

Access and Disabilities Working Group – Thursday 18 June 2026

Present

Cllr Andrew Hornsby-Smith – Chair – Church Ward Councillor
Cllr Jenny McGrother – Vice Chair – Caversham Heights Ward
Councillor
Cllr Anne Thompson – Tilehurst Ward Councillor
Cllr Will Cross – Redlands Ward Councillor

Gavin Handford - Director for Policy, Change & Customer Services RBC
Carla Thomas-Bellamy - Housing Adaptations and Grants Team
Manager RBC
Alex Wylde - Policy and Performance Manager RBC
Jenny Scott - Policy Officer RBC
Helen Bryant – Access Officer RBC

Bob Bristow – Reading Talking News
Brian Oatway – Member of the public
Craig Hunter – Co-Founder - Sport Together Berkshire
Steph Johnson – Sport Together Berkshire
Karen Jackson – CEO - Chloe's and Sophie's Special Ears Fund
Ray Rangarirai – Former Young Carer
Hayley Helsdown – Dementia-Friendly Co-ordinator - Age UK Berkshire
Teresa Colliass – Tenant
Pat Watson – Member of the public
Jaime Hodgson – Project Manager - BSL Plus
David Weatherley - Quality Control Manager, BSL Communication
Support Assistant & Deafblind Communicator Guide – BSL Plus
Mary Pienero – Readibus

Apologies

Sam Shean - Highways & Traffic Services Manager
Samm Mills-Hutchinson - Business Support Team Leader - Adult Social
Care - RBC
Pat Watson – Member of the Public
Jamie Read – Community and Inclusion Manager – Berkshire Music
Trust

Deborah Purchon - Registered Service Manager - Radis Home Care

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

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

MINUTES

The minutes of the previous meeting were approved as a true record, except for changing “David Webberley” to “David Weatherley”.

MATTERS ARISING

Speech to text captions should be an item for the next meeting of the Working Group.

Helen Bryant will send the press release about the audio buttons on bus stops to the members of the Working Group.

Cllr Rowland was to investigate the problems of accessibility caused by the food vans on the station concourse; however, she is no longer a Councillor.

Craig Hunter said that he had been in touch with groups for people with dementia about future sports events. There will be an event for people with dementia at some point. In the future, Sport Together Berkshire will be holding events by going to the community, rather than people coming to their events. Events are suitable for toddlers, children and adults. There is something for all the family, and there is no top age limit.

Hayley Helsdown said that the Festival of Inclusivity which is to be held next month at Palmer Park has been advertised through Age UK Berkshire.

Councillor Hornsby-Smith said that the Mayor will be attending the festival. Reading Borough Council have been working with the Council's Communications team, and we have sponsorship from Morgan Sindall and Gleeds.

Councillor Hornsby-Smith expressed his thanks to Sport Together Berkshire and said that it was an honour to work with them.

Further details of the event can be found here:

<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/festival-of-inclusivity-palmer-park-leisure-centre-thursday-23rd-july-26-tickets-1985717683044>

Bob Bristow asked if there would be someone around to assist visually impaired people at the festival. Craig Hunter said that Sport Together Berkshire wants to engage with visually impaired people.

Councillor Hornsby-Smith said that Sam Shean was not able to attend this meeting, so he will attend the next one, and so will Deborah Purchon from Radis Home Care.

Councillor Cross said that there is new tactile paving outside the Civic Centre, which he had requested.

Councillor Hornsby-Smith said that there was an area outside the railway station that gets very slippery, so he will report it.

COUNCILLORS' DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

None.

UPDATE ON NEW TELEPHONY AND CONTACT PLATFORM

Gavin Handford, Director of Policy, Change & Customer Services, gave a presentation on how people can contact the Council with the new telephony system.

He said that if anyone wanted to take part in testing the new system, they should contact Helen Bryant.

There will be monitoring to make sure that everything is working as it should.

To begin with, there will be SMS messages used for council tax and waste services, and this will be expanded later.

Brian Oatway asked if it will work with PCs. Gavin Handford confirmed that it will work with any device.

Karen Jackson asked if Zoom has been tested for accuracy; words can be misheard, and quality can be quite poor in automatic systems. She asked how, if they can't hear their telephone, deaf people could use a callback, and how would they respond. Gavin Handford said that the system will be monitored.

Councillor Cross said that if someone is deaf and only uses BSL it would not be possible for them to call the Call Centre. He asked if anyone had used the Text Relay Service:

<https://www.ofcom.org.uk/phones-and-broadband/accessibility/text-relay-guide>

Hayley Helsdown said that there is to be an Older Persons' Day in October, and that the theme will be Aging and Technology. She suggested that someone from the Council could come and speak at the event. Gavin Handford confirmed that it was already in the diary.

Mary Pienero asked about the callback system – if you cannot get to your phone quickly enough, how many callbacks will be made? Gavin Handford said that he is unsure if there is a limit.

