### **(C) QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS**

1. Councillor Moore to ask the Lead Councillor for Adult Social Care:

#### **Landline Switchover**

Between now and 2025 most telephone providers will be moving their customers from old analogue landlines over to new upgraded landline services using digital technology.

The landline switchover has serious implications for adult social care due to the connectivity of telecare devices such as fall monitors to the new line. Also, for vulnerable residents who may not have an internet connection or mobile phone, digital landlines cannot carry a power connection so in the event of a power cut they will not work.

Can I please ask what Reading Borough Council is doing to be ready for the switchover in their services, and how they will be helping residents to prepare for the changes ?

**REPLY** by Councillor Gittings Lead Councillor for Adult Social Care.

Thank you for your question Councillor Moore. As it relates to both people who draw on Adult Social Care Services and those residents deemed to be at higher risk, the response covers both elements.

In relation to the Council's responsibility towards residents who draw on Adult Social Care services and access Technology Enabled Care (TEC), please note the following:

Reading Borough Council is a partner in a Berkshire-wide Community Equipment Service contract delivered by NRS Healthcare. NRS delivers the contract and manages the installation and maintenance of all our equipment and Technology Enabled Care (TEC) devices.

Since December 2021 Reading has been working with NRS Healthcare to ensure compliance with the new Digital Switchover guidance.

In February 2022, the Adult Social Care TEC Team worked jointly with NRS Healthcare to undertake a vital piece of work to ensure that all residents who had previously been issued analogue devices transitioned from analogue to digital TEC.

The Council and NRS have now migrated 337 out of 338 cases to digital TEC to ensure that devices such as alarm systems are compatible with digital phone lines. The final migration will be completed by the end of March 2024. We are performing well compared to partners within the Berkshire Community Equipment Service Contract.

Since February 2022 RBC and NRS Healthcare have installed only digital TEC into the homes of those accessing RBC services,

In addition, all digital units installed by NRS have a 5-day back-up battery in the event of a power outage.

As part of the Council's duty to provide information and advice under the Care Act 2014, Reading Adult Social Care will include information and resources on the RBC website, such as links to the Local Government Association (LGA).

As an example, the content on the LGA website is designed to raise awareness through social media of the switchover and its implications to people around those who use telecare devices, whether that's a family member, neighbour, friend or client.

There are links to printable leaflet template with two versions, designed to be printed and either sent directly to residents or available in community spaces or for them to take away.

There is also step by step guidance on what the digital switchover means to different people (for example those with pendant alarms) and answers to the following questions:

- What is the Digital Switchover or 'landline switch off'?
- How will it affect me/what do I need to do?
- What to do in an emergency

It is also worth noting that telecom providers are aware of their responsibility towards higher risk customers and are implementing new measures to better protect them.

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In relation to the role the Council plays to support Reading residents with the upgrade from analogue phone lines to digital technology, the following measures have been put in place.

The Council's Digital, Technology & Change Team has been actively monitoring the landline switch-over initiative for a duration exceeding 18 months. In March 2023, a project brief was formulated to navigate the impending BT and Virgin PSTN switch-offs.

Substantial progress has been achieved in transferring Virgin Media services, with collaborative efforts involving schools and their ICT departments to transition to alternative suppliers.

Currently, the project has entered its second phase for the remaining BT lines.

A proactive approach is underway for resolution by the end of March 2024.

We hope to have all circuits migrated by the end of December 2024. It is worth noting that although the complete switch-off is targeted for 2025, the BT project may switch off circuits earlier than 2025, so there is a continuous need to be flexible and reactive to the BT programme of works.

For the council's part, we recognise the part we can play in communicating these changes to the public and guiding them to the appropriate support and we will look to use every avenue we have available to achieve that.

Specifically, in tandem with the publication of information on the RBC website mentioned earlier in this response, we plan to include information on the topic in the June and December issues of Your Reading and in the monthly email newsletter to residents.

## 2. Councillor Keane to ask the Lead Councillor for Environmental Services & Community Safety:

### Preventative Measures to Tackle Graffiti

A number of residents have contacted me recently, as I am sure that many of you have received similar concerns, regarding the increase in graffiti specifically tagging, around our respective wards. Usually this is removed fairly promptly after reporting through the wonderfully helpful 'Love Clean Streets' app for which I am sure we are all grateful. However could the council update us to whether there are any preventative measures in place or any due to be put in place that could reduce the occurrences in our town in the first instance.

**REPLY** by Councillor Rowland Lead Councillor for Environmental Services & Community Safety.

I'd like to thank Councillor Keane for her question about this issue that plagues our urban environment and frustrates us across all political parties.

I am however aggrieved that you feel as if graffiti is increasing across the town anecdotally when in fact, the numbers reported to the Council spell quite a different story. Over the past fiscal year, reports of graffiti across all Wards have declined from a 142 reports in April 2023 to a low of 24 reports in February 2024 just this past month.

