

**HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE**  
**10 JULY 2024**

**Present:** Councillor Eden (Chair), Asare, Ayub, Barnett-Ward, Cross, Dennis, Gavin, Hacker, Hoskin, McCann, Naz, Rowland, Thompson, White and Yeo.

**Apologies:** Councillor Magon

**1. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

The Minutes of the meeting of 21 February 2024 were confirmed as a correct record.

**2 MINUTES OF OTHER BODIES**

The Minutes of the following meeting were submitted:

Community Safety Partnership – 1 February 2024.

**Resolved - That the Minutes be received.**

**3. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND COUNCILLORS**

<b>Questioner</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Reply</b>
Councillor Magon	Flexible Home Loan Scheme	Cllr Yeo

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

**4. HIGHWAY MAINTENANCE PROGRAMME 2024/2025 UPDATE**

Further to Minute 22 of the meeting held on 21 February 2024, the Committee considered a report that provided updates on:

- Progress of the 2024/2025 Highway Maintenance Capital Investment Programme as set out in Appendix 1;
- Progress of Year 1 & 2 (2023/24 & 2024/25) of 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 as set out in Appendix 1;
- The National Highways Capital Grant award of £250k for Reading Borough Council for 2023/24 to maintain the M4 strategic diversion route between Junction 11/M4 and Junction 12/M4 and to provide scheme approval for officers to implement the works as set out in Appendix 1.
- The additional National Highways Capital Grant Award of £250k for Reading Borough Council for 2024/25 to maintain the M4 strategic diversion route between Junction 11/M4 and Junction 12/M4 and to provide scheme approval for officers to implement the works to be agreed with National Highways.

Appendix1 to the report set out details of road and provisional footway resurfacing works to be undertaken during 2024-25.

**Resolved -**

- (1) That the progress of the 2024/25 Highway Maintenance Capital Investment Programme for Carriageways and Bridges be noted;**

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- (2) **That the progress of the 2023/2024 additional DfT Road Resurfacing Fund Allocation for Reading of £7.726M following the reallocation of High-Speed Rail (HS2) funding be noted;**
- (3) **That the progress of the National Highways Capital Grant Award of £250k for Reading Borough Council during 2023/24 and a further £250k Grant award for 2024/25 to maintain the M4 strategic diversion route through Reading between Junction 11/M4 and Junction 12/M4 and scheme approval to implement the proposed works be noted.**

## **5. REWILDING AND WILDFLOWER UPDATE**

The Committee considered a report that provided an update on the operational changes involved in the Rewilding project, the achievements measured against the Wildflower Plan and the next steps.

The report explained that the Rewilding project had been underway for four seasons, and this made the fifth year of the commitment to rewilding the Borough. The Rewilding Project had been created in response to the Climate Emergency and commenced in spring 2020, primarily on larger highway verges. Several verges were left un-cut during the growing season, allowing the potential for wildflower species to grow and seed. Site conditions had been assessed in the autumn of 2020 and the resulting Wildflower Plan had been developed, which included additional areas of parks in the Rewilding project.

The report stated that during 2023-24 a further 2 hectares of Prospect Park had been added to the Rewilding Project. The report also explained that the combination of warm and wet weather during summer 2023 had promoted vigorous grass growth which had also prevented the scheduled grass maintenance cutting. This had impacted on the outcome of the Rewilding project as grass overtook many of the verges and the impact of wildflowers had been subdued and lost by these taller grasses.

The report also set out recommendations for 2024-25 including the continuation of the current programme on highways verges and in parks. A full year of Rewilding area management had been scheduled and in order to amplify the wildflower growth, five of the original sites had been programmed for reseeded. The service continued to recruit for the post of a Senior Technical Officer who would be the lead officer for the Rewilding project. The report also noted that changing weather conditions were part of the lessons learnt process being considered within the project, and this could influence the cutting schedule and maintenance moving forward or the variety of seeds/flowers that would be adapted to the changing climate conditions.

**Resolved: That the progress to date on the Rewilding Project and future actions be noted.**

## **6. SAFER READING REVIEW**

The Committee received a report which set out recommendations to restructure the current model for the Safer Reading Neighbourhood (Chairs) Forum and geographically based Safer Neighbourhood Forums (SNFs). These changes would then be submitted to the Community Safety Partnership (CSP) on 18 July 2024. The following documents were appended to the report:

- Appendix 1 – Existing and Proposed Structure of Safer Neighbourhood Forums;
- Appendix 2 – Maps of Safer Neighbourhood Forums (existing and proposed).

The report explained that the review followed on from a review of Reading's CSP, the introduction of its new strategy at the beginning of January 2023 and was supported by proposals put to the

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CSP on 14 September 2023. An informal review of the forums had taken place, with fresh impetus provided to support the Safer Reading Neighbourhood (Chairs) Forum.

