

ACCESS AND DISABILITIES WORKING GROUP MINUTES -7 MARCH 2019

Present:

Councillors Williams (Chair),
Manghnani
Khan

Helen Bryant - Access Officer RBC
Nina Crispin - Information and Engagement Officer RBC
Sam Shean - Streetcare Services Manager RBC
Robert Smith - Electoral Registration RBC
Marty Taylor - Electoral Registration RBC

Nigel McAlister - Member of the Public
Barbara McAlister - Member of the Public
James Taylor - Stroke Group
Trish Wright - MS Therapy Centre/Readibus
Bob Bristow - Chair, Reading Association for the Blind (RAB)
Laxshmi Kachwaha - Readibus
Stuart Pearce - Guide Dogs
Fiona Price - CEO, Age UK Berkshire
Douglas Dean - Thames Valley Pensioners' Convention
Peter Absolon - General Manager Readibus
Sam Chapman - Member of the Public

Apologies

Cllr Rachel Eden

1. MINUTES

Notes of the meeting held on 29 November 2018 were agreed as a correct record.

2. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

Nigel McAlister said that he had requested several meetings ago that a member of the Blue Badge team should attend a meeting, but this had not happened yet. It was agreed that this would happen at the next meeting in March.

Purple Tuesday had been on the local news; Fiona Price said that she had been to several events; it had been publicised widely on social media, but it needed to be better publicised in future.

Bob Bristow contacted The Oracle to ask if they were going to look into facilities for visually impaired and blind people, but had heard nothing.

Cllr Manghnani asked if there were facilities in The Oracle for blind people.

ACCESS AND DISABILITIES WORKING GROUP MINUTES -7 MARCH 2019

Fiona Price said that she had a good relationship with both shopping centres, and that she could act as a go-between.

The lift button labels in The Oracle were being changed, which made it better for everyone.

Purple Tuesday was meant to be an annual event and actions were to be taken further in the coming months.

3. POLLING STATION REVIEW

Robert Smith and Martyn Taylor from Electoral Services said that the Council was looking into the possibility of having new polling stations, including a church in Whitley.

It was explained that Postal, Proxy and Postal Proxy votes were available.

Bob Bristow said that trying to find the entrance to the Katesgrove Lane School was a problem, as was the template for blind and visually impaired people. It was agreed that Katesgrove was a difficult building to navigate because there were two entrances.

It was reported that Postal Votes did not work if the voter was blind and had to ask someone to do it for them.

Nigel McAlister said that he did not wish to have a Postal Vote - he wanted to be able to get to his Polling Station.

Issues regarding access would be brought up with Presiding Officers' training.

Fiona Price asked if information for the consultation would be available in different formats. The map was very small. Fiona Price also asked if audio information was available, especially for the maps. A USB stick would also be useful.

Sam Chapman asked if the polling documents were also available in Braille.

Bob Bristow said that only about 12% of blind people used Braille.

16 Point on yellow paper was best for some people.

Stuart Pearce said that he thought that as few as 5% of blind people would be Braille users now.

ACCESS AND DISABILITIES WORKING GROUP MINUTES -7 MARCH 2019

4. HIGHWAY MAINTENANCE

Cllr Rose Williams reported that some of the pavements in Katesgrove were in very bad condition.

Sam Shean said that the Council had obligations under the Highways Act to inspect and repair. A robust policy had to be in place to ensure that that happened.

Roads were classified with a hierarchical status; A Roads were Category 1, link roads were Category 2.

There was a 3 month inspection regime - Highways Officers did on-foot inspections on B roads looking for safety defects.

Defects could be signs missing, etc.

A standard had been set and Officers worked to a uniform system with regards to how deep and wide the potholes were, for example.

There was a schedule for investigation, depending on the danger presented by the defect; if it was considered to be very dangerous, this was 3 hours, less dangerous defects, 24 hours, and non-urgent defects, 28 days. A Roads were to be fixed within 24 hours. If residential roads were not heavily used, they could be repaired within 28 days.

From October last year, there was a Code of Practice; there was more emphasis on Officers making judgements.

There was a handheld iPad system, which had GPS and date stamped reports which went straight into the main system and to the operatives in the vans who did the repairs. Officers could take pictures of the defect.

It was hoped that there would be improvements with the new Code of Practice.

The Government sometimes gave money to councils to deal with more defects before they got worse.