Furthermore, the annual numbers are down overall across the Borough and reports of graffiti in Reading, by Ward, are as follows:

WARD	TOTAL REPORTS 23/24 *YTD	TOTAL REPORTS 22/23
ABBEY*	249	682
BATTLE	39	33
CAVERSHAM HEIGHTS	6	22
CAVERSHAM	28	67
CHURCH	7	8
COLEY	37	72
EMMER GREEN	17	62
KATESGROVE	79	104
KENTWOOD	21	36
NORCOT	31	36
PARK	28	36
REDLANDS	94	105
SOUTHCOTE	74	44
THAMES	266	368
TILEHURST	12	67
WHITLEY	24	24
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>1012</b>	<b>1766</b>

*\* Denotes that the Town Centre is visited every day as part of the 'Baseline agreement' with Reading BID. It is therefore expected to have a higher report rate as all graffiti removal works are recorded daily by members of the public, businesses and our own Graffiti Operative.*

The budget for Graffiti Removal is £150k per annum and Reading Borough Council employ 3 x Graffiti Operatives, in purpose built specialised vehicles to tackle the issue across the Borough.

Preventing graffiti in the first instance would require movable surveillance measures be put in place to second guess activity that we do not have the budget for at this time. Catching those responsible is challenging given the offence by nature is generally discreet. If residents have leads on prolific taggers, they are urged to contact the Police or our Council's ASB Team ([asb.team@reading.gov.uk](mailto:asb.team@reading.gov.uk)). There are a range of actions RBC could take including tenancy enforcement or issuing of Community Protection Notices to prolific offenders.

It is worth stating that proactively, our approach and aim is to attack the “broken window” that graffiti creates as quickly as we can. Quick response is the best way to stop more graffiti. If the graffiti isn’t up long enough for people to see it, the person who did it will be less likely to do it again in that area. Removing graffiti quickly also stops areas from looking like no one cares about them.

For properties that suffer from regular attacks of graffiti we work with the owners/occupiers to help them protect their property by advising on the use of protective coatings or strategic planting of shrubs/bushes to restrict access to the site. Other target hardening options may be to improve lighting or install CCTV. “Anti-graffiti paint”- doesn’t stop the paint- but it does make it easier to get rid of.

One of the most challenging areas to deal with is persistent tagging on utility boxes. We are continuing to engage with utility companies meaningfully to ensure that they engage proactively with us on this issue. Unfortunately, utility companies are largely unresponsive, although we are continuing to seek best practice examples and engage those companies to work with us.

Our current graffiti policy provides a free graffiti removal service to residents up to 2m<sup>2</sup> after obtaining a disclaimer from the owner/occupier - there are some restrictions to this free service, such as it is visible from the public highway and not above head height. It is the acquiring these private permissions that sometimes cause the delays we see when graffiti isn’t removed as quickly as we would like.

Residents really can help with the use of the Love Clean Reading App to quickly report graffiti to the Council. We rely on residents utilising this method to help be the eyes in our communities and this tool is one of our best defences. The App provides photographic detail of the graffiti along with a location plan which is passed to the Graffiti Removal Teams to remove quickly.

Apart from the Council removing reports of graffiti, we also have ‘Community Clean Up Kits’ which are available to residents’ associations and community groups free of charge after completing our health and safety training course so those that wish may help to take a lead in keeping their area graffiti-free. There is no doubt that whilst we have set reasonable resourcing aside to tackle this issue, that engagement and assistance from residents is always appreciated and working together it is our best defence to tackle this most insidious of issues.

### 3. Councillor Williams to ask the Lead Councillor for Adult Social Care: Council Support During Landline Switch Off

Many residents might not realise that the telecoms industry is switching off all old analogue telephone landlines by the end of 2025.

That means that everyone using a landline will need to be upgraded to an internet connection and internet phone service.

It is the duty of telecoms providers to ensure elderly, vulnerable or at risk residents are fairly supported through the process but many will be concerned.

Does the Lead Councillor know how many residents in Reading will be affected, and what plans does the Council have to inform and support our residents who rely on their landline phones as a lifeline that connects them to their friends, family, health service and more ?

**REPLY** by Councillor Gittings Lead Councillor for Adult Social Care.

While the primary responsibility rests with service providers, the Council recognises its role during landline switch off, particularly in guiding citizens at higher risk towards other telephony providers such as BT and Virgin Media.

We will be constantly monitoring developments to ensure that we engage with the public effectively using all the resources at our disposal.

To date, officers have contacted the main telephony providers BT and Virgin to ask for numbers of people in Reading who this applies to. An update has also been sought on their schedule of managing the process and risk to residents.

By the end of March 2024, the Council's ASC TEC team and our equipment partner, NRS Healthcare, will have migrated all 338 services users with monitored TEC in place to digital systems. This ensures that devices such as alarm systems are compatible with digital phone lines.

Since February 2022 NRS Healthcare have issued only digitally monitored TEC to RBC service users. In addition, all digital units installed by NRS have a 5-day back-up battery in the event of a power outage.

Over the next few months, officers will undertake the following external communication actions:

- An announcement with links to national guidance will be included in the next edition of the Council's magazine 'Your Reading' which will be issued in June and again in December.
- Information and links to guidance will also be shared in the RBC monthly email newsletter.
- Adult Social Care staff who are likely to have the most contact with higher risk people in Reading will help disseminate key messages. Advice provided externally by organisations such as Ofcom is for users to contact their telephony providers, so this will be communicated to them or their families.

This will all be supported by some internal communications to RBC staff within Team Reading emails and updated information on the RBC website.