

AGENDA ITEM 6

QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

**1. Councillor Ayub to ask the Leader of the Council:
Business Improvement District**

Can the Leader update me on the plans that the BID Committee have to work with partners on schemes to further develop Reading's successful economy now we know that local businesses have supported the renewal of the Town Centre BID and companies in the Abbey Quarter have voted for a new BID in that area ?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock Leader of the Council.

I thank Cllr Ayub for his question.

It is really excellent news that businesses have backed a BID renewal in the retail town centre for the third time and have now supported a new BID in the Abbey Quarter. Given the current uncertainty over BREXIT it is to the credit of all those involved that businesses have agreed to buy into the two BIDs as a way of supporting Reading's economy.

Reading UK proposed the BIDs and undertook the consultation with business, planning and voting separately as they are the two areas which have largely different audiences. The two BID areas are primarily retail in the town centre offices in the Abbey Quarter, with some cross over.

Initially Reading UK will continue the Retail BID Committee but set up a new Abbey Quarter BID Committee led by businesses in that area. Reading UK works closely with many local organisations, including the Cultural and economic development team which also involves staff at the Museum and Abbey ruins. There is also joint working with the Police and other key stake holders. The aim is to work in partnership to deliver the agreed 5 year business plans as they have done in the Retail BID for many years.

The BIDs are set up to add value to business and economic growth in the areas not replicate or undertake activities of the public sector, but foster effective working between the public and private sector and in time between the two BID Committees, which will undoubtedly bring added value and economies of scale.

I have two examples for you:

- Firstly an employee loyalty scheme will be set up for office workers to get special deals in the town centre shops, providing convenience for office workers and increased footfall for the retailers.
- Secondly the Council will be working with Reading UK (The Abbey Qtr BID) to bring forward new moorings and facilities on the Kennet by the Abbey encouraging boat travellers to stop and enjoy the shops, attractions and hospitality in the town centre.

This is in addition to investment in new public realm and better lighting across the two BID areas.

Details of all the comprehensive and exciting initiatives and plans the businesses voted to undertake between now and 2024 are contained in both business plans available at Reading UK website www.livingreading.co.uk

Nigel Horton-Baker Executive Director at Reading UK is hoping to meet with you and the other Abbey ward councillors in the near future and talk through the agreed plan for the Abbey area and invite you to meet the new BID Committee when it is established.

2. Councillor Debs Absolom to ask the Lead Councillor for Corporate and Consumer Services:
Register Office Services

Can the Lead Councillor please update me on the improvements that have been made to the Register Office's Services over the last year ?

REPLY by Councillor Brock Lead Councillor for Corporate and Consumer Services:

Over the last year a number of improvements have been made to the registration service to benefit our customers.

At the end of November the registration service moved from its previous home at Yeomanry House on Castle Hill on to the Civic Offices in the centre of town. The service is located on the ground floor with a dedicated waiting room and suite of interview rooms. Co-locating the registration service with the Customer Service Hub has been significantly beneficial in how registration customers are welcomed and access our services.

A newly renovated ceremony room in the Town Hall now provides a prestigious and fitting space for ceremonies such as marriages and civil partnerships; private and group citizenship; and baby-naming and renewal of vows. By placing the ceremonial room at the heart of the Town Hall, new audiences are also introduced to both the Reading Museum and one of our most important civic buildings.

The newly built cemetery office at Henley Road provides much improved accommodation for customers and staff. A modern and future-proof strong room provides for the secure storage of Reading's birth, death and marriage registers from 1837 to the present day. Following the move, replacement certificates ordered online or by telephone are now produced and posted from this location. While we're on the subject of the cemetery, I'd also like to congratulate the team at Henley Road for their regional Gold Award from Britain in Bloom in October 2018.

Feedback from customers about the changes has been overwhelmingly positive, most notably regarding the beauty of the new ceremony room. The central location and excellent transport links make the location attractive and early indications are that the Town Hall is in for a busy summer of weddings. Moreover, while Yeomanry House did not have lift access to the birth/death interview rooms, customers visiting the Civic Offices are delighted with the improved access.