Hayley suggested that there could be a way to flag up on the system if people are disabled and may not respond quickly. Gavin Handford said that he would find out.

Cllr Cross asked if there was a central record of people's needs. Gavin Handford said that this could be logged if the caller declares a need.

Cllr Hornsby-Smith asked if there is a response time target. Gavin Handford said that there is no target, but it will be monitored, and the volume of calls made is important.

Cllr Hornsby-Smith asked if there was any way for callers to be told where in the queue they were, for later feedback, and if not, how easy it would be to have this added. Gavin Handford said that this is being looked at and there are multiple queues.

Councillor Hornsby-Smith thanked Gavin Handford for his presentation.

AVENUE SCHOOL SPECIAL NEEDS ACADEMY

<https://www.avenue.reading.sch.uk/>

Symon Cooke, the Head Teacher, gave a presentation about the history of the school, and the present and future aims.

Symon said that he had worked at the school for 25 years and been Head Teacher for nine.

The school moved to the Meadway in 2007. Formerly there were 55 pupils, now there are 265, and plans are being made to welcome 150 more. There have been 450 requests for children to enrol at the school and there are only 20 available spaces. Pupil ages range from 3-19 years.

The Avenue School is now 150 years old and is one of the oldest special education schools in the country. A party is planned for September to celebrate the anniversary.

Maximising independence is a very important part of the ethos of the school; to give pupils the motivation to get up in the morning and to get into employment.

Symon said that he would be interested to know how accessible the town is for people who are unable to read.

Councillor McGrother asked if there is any overnight respite facility, but there is not. Some pupils are receiving respite at Cressingham and Pinecroft children's homes.

<https://brighterfuturesforchildren.org/stable-loving-homes/>

Councillor Hornsby-Smith thanked Symon Cooke for his presentation.

WISHES FOR DEAF CHILDREN

<http://www.cssef.org.uk/index-1.html>

Karen Jackson gave a presentation about the work of Chloe's and Sophie's Special Ears Fund.

The charity has equipment such as vibrating alarm clocks and safety helmets which are suitable for use by people who have cochlear implants and hearing aids. There are also dolls and teddy bears that have been fitted with various aids.

There is an activities programme, which aims to prevent isolation. There are several groups, Blossom, for girls, which meets every 2 weeks, Bloom, and a youth club. There will soon be a group for boys called Explorers.

The groups help deaf children to gain confidence and independence.

Karen said that it had been difficult talking to schools about integrating deaf children. It is estimated that there is one deaf child in every classroom.

Councillor Hornsby-Smith asked how the charity raises funds. There are 4 charity shops, which generate 2/3 of the funding. Applying for grants is very challenging; demand is very high.

The main problem is that it is difficult to know where children are in schools.

Councillor Hornsby-Smith thanked Karen for her presentation.

ACTION: Councillor Hornsby-Smith to liaise with Karen and South Reading Family Hub.

HOUSING ADAPTATION AND DISABLED FACILITIES GRANTS

Carla Thomas-Bellamy gave a presentation about Disabled Facilities Grants and how people's houses can be adapted so that they can live in them for longer and with more independence.

The aim is to decrease dependence on Social Services and to improve people's lives.

Hayley Helmsdown asked if email addresses could be shared.

Cllr Hornsby-Smith said that there were privacy concerns, but if members of the Working Group were happy to share their email

addresses, they should let Helen Bryant know, so that they can be circulated within the Group.

He asked if there was a maximum budget. There is a fixed three-year budget allocation of £1.5 million.

He asked how many applications were processed in a year.

In 24/25 there were 176, of which 130 were approved. In 25/26 there have been 194, of which 120 have been approved.

If someone has an urgent need for their housing to be adapted, they will need to be put higher up in the queue.

Brian Oatway asked about timescales. Bathrooms can take from 4-6 months to complete. There is a lot of demand, so people are encouraged to get in touch if their situation changes, so that they can be given help in the meantime.

Karen Jackson asked if there was funding for fire alarm systems for deaf people. Flashing fire alarms can be fitted.

Councillor Hornsby-Smith thanked Carla for her presentation.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Reading Deaf Club is celebrating its 25th anniversary, and an event was held this month.

Councillor Jenny McGrother said that the Pink 22 bus was being cancelled by Reading Buses, which may mean that some people, including older and disabled people, might find that they are a long way from a bus stop. People who are blind, and whose guide dogs are used to finding the bus stop may be particularly affected. She wondered how people could be persuaded to use Readibus, as there seems to be a stigma attached to use of the service.

ACTION: Mary Pienero said that she would pass this information to Readibus.

FUTURE PRESENTATIONS

As Deborah Purchon could not attend this meeting, she will attend the next in September. The recent Supreme Court decision on Deprivation of Liberty should also be discussed.

<https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/news/charities-response-to-supreme-court-ruling>

Karen Jackson said that we need captions for every meeting of the Working Group from now on.

Bob Bristow sent his apologies for the next meeting.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

24 September 2026