

**HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES - 21
FEBRUARY 2024**

Present: Councillor Dennis (Chair);
Councillors Eden (Vice-Chair), Asare, Ayub, Barnett-Ward,
Challenger, Cresswell, Emberson, Kitchingham, McCann,
O'Connell, Goss, Rowland and Yeo

Apologies: Councillors R Singh and Tarar

**18. MINUTES OF THE HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS & LEISURE COMMITTEE MEETING
HELD ON 8 NOVEMBER 2023**

The Minutes of the meeting of 8 November 2023 were confirmed as a correct record.

19. MINUTES OF OTHER BODIES

The Minutes of the following meeting were submitted:

- Community Safety Partnership – 8 November 2023.

Resolved - That the Minutes be received.

20. QUESTIONS

<u>Questioner</u>	<u>Subject</u>	<u>Reply</u>
Councillor Creswell	Housing for Refugees and Asylum Seekers	Cllr Emberson

The full text of the question and reply was made available on the Reading Borough Council website.

21. GLL ANNUAL REPORT AND PRESENTATION

Further to Minute 18 of the meeting held on 9 November 2022, the Committee considered a report providing an update on the performance and delivery of Leisure Services and development of new facilities by Greenwich Leisure Ltd (GLL). The report also informed the Committee of a £1.5m grant from Sport England Strategic Facilities Fund towards the cost of Rivermead and Palmer Park leisure centres.

The report noted that the leisure contract had started on 1 July 2021 with GLL carrying out the operational management of the Council's leisure centres at Rivermead Leisure Centre, Palmer Park Sports Stadium, South Reading Leisure Centre and Meadway Sports Centre. The Council's £40m investment programme in leisure centres had included significant works to all its leisure centres. The new Rivermead Leisure Centre had opened in July 2023 with the pools set to open in summer 2024. This followed the opening of Palmer Park Leisure Centre & Stadium including a new six-lane 25m community swimming pool in December

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2022. Refurbishment works to the swimming pool changing areas had been undertaken at Meadway Sports Centre and works were underway at South Reading Leisure Centre swimming pool and associated changing areas. Use of facilities had continued to grow as the new facilities were opened and improvements made.

The report explained that overall GLL were making significant strides in delivering good services, with service breadth and quality approaching what would have been expected had there not been significant impact to the leisure sector due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The partnership was moving towards business as usual and direct comparison to the performance originally envisaged in the contract. The following priorities had been identified for the partnership to focus on in 2024/25:

- Continue to develop and grow the Healthwise Programme to increase participation by underrepresented groups and those with specific health conditions.
- Continue to develop partnerships locally with schools and other community organisations to increase participation in physical activity beyond the boundary of the leisure centres.
- Continue to improve the quality of service to customers using Trustpilot as the key customer feedback mechanism.
- Improve data collection and analysis to measure the impact of the services provided and to engage and increase participation by underrepresented groups, reflecting the demographics of Reading.
- Implement independent quality assessment of services (Quest) at Palmer Park and Rivermead.

Stephanie Smith and Craig Woodward of GLL gave a presentation which included information on usages statistics for 2023, energy and environmental improvements, outcomes from the Healthwise referral programme and other community work.

The Committee discussed the presentation and asked further questions of GLL including on plans for the current demountable pool, improvements to the site entrance area including the drainage ditch, refugee memberships, disability programmes, Your Reading Passport discounts and opportunities to promote GLL's community programmes.