As I'm sure you can appreciate, it's been an extremely busy year for the whole team at the Register Office and cemetery. I'd like to thank them all for their hard work in driving forwards all the projects and changes that I've outlined. Their success in delivering these innovations means that our residents are already experiencing the benefits of them and will continue to receive a good service in the years to come.

3. Councillor Debs Absolom to ask the Lead Councillor for Corporate and Consumer Services:
Trading Standards Team

Can the Lead Councillor please update me on the work that the Council's Trading Standards team have undertaken over the last year ?

REPLY by Councillor Brock Lead Councillor for Corporate and Consumer Services:

The responsibilities of the Trading Standards team are incredibly wide ranging from: dealing with rogue traders; combating counterfeit goods; food safety and product labelling; safety of electrical goods; weights and measures; cosmetics testing; safe storage of explosives; underage tobacco, alcohol and knives sales; preventing animal disease outbreaks; combating car clocking and petroleum site safety.

In recent years, the work of the team has focussed on investigating fraudulent, illegal and unfair trading activities often involving organised crime groups across a wider area.

Key areas of work include over the last year have been:

- Responding to doorstep complaints where local residents have been duped into having building work carried out which is often of very poor quality, not required and significantly over priced. The team aim to provide a rapid response to these issues; to gather evidence, confront the trader and to protect the local resident from further harm. The team has recently recruited a specialist in this field to improve enforcement outcomes.
- Investigating fraudulent, illegal and unfair trading activity which is often now conducted through online markets and social media channels such as eBay and Facebook. This is a significant part of the teams work and can involve complex and lengthy investigations working with regional partners, National Trading Standards and other enforcement agencies.
- Managing a borough wide Community Alcohol Partnership (CAP) which seeks to reduce alcohol use amongst under-18s and the associated harms which result. This is an award winning scheme which delivers on the wider public health strategies around alcohol misuse and is achieved through a partnership approach with schools, retailers, the police and community groups. The scheme has been focussing on high harm areas in South Reading and is exploring a programme with Reading University to expand the scheme in that area to reduce the impact of alcohol misuse in the 18-25 age group.
- Providing advice to local business to ensure they get the help and support they need to thrive and grow and give them confidence that there is a level playing field for legitimate business if their products, processes and procedures are in compliance with regulations. Local businesses are directed to free advice initially and where more detailed information is needed then the service charges on a cost recovery basis. It is expected this work will grow with small business requiring additional support with the Brexit process.
- Protecting the food chain through inspections of premises and sampling of food products to ensure they are safe and labelled correctly. This includes working with

retailers, manufacturers and importers and can range from detailed technicalities around labelling to sampling takeaways for meat species identification.

- Targeting premises suspected of selling illicit tobacco, which is cheaper and potentially more available to young people, using sniffer dogs to uncover hidden product. The service will participate in regional projects this year on the compliance of Shisha and e-cigarettes and will also be testing premises to ensure they are not selling knives to under-18s. The team also leads on the Berkshire Tobacco Alliance for Reading which aims to reduce the prevalence of underage smoking through educational programmes in schools, working with business and targeted enforcement.

In addition to these core activities, the Trading Standards team is also part of the National Scams programme, which involves identifying, visiting and supporting vulnerable residents who have been victims of scams. Officers work with the victim to prevent them from sending further money and make safeguarding referrals where required.

Officers also have a significant role, alongside the Environmental Health service, in providing nationally binding advice to companies under the Primary Authority scheme. Companies signed up with Reading include JD Wetherspoon, Yell and Primark and the team also specialise in the gambling industry sector which primarily focusses on industry procedures to prevent underage sales.

By necessity, this is only a brief summary of the work the service is involved with and officers would be more than happy to present a more detailed report at a future committee meeting. I hope all Councillors will join me in extending gratitude to our officers in Trading Standards for their constant dedication to protecting Reading's residents, businesses, and consumers.

