

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

15 JULY 2019

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 1

Ann Dally to ask the Lead Councillor for Corporate and Consumer Services:

Revenue Collection

Do you agree that RBC would benefit from being part of the new innovative joined-up approach to revenue collection processes, as outlined in the February 2019 LGA report and described in detail in the MAS toolkit (Supportive Council Tax Recovery: Strategic Guidance to Support LAs...), which gives convincing evidence of Local Authorities experiencing increased revenues, decreased costs, and better financial education for residents, all of which enhancing the reputation of the Council?

REPLY by Councillor Emberson (Lead Councillor for Corporate and Consumer Services)

The Revenues and Benefits team have since January been working much more closely with the debt advice sector to review their current processes, with the aim of assisting residents maintain their council tax payments.

The Revenues team have made significant progress in implementing most of the recommendations made in the Citizens Advice Protocol and will adopt the Protocol in full later this year.

The Revenues team have also reviewed the Money Advice Service Supportive Council Tax Recovery guide and are in the process of checking the eight steps that improve collaboration with the debt advice agencies and better support residents in financial difficulty.

Of the eight steps, the Revenues team have undertaken the following actions:

Debt Advice Interventions - The Revenues team are about to issue literature with all its correspondence to signpost residents to debt advice agencies. Those struggling with debt often find it beneficial to be linked up with experts who can offer specialist support, and as a local authority we recognise our responsibility in helping to facilitate this. As the case studies indicate, debt advice intervention for someone with council tax arrears is more likely to result in a sustainable payment arrangement and therefore the Revenues team are keen to establish with the debt advice agencies a process in which referrals can be made.

Resident Affordability - the Revenues team already accept financial statements from the debt advice agencies and acknowledge that a qualified

debt advisor has assessed what a resident is able to afford, in addition our enforcement agents acknowledge this and where vulnerable will allow 'breathing space'. We also do carry out financial statements with some local residents where appropriate. Where arrangements are agreed, the Revenues team halt any further recovery action on that debt. The Revenues team already use aspects within the standard financial statement; however it is intended to register for SFS membership to ensure that they have a consistent approach to income and expenditure assessment.

Payment arrangements and pre-enforcement - The Revenues team are reviewing the operational recommendations outlined to ensure they have a consistent approach. Many of the recommendations are already undertaken, these being:

- The department allowing extended payment arrangements where an affordability assessment has been undertaken.
- The department allow customers to extend their current financial year payments into February and March, providing 12 instalments rather than the traditional 10.
- The department allow payment arrangements on liability orders where employment details are known. They will only enforce an attachment of earnings where the arrangement is defaulted.
- The department allow short term concessionary arrangements whilst the customer seeks debt advice, or provides details in order that an affordability assessment may be undertaken by the team.
- The department now allow customers to choose their instalment date to coincide with their salary/benefits payment date.
- Where the department rejects arrangements, the customer is kept informed of the reason behind this decision and potential consequences of non-payment.
- The department would not discuss further borrowing in order to pay their council tax.

Debt Advice Referral Strategies - This links in to action point 1 and further work is required to establish a referral process with the advice agencies. Local Authority oversight of referral partners - This is an area of work not currently undertaken and we will look at implementing in conjunction with the Protocol.

Engagement and partnerships - Clear points of contact have been established within the Revenues team to allow the debt advice sector to contact the Recovery Team directly. The Revenues team have recently participated and presented at networking events within the debt advice

sector. They have also started to provide training to the debt advice sector on the Council Tax Recovery Process and in addition, the external enforcement agents have provided training on their processes.

Target specific resident cohorts for debt advice intervention - The Revenues team have over the past 12 months changed their debt recovery strategy. This includes using new technology, such as the introduction of text messaging as a reminder to residents to make payment. Where a resident falls into arrears and a summons is issued, the Recovery team will attempt an outbound call (where contact details held) to take payment or agree repayment terms, something most authorities do not do before considering further enforcement because we recognise the importance of personal contact with our residents. As well as notifying residents, the team at this point will also verbally advise of debt advice options. The team are also reviewing other techniques to contact residents as we recognise that a batch letter process is not always the best way to engage with all cohorts of residents in arrears.