The report noted that the existing Forums did deliver benefits, including a space for residents to raise current issues and feel supported, gathering of information at the meetings and its dissemination to key stakeholders and the Committee especially emphasised the dedication and support from the Chairs to tackle issues of crime and disorder. However, there were several issues with the current model which needed to be addressed, including lack of forums in some areas, clashes of meetings which made it difficult for some stakeholders to attend, limited participation, lack of clear links to the CSP, insufficient resources from Council officers and the Police to support the forums, inconsistent priorities across the forums and inconsistent and outdated geographical boundaries.

The report stated that to ensure that all residents had an opportunity to feed into our activity to tackle crime and disorder, there was an identified need to:

- Move from a “one size fits all” approach to working more broadly with our communities on the objectives of the CSP, with other means of gathering feedback such as online surveys, Love Your Neighbourhood sponsored activities, e.g., estate walkabouts etc. to complement the activities of the Forums.
- Ensure all Council supported Forum meetings were promoted as open to all residents, with awareness-raising and publicity initiatives to maximise attendance.
- Make more efficient use of resources and tools available across the Community Safety Partnership to engage.
- Incorporate a wider range of methods used by residents and communities today to connect on issues that impact them.
- Ensure greater engagement between the CSP and all communities (young people, seldom heard) on matters relating to crime and disorder and support them with the structure to do so, including encouragement to attend the Forums as much as possible.
- Ensure there was a direct link between officer led problem solving meetings and communities to allow residents to contribute to problem solving issues that were impacting their neighbourhoods.
- Improve communications about the work happening in local areas to tackle crime and disorder in a way that did not rely solely on Forum meetings.

The report proposed a refresh of the geographically based Forums to address both the structural and logistical challenges identified to ensure that Forums were operating in line with the Council's Constitution. The aim of the refresh was to expand to an all-encompassing approach to provide all residents in communities across the town with equal opportunity to have their voice heard by being able to meet with problem-solving Police Officers, Council officers and Councillors jointly a minimum of three times a year. The aim was to increase outreach to seldom heard communities through well publicised public meetings, enabling residents to raise issues of concern, and to contribute to finding solutions to tackle crime and disorder and reduce the fear of crime. The following Safer Neighbourhood Forum Principles would be introduced:

- The Public Forums would be supported from the Council's Community Partnerships Service, specifically the Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) and Safer Public Realm (SPR) Teams, as well as Thames Valley Police and local Councillors;
- There would be some rationalisation of the current schedule to allow for consistent RBC support;
- The schedule of meetings needed to support Police attendance which at the latter end of the working week could be more challenging due to shift priorities and it was noted in the meeting that this could also be affected by the move to a five Local Command Unit structure that was being introduced;

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- New Forums would be established in all neighbourhoods currently without one (e.g., South Reading, Town Centre, Amersham Road and Orts Road) over time, starting with South Reading over the summer of 2024;
- All Public Forums would be held three times a year, once each in Winter, Spring and Autumn Terms avoiding half terms and holidays; and
- All supported public forums would be genuinely open to all residents in an area.

The report also explained that the following elements were essential features of a public-meeting style of forum, which would engage meaningfully with residents to be able to achieve notable success in problem solving:

- The scope for residents to participate to be diversified, allowing several channels for engagement, including online and use of social media, for those unable or unwilling to attend in person;
- Forums to be inclusive with as open an approach to attendance as could be realistically expected;
- To be simple in format, style of delivery and accessibility;
- To be utilised to leverage local relationships and conversations, in time allowing local people to lead;
- That meetings not be rushed, and time to be allowed for resident's contributions;
- That Police and Council Officers set out clear expectations of what was and was not achievable; and
- That Officers who attended forums always reported back.

The report requested that existing chairs would continue acting as SNF Chairs and as members of the Safer Reading Neighbourhood Forum, to facilitate the transition to the revised model and to act as a local advocate (volunteer Leader) for the Community Safety Partnership. Representatives of Social Landlords with responsibility for tackling ASB would also be encouraged to attend meetings in areas where they had significant levels of stock, as would other stakeholders in particular Forums such as the University of Reading. The Committee added four resolutions to the report ( numbers 2-5 below) and

### **Resolved:**

- (1) That the proposed refreshed structure for the geographical Safer Neighbourhood Forums be approved to ensure the Forums were operating in line with the Council's Constitution;**
- (2) That the Safer Neighbourhood Forum Chairs be thanked for their dedication and their considerable problem solving skills be acknowledged;**
- (3) That the ethos of the report be emphasised by officer focus to prioritise the provision of a functioning Forum in every area. Where such Forums already exist, the emphasis would be not to disrupt these positive works, but to amplify and support such work;**
- (4) That the Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Community Safety continue to work with and push for the strongest level of support for the Forums from Thames Valley Police, especially noting the possible impact to**

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**that support with the move to a five Local Command Unit structure across the Thames Valley;**

- (5) That a one-year review of progress be submitted to the appropriate meeting of the Committee.**

(The meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 7.46 pm).