4. Councillor McGonigle to ask the Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods and Communities: Glyphosate products

Some of us remember when driving our windscreen would be covered with insects. It is now well documented that we are facing an enormous loss of insect life in the UK, some estimate an 80% loss in the last 30 years.

This is due to pollution, loss of habitat, global warming and particularly to the over-use of pesticides/insecticides.

This insect loss is causing a very serious decline in bird numbers and natural pollinators of our flowers fruits and vegetables.

Following the very welcome action of RBC in joining the increasing number of councils taking action about our climate emergency, can we now assume that this council will cease to use Glyphosate products in our town, and mitigate previous losses by planting wildflower meadows or at least allowing areas to re-wild in parks, along roadsides and other open spaces.

We can then encourage residents to follow suit.

This is a serious crisis and a disturbing threat to our food chain and I would like to ask the council to cease using Glyphosate products with immediate effect ?

REPLY by Councillor James Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods and Communities.

Glyphosate is a non-selective, non-residual herbicide which is very effective at killing weeds which are actively growing at the time of application, but does not remain active in the soil

to prevent the subsequent growth of new weeds. The Council uses glyphosate to control weed growth in a number of locations on highway, in parks and other areas of council managed open space. The normal current spraying programme is 3 occasions per year. We also use it to control harmful or invasive weeds e.g. Japanese Knotweed.

On 12 December 2017, the European Commission renewed the approval of glyphosate for 5 years, following support by a qualified majority of Member States in an Appeal Committee held on 27 November 2017.

There is some contradictory evidence about the environmental impact of glyphosate, but there has been no change in national guidance or advice which as a matter of course the Council follows as a minimum standard. In any case, the Council limits the use of all pesticides as much as possible and has assessed the effectiveness and cost of a number of alternatives such as manual control and thermal control with hot water, steam or flame. Whilst technology is improving, each of these alternatives is greatly more labour intensive and expensive than the use of glyphosate.

All staff and contractors applying pesticides for and on behalf of the Council are qualified to do so in accordance with the Control of Pesticide Regulations and we regularly review our risk assessments and methods of application. The Council will continue to monitor carefully the information and advice that is published about glyphosate and regularly review its use on its land holdings.

With regards to mitigation from wildflower meadows and planting, the Council's Parks Team was awarded Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) funding in 2011, to support a 10 year scheme up to 2021. The team currently manages approximately 40 hectares of wildflower meadows the maintenance of which is supported by this funding.

Additionally, the Parks Team has recently been working with a partner organisation which is in receipt of grant funding through the Climate Action Network. They have been engaging residents in planting wildflower plugs (supplied via BBOWT's growers from local seed) into roadside verges across the town to see how these respond to the Council's existing mowing regime. Early investigation has established that clovers and birds foot trefoil manage to flower profusely with regular mowing and attract insects, and other species such as ladies bedstraw and selfheal also flower with regular mowing.

These areas will be monitored over the summer of 2019 to assess the success of the planting. This will provide a subset of plants that are resistant to the regular mowing regime and are beneficial to insects.

If successful, the Climate Action Network will take the project to the business community and ask them to fund further wildflower plantings with their staff to do the planting as Corporate Social Responsibility.

5. Councillor Barnett-Ward to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:
Readybike

Following the unfortunate withdrawal of the Readybike service, can the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport update the Council on steps being taken to secure a new operator ?

REPLY by Councillor Page Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport.

I thank Cllr Barnett-Ward for her question.

The Council has recently received notification that Hourbike Limited is unable to operate ReadyBike beyond 31st March 2019 due to financial challenges experienced.

Hourbike Limited, a small UK-owned business, was appointed to install, manage and maintain the cycle hire scheme with an annual scheme subsidy of around £120,000 per annum, which was funded by the Local Sustainable Transport Fund programme until March 2016. The scheme was subsequently funded through existing transport budgets until August 2017 when the contract was retendered. Hourbike Limited was reappointed to manage and maintain the scheme with zero subsidy from the Council.