Align to the Money Advice Service 'Supportive Revenues Standards' - The Revenues team are currently working to the 'minimum standards' with some elements of the 'good practice support' being achieved. As a result of working towards all action points, the team aim to achieve all of the 'good practice support' and elements of the 'going above and beyond'.

In summary we agree that it is beneficial to follow the strategic guidance published by the Money Advice Service, and my objective over the next 12 months is to ensure we have implemented it in full. Alongside this, the Labour Administration has committed in its last Local Election Manifesto to introduce Citizen's Advice Council Tax Protocol and improve our debt collection practices and also enhance financial education provision for residents. I look forward to engaging with yourself and other voluntary organisations in the town as we move this work forward.

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PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 2

Ann Dally to ask the Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing and Sport:

Mental Health linked to problem debt

Do you also agree that using Local Authority data in a joined-up way will have further significant advantages for mental health and wellbeing within the community, in that it will support efforts to address poor mental health linked to problem debt and decrease the risk of death by suicide via the local Suicide Prevention Plan?

REPLY by Councillor Hoskin (Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing and Sport):

I am pleased to advise that the Council has recognised the links between mental wellbeing and managing debt, and that this is now being taken into account as we plan services.

Issues of debt can lead to mental ill-health. This can be as a direct result of the stress and anxiety caused by the debt itself or because of other stressful life events that have occurred that can lead to both debt and mental ill-health. These include issues such as loss of employment or relationship breakdown.

In addition, people who have experienced mental ill-health may need additional support either to avoid or to manage debt. This may mean support to develop the personal skills and resilience necessary to avoid being overwhelmed by financial difficulties.

There are already a range of services that exist to support Reading's residents experiencing debt and / or mental ill health - for example:

- Citizens Advice Reading
- Reading Community Welfare Rights Unit
- Communicare
- Berkshire West Your Way
- Talking Therapies
- Samaritans
- Compass Recovery College

The services listed here all take a holistic approach to understanding and meeting client needs, meaning they are well placed to address the links between mental health/wellbeing and problem debt. There is a good deal of signposting and referral between these services, but we need to ensure that vulnerable people do not lose contact with support services during any hand-offs.

We are also seeking to be more strategic in how we address the issues of debt and mental ill health. For example, debt is one of the themes of the Council's Poverty Needs Analysis Action Plan that is currently being developed, as is supporting people with a mental health diagnosis to find or stay in employment, thus avoiding them falling into debt in the first place. This action plan will be monitored by the cross-directorate Welfare & Poverty Steering Group, which is also attended by Citizens' Advice Reading, Reading Welfare Rights Unit and Communicare.

We have recognised that more could be done to link people who are experiencing debt, when they are at their most vulnerable, to the existing support services that I have mentioned. As a council we are already in contact with people who are in debt due to non-payment of council tax, for example. I agree that we should be ensuring these individuals and families are being directed to the support we have available, and I have therefore asked officers to explore how best to provide information on the relevant local support services in the letters the revenue team send out to those falling behind in council tax payments. Furthermore, we will explore how we can be referring those in debt to a relevant debt Advice Agency, who could then contact the resident to offer support and advice. This 'joined-up' approach would have clear benefits to both residents and ourselves. However, this would need to be subject to customer agreement and working in partnership with our local debt advice agencies to ensure they are able to deal with the referrals.

Finally in regard to suicides- a recent audit of suicides in Berkshire identified that 19% of people who died from suicide were found to have had a financial problem around the time of their death. Although, the vast majority of people who experience financial difficulties do not go on to take their own lives, we recognise this as a risk factor for suicide and that it underlines the importance of the issue of debt. Our multi-agency suicide prevention group will support the council in the implementation of the initiatives I have described.

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15 JULY 2019

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 3

Peter Burt to ask the Leader of the Council:

Sale of Arthur Hill Swimming Pool

The report on the sale of Arthur Hill Swimming Pool considered and accepted by Policy Committee in secret on 16 July last year recommended sale of the Arthur Hill site to OOK Developments, acknowledged as being a young company of limited experience, for a sum of £1,150,000 on the anticipation that contracts would be exchanged within 28 days and completed 28 days thereafter. The report asserted that this would result in what was described as the "certainty" of a capital receipt of £1,150,000 for the Council in the 2018/19 financial year.

One year later contracts have still yet to be exchanged, the anticipated capital receipt has not been materialised, and a popular and much needed local sports centre remains locked up and decaying thanks to Reading's Labour councillors.

