

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

10 JUNE 2024

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 1

Lin Godfrey to ask the Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Community Safety/Lead Councillor for Climate Strategy and Transport:

Footpath Maintenance

Footpaths are the poor relation in highway maintenance although everyone uses them, even when they shouldn't. Cars, parked on pavements, cyclists & e scooters spring to mind.

On Monday 13th May I tripped over in Union Street aka Smelly Alley ending up in minor injuries at RBH. Luckily nothing was broken but it shouldn't have happened. I reported the incident via Love Clean Reading and received a reply from the Highways Inspector. The upshot of the email conversation was that the criteria for intervention wasn't met.

Block paving, with which Union Street (& rest of town centre) is paved, is bumpy, large puddles form when raining, and individual blocks only have to be slightly raised to become a trip hazard for an unwary pedestrian.

Besides costing the NHS money patching up pedestrians falls can be detrimental for an older person with long term consequences.

For the above reasons will consideration be given to raising the amount allocated for footpath maintenance??

REPLY by Councillor Karen Rowland (Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Public Safety):

I thank Ms. Godfrey for her question and sincerely do hope that she is making a full recovery following her fall in Union Street.

As Ms. Godfrey identified, the Council already does invest in our roadways - quite significantly in fact. That investment this Council has made is substantially above and beyond the capital funding provided to us in the Government's annual Local Transport Plan award for carriageways and bridges. Government funding to Councils has, over a long period of time, been insufficient to properly maintain our roads and pathways and it is that lack of investment from a national level that forced us to adopt a managed deterioration of the road and footway condition over several years prior to 2020. It is for that reason, and as a direct response to residents' concerns that this Council's stepped up and made its own investment in our road and footway network.

In 2020 the Council began a 3 year, £9m investment in residential roads and footways. Over this 3-year investment, 500 of the 1400 roads we have in Reading were resurfaced and more than 86 footways improved. This resulted in a significant improvement in road condition with over 80% of our residential roads now showing as 'green' status/ or "in good condition". There has also been a reduction in the number of contacts from residents about inferior road conditions and potholes with a significant reduction of potholes from 3,680 in 2019 to under 1,000 in 2023.

Following the success of this capital investment programme, but knowing we could do more, this Council committed to a further investment of £8m over 5 financial years (2023/24 to 2027/28), to continue improving our residential highway network.

This investment also includes improvements to our footway network with a programme of £650k per financial year since 2020/21, which is addressing those footways that are highest priority and damaged from general deterioration conditions and other factors such as inappropriate car parking. This investment in the footway network will continue through to 31 March 2028.

In addition to this investment the Council has also invested £450k within the Town Centre to address the condition and this investment does include consistent repairs to areas of failed and loose block paving or areas that cause flooding.

The Council, as the Highway Authority, has a duty under the Highways Act 1980 to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that there is a safe passage along a highway. The Council comply with this duty by ensuring that all the public highways within the Borough are regularly inspected. Any defects meeting the Council's appropriate criteria for requiring attention, are noted and actioned for repair.

Not every disturbance of the highway however will be classed as a defect. A defect requiring repair, whether in the carriageway or footway, is determined by having reached the investigatory criteria and/or having met the risk-based assessment requirements specified in the Council's Highway Maintenance Policy

Within this structure, the Town Centre receives a safety inspection every two weeks and Union Street, or Smelly Alley as it is known, is included within that cyclical inspection. As a guide, the investigatory level for action will include the size of the defect which for footways is a 20mm vertical face over an approximate area of 300mm by 300mm. The inspection will also look at other risk-based criteria to inform the decision to repair or monitor. I do understand your frustration, certainly after taking a spill, that the particular anomaly in the surface did not at that time, meet that criteria, but the area is continuing to be monitored.

Smelly Alley has a unique structure, with a slight historical recess that runs down the centre (now the central gully) along which was originally run a chain to help haul goods into the town centre from the Kennet. It is that heritage feature, along with the brick paving in Smelly Alley and throughout the Town Centre along pedestrian routes that create occasional challenges for repairs, but likewise go a long way to enhancing the charm of the Town Centre and its historical features. Whilst a more radical option might be to simply tarmac the entire area over, which would be easier and less expensive for the Council, we would be reluctant to undertake such a step as it would significantly impact the interest and charm of our historical Town Centre and its Conservation Areas.

I can also confirm that the Council is re-invigorating its work on the development of a Town Centre Strategy working with REDA and the Town Centre BID/ Business Improvement District to look at the long-term improvement of the Town Centre. At the heart of that work is a strategy to jointly improve the quality and appearance of the Town Centre and to ensure it is a safe, welcoming place to visit. Part of that work will include a look at rationalizing flooring material standards throughout the Town Centre and ensuring that when developers carry out major development works or when other funding opportunities come up, the Strategy can be enforced across the Town Centre area. It is hopeful that that document will go out for public consultation over the coming winter.

I want to reassure Ms. Godfrey that Union Street is an important part of that Town Centre Strategy and along with the festoon lighting recently installed to improve nighttime lighting levels for the route, the Council will continue to maintain the alleyway and look to continue to enhance and improve it when and as funding allows.