The Council issued a press release on 15th March 2019 highlighting the withdrawal of Hourbike from the ReadyBike scheme and our intention to seek a new operator, as soon as possible, to continue delivering cycle hire as a commercial service with no subsidy from the Council.

Officers are now investigating options with a number of potential new operators who have expressed an interest in continuing to offer a cycle hire scheme in Reading. As part of these discussions, the Council is also keen to investigate opportunities to upgrade the current scheme, including the possible availability of e-bikes as well as seeing the scheme extended to more areas of the town especially in the west.

The current ReadyBike scheme will therefore end on 31st March 2019 whilst officers investigate options to appoint a new operator. The bikes are owned by the Council and will be stored pending any further developments.

A further update on the scheme will be given in the summer.

**6. Councillor Josh Williams to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:
Cycle Lanes/Readybike Scheme**

Can the Lead Councillor please tell us how much money has been spent in the last five years on installing and maintaining segregated cycle lanes in Reading, and how much money has been spent in the last five years on installing and maintaining the, now 'mothballed', Readybike scheme ?

REPLY by Councillor Page Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport.

I thank Cllr Williams for his question.

The Readybike cycle hire scheme was implemented as part of the Local Sustainable Transport Fund (LSTF) programme, for which the Council secured over £25m investment from central Government to be spent between 2011 and 2016.

The Readybike scheme was launched in June 2014, with an annual subsidy of approximately £130,000 following a competitive procurement process. This was initially funded by the LSTF grant until March 2016, and then from existing transport budgets until August 2017 when the contract was retendered. The scheme has subsequently been operated on a commercial basis without a subsidy.

This Readybike scheme was one element of a range of cycle improvements delivered through the LSTF programme, which included:

- Christchurch Bridge, providing a new direct link to the station and town centre across the River Thames from Caversham;
- New cycle route on the London Road, between the town centre and Cemetery Junction;
- The 600 space cycle parking hub at Reading Station northern interchange;
- Public realm enhancements to the shared space at Town Hall square; and
- A wide-ranging programme of cycle training and promotional activities to support new and existing cyclists.

The Council has continued this investment in cycle facilities in the last few years following completion of the LSTF programme, including:

- Enhancements to existing cycle routes as part of the A33 pinch point scheme, with external funding from central Government;
- The new National Cycle Network (NCN) Route 422, providing a new east-west cycle route through the Borough with £1.2m funding from the Local Growth Fund;
- Dedicated cycle facilities currently being implemented as part of the Cow Lane bridges scheme, with further facilities to follow on the Oxford Road;
- Development of plans in partnership with Sustrans for improved access on the NCN network along the River Kennet and Avon; and
- A programme of 20 mph zones in residential areas throughout the Borough, to provide a safer environment to encourage cycling and walking.

In addition we continue to deliver a comprehensive programme of cycle training and promotional activities, including:

- Bikeability cycle training in schools, with external funding secured from central Government;
- After school and school holiday cycling training and clubs in Palmer Park; and
- Initiatives to encourage walking and cycling in partnership with local schools through the national Modeshift Stars accreditation programme.

Our delivery record demonstrates the holistic approach the Council takes to delivering improvements for sustainable transport, with most schemes including a mixture of enhancements. It is therefore not possible to break down spend for individual modes of transport or types of facility. However the outcomes of this investment are demonstrated by clear trends showing an overall increase in public transport, walking and cycling trips into the town centre over the past few years, in comparison with car trips which have remained at a fairly constant level.

We are also developing future plans through the preparation of a Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan, in partnership with West Berkshire and Wokingham Councils. This plan will prioritise key routes and measures for cycling and walking throughout the urban area to inform future bids, as well as forming a key element of a new Local Transport Plan for Reading with the objective of providing benefits relating to congestion, air quality, climate change, equality, health and wellbeing.