Nigel McAlister said that defects were important, but that for disabled people dropped kerbs were extremely important; either kerbs were not dropped on both sides of the road, or they were not flush to the road. Disabled people depended on well-maintained dropped kerbs.

One particular local kerb had been dangerous; it was possible that the level had dropped, and it was not intended to be a dropped kerb. Sam Shean had managed to get the dropped kerb fixed.

ACCESS AND DISABILITIES WORKING GROUP MINUTES -7 MARCH 2019

The standard for dropped kerbs was 6mm.

Sometimes people were told that they were not dropped kerbs, but were for drainage.

Stuart Pearce said that the dropped kerbs in Southcote Road did not always match up on both sides of the road.

So-called "Bullnose" kerbs could be used upside down to give a flush surface, but water was prone to pool in them and so this would not be carried out any more.

Sam Shean said that there was not a lot of money available, but people should request, possibly through Helen Bryant, that any dropped kerbs and other highway issues which were dangerous be sent to Sam and that they would be assessed.

New developers were also required to comply with regulations.

Fiona Price said that in London Street, where there were 3 lanes of traffic, the crossing was not in operation and that the council had been contacted several times. This was very urgent. A child had nearly been run over. There was a dropped kerb, and people who were visually impaired thought that the crossing was in use.

Cllr Manghnani asked if the Highways Department had authority over shop owners who displayed items outside shops; there had been a woman with a double buggy who had been unable to get past and stepped off the kerb into the path of a bus.

Cllr Williams said that this was a Licensing issue.

There were also problems at the top of Oxford Road with A boards.

Sam Shean said that many properties had private land in front of them, and that they should have been using their own frontages.

Cllr Manghnani said that she had had to tell the shopkeepers that if the displays were on the highways, then they were causing a highway obstruction. Cllr Manghnani did not have her mobile phone with her to take a picture.

It was remarked that there were not many inspectors.

Sam Chapman said that kerbs often had too much of a camber and so did pavements, particularly in the Forbury to Market Place near the church. It was very steep, and wheelchair users were unable to move in a straight line.

Sam Shean said that there were some issues, because there were basements below some of the pavements which were causing the problems. He said that he would have a look and see what needed to be done.

ACCESS AND DISABILITIES WORKING GROUP MINUTES -7 MARCH 2019

Nigel McAlister said that he had raised the issue of signage with Helen Bryant; signage badly needed to be rationalised, as it was often contradictory and confusing, especially regarding parking; where it was and was not possible to park. The area had 7 or 8 parking spaces. The sign appeared to read that drivers could not enter before 11am and after 4pm. However, there was also a sign which stated that Blue Badge holders could park from 5am - 8pm. The sign referred to permit holders.

At the entrance to Broad Street there were 3 marked parking bays - it was possible that most people did not know about them. There was a sign which stated that Blue Badge holders could drive down Broad Street, but this was not possible.

Outside The Botanist the signage informed drivers that they should turn left into Duke Street but there was no signage stating that drivers could drive straight on.

The question was asked, why Blue Badge spaces stopped being valid after 8pm.

Visitors may have been put off using around half of the Blue Badge spaces in the town because of confusing signage. The Council's website was also not helpful in this regard.

There were over 90 spaces in Reading, which was a credit to the town. The 4 hour time limit was sensible; not all areas had this limit.

Sam Shean said that the Network Manager would deal with these problems. He said that the Broad Street signage was reasonable, but it did not state that Blue Badge spaces became taxi ranks. There was a sign next to the bays, but it was a very small sign.

Douglas Dean said that there needed to be details available of all Blue Badge spaces.

Cllr Williams said that when members of the Working Group went round the town there were some dropped kerbs on one side of the road but not on the other, and wondered if they were for vehicles only.

At Station Road/Friar Street the kerb disappears, which makes it very difficult for blind people. One member of the Group went into the middle of the road.

The Council needed to communicate to all drivers who was entitled to use Blue Badge spaces and who was not.

Courtesy markings were not enforceable.

It was reported that parents had been misusing bays for disabled drivers outside Whitley Community Centre. There were no patrols or enforcement. A picture had been taken and sent to a national magazine for disabled drivers, which always published such pictures.

ACCESS AND DISABILITIES WORKING GROUP MINUTES -7 MARCH 2019

Helen Bryant asked about Craven Road; some markings had appeared on the pavements.

Stuart Pearce said that there needed to be phased roadworks and asked if this was done; it seemed that many places had been dug up at the same time.