The Policy Committee report indicated that in the event of the purchaser not performing to an acceptable timescale, the Director of Environment and Neighbourhood Services had the authority to engage with the second placed bidder or remarket the property.

Given that the purchaser has quite clearly failed to perform to an acceptable timetable by even the most generous standards, and apparently has no prospect of being able to do so in the foreseeable future, why has the Council not reconsidered its decision on the sale of Arthur Hill Pool to OOK developments?

REPLY by Councillor Brock (Leader of the Council)

Thank you for your question Mr Burt.

The decision to dispose of the freehold of Arthur Hill swimming pool was agreed at Policy Committee in July 2018 following a process to market the building. The Council was open about advertising the disposal of the building publically and named the successful bidder.

Following the Policy Committee decision, officers worked with the preferred purchaser towards disposing of the property as soon as possible. Dialogue to this end, coupled with required due diligence work, was more extensive and time consuming than originally envisaged. While it is regrettable that this has resulted in the disposal not being concluded, it is of course incumbent

on the Council as a public body to ensure such processes are robust and compliant with statutory duties and obligations, including to ensure best value for public assets.

I advised the Policy Committee in June that due diligence was ongoing and the Council had commissioned further surveys and site investigations at Arthur Hill Pool. That work has now concluded and I am pleased to confirm this has provided constructive reports on current conditions at the site and in relation to the building, which is particularly important in the context of the locally listed frontage.

I also confirmed at Policy Committee in June that, once this due diligence had been completed, the Council would need to take a decision about the future of the Arthur Hill Pool building.

To enable this, options are being reviewed and a report will be submitted to a future Policy Committee. At the present time dialogue with the preferred purchaser has been discontinued. The Council will continue to consider the re-use of the site for housing, including Council housing, key worker housing, or other affordable housing provision.

The Council remains committed to delivering a new pool at Palmer Park as part of the leisure procurement process.

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

15 JULY 2019

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 2

Peter Burt to ask the Leader of the Council:

Review of FOI arrangements

At the last Policy Committee meeting, in response to my supplementary question on the Information Commissioner's decision notice ordering the Council to release information on the sale of Arthur Hill Pool, you stated that you had asked for a review of the Council's Freedom of Information arrangements to be conducted.

Please can you advise me who is conducting this review; what its terms of reference are; when it is expected to be completed; and whether you intend to publish the findings?

REPLY by Councillor Brock (Leader of the Council)

The Council's Chief Auditor has been asked to undertake a review of the Council's process for capturing, processing and responding to Freedom for Information requests. The focus of the review is to ensure that the Council's procedures are fit for purpose and comply with statutory timeframes and the basic principles of the Freedom of Information Act.

The aim is for the review to be completed and the report finalised by the end of July. The final report will subsequently be reported to the Audit & Governance committee.

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

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15 JULY 2019

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 5

Roger Lightfoot to ask the Leader of the Council:

Sale of Central Pool site

Could you please update us on the progress of the sale of the Central Swimming Pool site?

REPLY by Councillor Brock (Leader of the Council):

I thank Mr Lightfoot for his question.

Reading Borough Council has been successful in securing Housing Infrastructure Funding (HIF) from Homes England. This funding supports essential site clearance work to bring it forward for development. I am pleased to confirm that the Council has now entered into a grant agreement with Homes England, enabling us to draw down up to £1m of funding to cover important site preparation costs, including demolition.

In anticipation of this grant award, demolition is well advanced and the works to remove the superstructure are on time and under budget. Officers are currently arranging for the removal of the diving pool and are working with the local utilities providers to enable this work to commence shortly. The process for bringing the site forward for housing development in order to comply with the HIF bid is progressing and will be subject to a future Policy Committee report in the Autumn. Any housing development on this site will include affordable homes for the very many people struggling to get on the housing ladder in Reading and the south east.

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

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15 JULY 2019

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 6

Roger Lightfoot to ask the Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing & Sport:

Leisure Contract

Can the Lead Councillor update us on progress of the Leisure Contract, and did his visit to the High Wycombe facility persuade him of the urgency to get things moving even quicker?

REPLY by Councillor Hoskin (Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing & Sport):

Thank you for your question Mr Lightfoot.