Resolved –

- (1) That the performance of GLL in respect of the operation of the leisure contract, as set out in the report and presentation, be noted;**
- (2) That the opening of the new facilities and swimming pool at Palmer Park Leisure Centre & Stadium in December 2022 and Rivermead Leisure Centre in July 2023 and the planned pools opening in summer 2024, both of which had been built to BREEAM excellent sustainability standards, be noted;**
- (3) That the successful refurbishments at South Reading and Meadway Leisure Centres be noted;**

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- (4) That the priorities for 2024/25 as set out above be endorsed;**
- (5) That the receipt of the Sport England Strategic Facilities Fund grant of £1.5m funding contribution towards the construction costs of the new leisure facilities at Rivermead and Palmer Park be noted.**

22. HIGHWAY MAINTENANCE UPDATE 2023-24 & PROGRAMME 2024-25

Further to Minute 41 of the meeting held on 9 March 2023, the Committee received a report that provided an update on the progress of the Council's five-year Highway Capital Investment Programme, two-year Bridges & Structures Capital Investment Programme, three-year Department for Transport (DfT) Highway Maintenance Award 2024/25 Local Transport Block Funding (Integrated Transport & Highway Maintenance) settlement and additional DfT Road Resurfacing Fund Allocation for Reading following the reallocation of High-Speed Rail (HS2) budget. The report also gave an update on the completed Highway Maintenance 2023/24 DfT Local Transport Block Funding Capital Works Programme. The following documents were attached to the report:

- Appendix 1: 2023/24 Programme Delivered;
- Appendix 2: Proposed 2024/25 Delivery Programme.

Resolved -

- (1) That the year 2 (2023/24) progress of the additional £8m five-year (2022/23 to 2026/27) Highway Capital Investment Programme be noted;**
- (2) That the year 2 (2023/24) progress of the additional £4m 2-year (2022/23 to 2023/24) Bridges & Structures Capital Investment Programme be noted;**
- (3) That the year 3 of the three-year Department for Transport (DfT) Highway Maintenance Award 2024/25 Local Transport Block Funding (Integrated Transport & Highway Maintenance) settlement be noted;**
- (4) That the additional DfT Road Resurfacing Fund Allocation for Reading of £7.726m following the reallocation of High-Speed Rail (HS2) budget for the period 2023/24 to 2033/34 be noted;**
- (5) That the completed Highway Maintenance 2023/24 DfT Local Transport Block Funding Capital Works Programme be noted.**

23. NEW READING CENTRAL LIBRARY

Further to Minute 37 of the meeting held on 9 March 2023, the Committee considered a report that provided an update on progress with the new Reading Central Library. The following documents were attached to the report:

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- Appendix 1 – Stock area and background/disposal
- Appendix 2 – organisations contacted regarding surplus stock
- Appendix 3 – Equality Impact Assessment

The report explained that the new Central Library would feature a better stocked Children's Library and better provision for a Teen zone. There would also be more space for books in non-English languages, adult fiction, spoken word and large-print items and an improved local history section. The space would include well-equipped study and working space with over 100 seated spaces, dedicated exhibition space to support visual artists, free PCs and tablets for use on site and free wifi, as well as a new event space that could be used for events and activities, including provision for screenings, streaming and projection and an adult learning/multifunctional room for hire. Alternative ways to provide the toy library service were being investigated.

The report added that books and book lending would be the key function of the new space, with additional focus on making spaces better and more usable for events and activities. The new space would have a slightly smaller footprint, but the design would accommodate more books on public display as well as more study space. In order to deliver this some library stock had been identified as surplus to requirements and would be removed in line with the withdrawal policy. Central Library had been built as a County library for Berkshire and retained large reserve collections for Music and Drama, Reference and fiction/non-fiction. These collections were largely static and would be reviewed and reduced as part of the move to enable the accommodation of more relevant stock for current users. The local history collection would be prioritised as a key, unique and valuable resource for the town and retained within the library. A large amount of other stock not currently publicly available was no longer needed and was set out in a table attached to the report at Appendix 1 to the report. Appendix 2 to the report listed organisations that had been contacted so far regarding surplus areas of stock.

The report stated that the library move would take place during 2025, with the timetable subject to revision and consultation. It was recommended that the Assistant Director for Culture, in consultation with the Lead Councillor for Leisure and Culture, be authorised to approve the mechanics of the move, including decant and period involved. This would enable officers to plan and agree the closure period and arrangements for the decant and move of Central Library in 2025.

