

Access and Disabilities Working Group - Thursday 6 March 2025

Present

Cllr Andrew Hornsby-Smith – Chair - Church Ward Councillor
Cllr Mamuna Naz – Vice Chair – Norcot Ward Councillor
Cllr Karen Rowland – Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Community
Safety – Abbey Ward Councillor
Cllr Anne Thompson – Tilehurst Ward Councillor
Cllr Will Cross – Redlands Ward Councillor

Andrew Jackson – Project Manager - Change Delivery Team RBC
Lisa Munga - Customer Experience Strategic Lead RBC
Jill Marston – Policy Officer RBC
Helen Bryant – Access Officer RBC
Louise Anderson - Customer Relations Officer – Customer Relations Team RBC

Linda Dean – Reading Deaf Centre
Lyndsey Cunningham-Drury – Reading Deaf Centre
Fiona Price – Age UK Berkshire
Jenny Turner – Readibus/Arthritis Matters
Trish Wright – Readibus/MS Therapy Centre
Bob Bristow – Reading Talking News
Pat Watson – Member of the Public

Apologies

Helen Roche - Social Prescriber - University Medical Group
Tracey Proudlock - Company Director Proudlock Associates
Steve Atherton – Member of the Public
Brian Oatway – Member of the Public

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Cllr Hornsby-Smith welcomed everyone and asked attendees to introduce themselves.

MATTERS ARISING

A small group went to visit Rivermead and Palmer Park.

Cllr Hornsby-Smith said that GLL and Sport Together Berkshire will be holding a joint Inclusive sports day, in partnership with the Council on 13th September.

It will take place in Palmer Park. We will have more information about that in our June meeting. We will have ongoing meetings to discuss the publicity and other issues. We have decided to charge £3 per ticket. We want to make it a big, inclusive event.

<https://sport2getherberks.org/>

COUNCILLORS' DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

None

PRESENTATION BY ANDREW JACKSON – PROCUREMENT OF TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION SERVICES

Andrew Jackson gave some background information on the procurement process and the history of how the Council has provided translation and interpretation services.

Reading Borough Council have coordinated interpretation and translation services over the past 12 years for Council services and local NHS providers. NHS Services locally gave notice that they would tender separately this year. This means that the Council will not provide NHS services from 25th April.

Reading Borough Council has several suppliers. They provide face to face telephone interpretation, video interpretation, British Sign language and document translation services.

Procurement law requires that the Council bids for the services regularly, so this what is happening now.

Translation and Interpretation might be needed in several situations:

- Urgent crisis cases in social work, adult social work, planned meetings.
- Financial assessments and benefits teams.
- A letter may need to be translated or follow up interpretation conversations.
- A report may need to be translated.
- Coroner Court requires a face-to-face interpretation.

These are just a few examples.

The Council is looking for a managed service, to be provided by one supplier.

With the news that the Council would no longer provide NHS services from 25th April, this provided an opportunity for RBC to review the service needs to explore the potential to reduce service suppliers and costs.

We are looking for one supplier to manage all our needs. It's likely that it would reduce the interpretation and translation costs, too. The winning supplier will offer a wide range of service provision.

The Council issued tender documents in January; the tenders are being evaluated now.

There is an opportunity to reinforce our messages to staff about the needs of our diverse community in Reading, and to understand how interpretation services work and how they can access these. RBC needs to educate people about the rights to request an interpreter or translated information.

Lisa Munga explained that the Council is evaluating a set of suppliers for all sorts of translation and interpretation.

Cllr Hornsby-Smith asked about the meeting with SignLive, which provides simultaneous translation of British Sign Language online. Representatives of Reading Deaf Centre endorsed their system, and noted it had been adopted at West Berkshire Council.

Andrew Jackson acknowledged that there had been a meeting, but could not comment further on the status of an individual provider during the procurement process.

Cllr Hornsby-Smith thanked Andrew Jackson and Lisa Munga for their presentation.

PRESENTATION BY READING DEAF CENTRE

Linda Dean and Lyndsey Cunningham-Drury gave a presentation about the Deaf Centre and its activities. Their presentation was supported by BSL interpreters.

The office at the centre is staffed from 10-4. Anyone with any hearing loss is welcome.

The Deaf Centre has events, such as Deaf Stall Days, where people can advertise and sell their products. There are coffee mornings every month, and presentations, from the Fire and Rescue service and Citizens Advice Reading, among others.

The centre holds events, such as dances and quizzes on Friday nights. Sometimes there are parties on Saturday nights. There is a deaf church service once a month. There is a deaf pub. There is a 50+ club held every two weeks on Tuesdays.

As the centre is a charity, the members must raise money themselves.

It is important, when holding events, to let deaf people know if you are providing BSL (British Sign Language) interpreters, otherwise they will not know, and might decide not to attend.

Deaf Awareness Week is on from 5th -11th May. There will be an open day at the Centre during the week.

A BSL course, Level 1 is starting in September.

British Sign Language is very different, even between the nations of the UK, from that of other sign languages in other countries.

Deaf people go to music events, such as gigs, and some people enjoy the vibrations of the loud music. Pride also has interpreters.

If hearing people meet a deaf person, it is really important to look at the person and maintain eye contact. It is important to remember that you don't need to shout; think about the different ways that you can communicate, such as pen and paper, or you can use an app on your phone, or just use gestures.

It is worth looking at the alphabets and the BSL alphabet. and practising finger spelling. It's a way to communicate with the deaf community. You can start by learning your name and then other names of places or things that you may wish to communicate. Then if you meet a deaf person and something gets lost in translation, you could finger spell.