Sam Shean said that ideally every job was planned, but that sometimes emergencies occurred.

Cow Lane lights - the completion date was unclear.

There was a deep trench into which lots of water collected.

5. Consultation on Reading Bus Passes

Peter Absolon gave some background information:

There had been a consultation about older people's bus passes in 2015. These passes would revert to the national, rather than local, scheme, except for on Readibus.

It had been planned to withdraw companion passes on buses and all use of passes on Readibus.

It was noted that Readibus was the only bus many residents could use their bus passes on besides Reading Buses.

Cllr Williams said that there was a database of Readibus clients.

Peter Absolon said that Readibus had not informed its clients, but the Council was writing to all those who already have a bus pass.

Fiona Price said that it was not clear on the Council's website that all levels of bus passes were being consulted on, and that the consultation needed to be far more explicit.

Age UK and others would be writing a detailed response.

The members of the Working Group were urged to be very proactive in terms of response; there were too many consultations that affected the same people.

It was noted that the Council had to consult to decide priorities, because there was very little money available.

Stuart Pearce asked how the system worked in terms of who received the money when bus passes were used.

ACCESS AND DISABILITIES WORKING GROUP MINUTES -7 MARCH 2019

The question was asked of who was being paid for the passes and if it made any difference if disabled people travelled on buses.

It was reported that the Stroke Group had 40 members; they did not get out very often and many were unable to read. None of the members of the group had had the letter about the consultation but without Readibus it was possible that such groups would be forced to close.

There had been no notification from the Council - the members might have had to pay a minimum of £5 to get to town, which not everyone could afford.

It was noted that buggies and prams sometimes took up wheelchair spaces when they should not have done on buses in Reading.

Bob Bristow said that at one time everyone paid a small fee to use Readibus.

Peter Absolom said that the current situation was that bus pass users from Reading, Wokingham and Oxfordshire used passes on Readibus, but not those in West Berkshire.

Local Authorities got money and fares paid by the Council were given to Readibus.

The Council was requesting responses by means other than the questionnaire, for example writing letters and by telephone calls.

Labour had pledged free bus passes nationally.

Douglas Dean asked if people from Wokingham and Oxford were paid by Reading Borough Council. Peter Absolom said that the money was charged to the relevant Local Authority and reimbursed by Reading Borough Council to Readibus.

Fiona Price said that there could be a case where some paid and some did not.

The question was asked why others from other Local Authorities were not charged.

Peter Absolom said that the fare was broadly equivalent to a bus fare.

Nigel McAlister said that in Buckinghamshire the local Dial a Ride folded and people were left without accessible transport. It had been run on very little money with small subsidies.

Nigel was impressed by the attitude of the Council to disabled people, which was partly why he moved to the area. It was recognised that people in Reading were very lucky and that the Reading bus pass scheme was better than the national one. In Buckinghamshire people had to pay large fares to go not very far.

ACCESS AND DISABILITIES WORKING GROUP MINUTES -7 MARCH 2019

One possibility could be to make passengers from other councils pay more for journeys.

Peter Absolon said that all Local Authorities paid.

Cllr Williams pointed out that Readibus was already running on very little; occasionally money had to be found for new vehicles and so on. Many buses were paid for by fundraising.

Stuart Pearce asked if other councils paid a lump sum per year, and Peter Absolon replied that the money pays for the infrastructure.

It was noted that RBC was not reducing core support.

Cllr Manghnani asked how many older people had bus passes and how many of those people could contribute a nominal sum, for example £30 a year to help support Readibus.

It was possible that the Council could carry out a survey to find this out.

Peter Absolon said that Local Authorities like Reading Borough Council, to their credit, had been more generous than was the national offer.

AOB

Nina Crispin said that there was a public health consultation, and that copies were available.

Sam Chapman said that he believed that the Council was in discussion with developers; it seemed that the developers do not always want to provide wheelchair standard housing and Lifetime Homes standard housing. He asked if these developers are given planning permission why did they then fail to provide what was needed.

There were many flats being built, many of which did not have any parking bays.

Cllr Williams said that, in some areas, people were parking cars outside other people's houses, and then going on holiday.

Nigel McAlister said that he wanted a list of all the Blue Badge spaces; there was a map but it was incomplete. He said that there seemed to be no national scheme any more; it seemed to differ everywhere, and drivers had to do their own research.

The meeting ended at. 4.10