Resolved –

- (1) That the approach to stock provision for the new library, including increased provision in several areas, be noted;**
- (2) That the planned work in relation to stock management and withdrawals, consistent with the Reading Libraries Withdrawal Policy, be noted;**
- (3) That the Assistant Director for Culture, in consultation with the Lead Member for Leisure and Culture, be authorised to agree the closure period to facilitate the move of Central Library to the Civic Centre.**

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24. DISCRETIONARY LICENSING IN THE PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR

The Committee received a report which presented options for future regulation of private sector housing, including the implementation of discretionary licensing schemes. The following documents were appended to the report:

- Appendix 1 - Metastreet Stock Condition Survey.
- Appendix 2 - Renters Reform Bill Summary of Proposals.
- Appendix 3 - Comparison of scheme criteria and conditions which may be attached.
- Appendix 4 - Indicative timetable for Consultation and potential approval of a scheme(s).
- Appendix 5 - Financial implications – Proposed fees.
- Appendix 6 - Financial implications - Fees comparison with other local authorities.
- Appendix 7 - Financial implications – Predicted income and expenditure.

The report noted that the Council currently operated the national mandatory licensing scheme for larger houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) with five or more occupants. The Housing Act 2004 included provision for local authorities to also designate Discretionary Licensing schemes to improve conditions and property management in the private rented sector. Evidence showed this had positive impacts on residents' physical and mental health and better educational outcomes for children. Discretionary schemes covering greater than 20% of a local authority's geographical area or housing stock would require Secretary of State approval.

The report set out at Appendix 1 a Stock Condition Report, the findings of which included that: nearly 40% of housing stock in Reading was in the private rented sector, rents and property possession were above average for England, there were over 3,000 HMOs of which 37% were likely to have serious hazards (under the Housing, Health & Safety Rating System), and HMOs had the highest rates of Anti-Social Behaviour when compared to other tenures. This highlighted the scale of poor housing conditions, deprivation, anti-social behaviour and other issues linked to the private rented sector in Reading. Based on the evidence provided by the Stock Condition Report the report recommended that a statutory consultation exercise with residents, private landlords, businesses and other key stakeholders be undertaken on proposals for boroughwide additional licensing and a phased introduction of selective licensing.

The report explained that additional licensing was a discretionary power to declare all or part of the local authority's area subject to its controls for no more than five years. It would cover 'smaller' HMOs that were currently outside of the mandatory licensing requirements and/or buildings converted into self-contained flats if that conversion was not in accordance with building regulations 1991 or later. It was proposed to consult on introducing additional licensing across the Borough.

Another discretionary power was a selective licensing scheme to require all private landlords in a designated area to have a licence, with the aim of ensuring that rented properties were of a decent standard and give tenants confidence that houses and flats in a designated area

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would be healthy and safe to live in. The report proposed a consultation on a selective licensing scheme to cover Park, Redlands and Battle wards which were anticipated to have the highest rate of private rented properties with serious hazards. This geographical area would be under the 20% threshold that would trigger the requirement for Secretary of State approval.

Resolved:

- (1) That the evidence in the commissioned Stock Condition Report, highlighting the scale of poor housing conditions, deprivation, Anti-Social Behaviour and other issues linked to the private rented sector in Reading be noted;**
- (2) That the Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services be authorised to commence a statutory consultation exercise with residents, private landlords, businesses and other key stakeholders on proposals for boroughwide additional licensing and a phased introduction of selective licensing, and to propose areas to be included in the consultation on these designations based on the evidence provided by the Stock Condition Report;**
- (3) That the initial report findings in Battle, Park and Redlands wards, based on the evidence provided by the Stock Condition Report, be noted;**
- (4) That a further report on the outcome of the consultation be submitted to the Committee, setting out recommendations as to whether to designate additional and selective licensing schemes and their scope and scale.**

(The meeting closed at 8.17 pm)