Deaf people face many barriers. They might need interpreters to be provided. They might go to the cinema, the theatre, and need subtitles. Often the subtitled or signed performances might be on at times when people who need them are at work. The cinema might have subtitles but only on certain nights. Also, if deaf people go to the doctor's or the hospital, they need to book an interpreter. Most of the time they arrive and find that one has not been provided.

Deaf people's mental health is in crisis now. There is a two-year waiting list to get a counsellor. The number of people in need has increased significantly because of the barriers deaf people have in access and services.

Cllr Hornsby-Smith asked if there was one thing that the Council could do to improve the service to deaf people.

A service which allows people visiting the Council to have BSL in real time in an app would be very useful.

When the service is up and running it will be very important to make people aware of it.

Cllr Naz asked if there were any children's groups.

There are lots of groups, including NDCS (National Deaf Children's Society), Berkshire Deaf Children's Society, a deaf football tournament is held in June, Pickleball is played on Fridays from 6-7. At Christmas there was an event for deaf children 120 people attended.

Cllr Cross said that Reading is very lucky to have a Deaf Club, as many are closing. Numbers have declined since COVID and post pandemic there has been a lot of anxiety around socialising.

Cllr Hornsby-Smith asked if the open day was open to all – it is, and interpreters will be available on the day to show people around the centre. He remarked that the Council needs to develop closer links with the Deaf Centre and that there is a lot to learn. Information could be shared between organisations.

There is a Facebook page for the Deaf Centre.

Cllr Hornsby-Smith thanked Linda and Lyndsay for their presentation.

[Reading Deaf Centre – Empower, Connect, Celebrate at Reading Deaf Centre](#)

[Reading Deaf Centre Information | Reading | Facebook](#)

VISIT TO PALMER PARK AND RIVERMEAD

A small group has visited both sports centres to look round and see what access is like for disabled people.

A question was asked about facilities for deaf people in emergencies, such as a fire alarm, if there were flashing lights used with the audible fire alarms. It was suggested that information could be put on the screens that are in front of the static bikes in the gyms. This system could also be used to alert people that the centre was about to close, and other important messages.

Councillor Hornsby-Smith said that it is all very well organised, but there are no automatic doors on the sports hall because when people move towards the doors in the middle of a game they come open, and shuttlecocks and other sports equipment go outside the courts. This problem is being looked at.

The lifts are quite small – Helen Bryant could fit her power chair in the lift, but it would be difficult to fit more than one other person at the same time.

One of the pieces of equipment in the gym which was suitable for manual chairs was too narrow to allow Helen Bryant's power chair onto it. This problem will be investigated.

There are pool pods, which allow wheelchair users to enter and leave the pool via a waterproof wheelchair and a lift of sorts.

On the day of our visit the temperature of the water in the swimming pool was around 28-29°C.

Cllr Rowland applauded the Working Group for raising the question and making sure that the temperature was comfortable and safe for disabled swimmers.

ACTION:

To find out if there are flashing lights to alert deaf people if there is a fire.

SHOPMOBILITY AT THE ORACLE

Cllr Hornsby-Smith said that there had been a very productive meeting with Andy Briggs, General Manager, Sabina Piech, Destination Host, Helen Roche, who is a Social Prescriber at Reading University Medical Practice, Helen Bryant and himself.

The map on The Oracle website which is supposed to show how far people who borrow scooters, wheelchairs and other equipment from Shopmobility are allowed to go in the town needs to be simplified – at the moment it is not at all clear.

From now on, people who use Shopmobility at the Oracle may only need to produce one form of ID rather than two.

The scheme is not registered on the Shopmobility UK website at present, but it is hoped that it will be soon.

We plan to have another meeting with The Oracle, and someone from the centre will come to the Working Group's next meeting in June.

The Oracle is now accredited with a scheme called "Unseen Aware", which states on its website:

"[it is]...a movement designed to create a truly inclusive experience for the many millions of customers and employees with disabilities you just don't see."

This means that the staff who have been trained will have, as stated on its website:

"greater understanding and empathy"

They will be wearing purple badges with "I Understand Unseen Disabilities" on them.

Bob Bristow said that the centre did not offer much for blind and visually impaired people.

Fiona Price remarked that some people might need training in town to ensure that they can get around safely. Reading BID needs to make the town friendly to everyone, including people with dementia, blind people, deaf people and others.

Deaf people also need access, there could be signs displaying BSL, like the big signs outside the station.

[Shopmobility - The Oracle](#)

[ShopMobility UK | Enhancing Accessibility with Mobility Aids](#)

<https://unseenaware.com/>

SPORTS EVENT – BERKSHIRE SPORT TOGETHER, GLL, RBC

Cllr Hornsby-Smith said that there would be an opportunity for groups to buy a stall at the event so that they can display leaflets to advertise their group or charity, have activities and games and so on.

He asked if the Deaf football club might be interested in joining in.

The event should be a celebration of access and inclusion.

Helen Bryant went to the last event held at the Avenue School, which was very well-attended. There were activities to take part in, including boccia, wheelchair rugby, “darts” with a big inflatable Velcro “dart board” and a Velcro ball that you throw and score points, just like a normal dart board, and curling—but not on ice.

TOWN CENTRE – PUBLIC REALM

Cllr Hornsby-Smith said that there had been a meeting with Mark Worringham, Planning Policy Manager from Planning, Transport and Regulatory Services to explain what was happening regarding the consultation on the public realm and the town centre.

Cllr Rowland said that officers had been very appreciative of the feedback that they had had.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

None.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE TOPICS

Cllr Thompson said that the development by the station has many steps, but the lifts have not been working. Cllr Rowland said that she would email the appropriate officers about the matter.

Bob Bristow suggested that there could be a presentation on Reading Talking News.