My recent visit to a facility in High Wycombe reconfirmed how modern up to date leisure facilities can increase participation and encourage the whole community to take physical activity to improve their health and physical and mental well-being.

The procurement process is complex and while the appointment of a new leisure partner is time-consuming we are on track to complete this process and I anticipate a report coming forward in the autumn with a formal appointment later this year and a contract start in January 2020 following a necessary mobilisation period.

This Council is in the process of delivering a radical enhancement of the town's leisure facilities, including the provision of a new pool at Palmer Park and a new competition standard pool to replace Central Pool.

The operator will then be responsible for obtaining planning permission for the new pools at Rivermead and Palmer Park prior to commencing work on site and improving and managing facilities at South Reading and Meadway. This is a significant programme of work and build timescales will become clearer as the procurement progresses to detailed and final proposals from the bidders. Once we have this clarity and appointed our preferred operator we will of course publicise the anticipated development programme.

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

15 JULY 2019

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 7

Stuart Kinton to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:

Third Thames Bridge

How does the proposal for a third vehicular crossing over the River Thames fit in with Reading Borough Council's climate emergency declaration and meeting the strategic aims outlined in point 5.1 of the Major Transport Projects Update report to SEPT Committee (9th July 2019) that include "Keeping Reading's environment clean, green and safe" and "Promoting health"?

REPLY by Councillor Page (Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport):

I thank Mr Kinton for his question.

A third vehicular crossing over the River Thames has been a longstanding objective of both Reading and Wokingham Borough Councils. It would provide significant benefits as demonstrated by the Strategic Outline Business Case which has been produced for the scheme.

The crossing would provide a more direct route for through traffic which does not need to be in the centre of Reading, and which currently adds to congestion on the existing Caversham Bridge and Reading Bridge crossings.

Proposals for the third crossing are being progressed to include the provision of a park and ride site north of the river on the Henley Road and cycle facilities across the bridge, providing viable alternatives to the private car for trips from the north into the town centre and beyond.

It would also provide the opportunity to review and better manage the use of the two existing bridges (Caversham and Reading), with a view to potentially introducing public transport priority measures on these existing pinch points on the highway network.

The benefits of a new Third Bridge would obviously be the subject of further public consultations in the area, not least with the communities north of the river in South Oxfordshire who will need reassurance about appropriate environmental and traffic management mitigation measures on the local highway network.

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

15 JULY 2019

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 8

Stuart Kinton to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:

Schemes to Reduce Carbon Emissions

The UN Secretary General António Guterres made a statement on 30th June 2019 in which he said; "the world is facing a grave climate emergency... ..It is plain to me that we have no time to lose. Sadly, it is not yet plain to all the decision makers that run our world." Given also RBC's declaration that we have a climate emergency, would this Committee consider that now is no longer the time for "business as usual". Will the Council commit to schemes to reduce carbon emissions by having car free days and a congestion charge for Reading?

REPLY by Councillor Page (Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport):

I thank Mr Kinton for his question.

Reading Borough Council is in the process of developing a climate emergency framework to ensure that action on climate change is ramped up in order to play our full role in achieving a zero carbon Reading by 2030.

The Council, however, cannot meet this challenge alone and is currently working with our partners in the Reading Climate Change Partnership to develop a collaborative third climate change strategy for 2020 to 2025.

The Council recently met its own target to cut carbon emissions by 50% three years early, helping to achieve the borough wide reduction of 41%. That puts it in the top 20 local authorities in Britain for progress, but we will need to accelerate that improvement even more if we are to achieve a carbon neutral Reading in just 10 years' time.

The Council is currently investigating options to reduce carbon emissions from transport through the introduction of demand management measures such as a possible Congestion Charge, a Clean Air Zone and/or Workplace Parking Levy. Importantly this work is being undertaken as part of our wider transport strategy to provide enhanced sustainable transport options to the private car, rather than simply imposing a charge with no realistic alternatives in place.

Next Monday we will be launching a public consultation seeking suggestions to inform development of our new transport strategy and I would encourage as many people as possible to respond. We will also be seeking views on

temporary initiatives to encourage use of sustainable transport such as car free days, school streets and play streets as part of this work.

I would remind Mr Kinton that, over the years, the Borough Council and its wholly-owned company Reading Buses have provided quick and reliable bus routes, new Park and Ride facilities, and new transport interchanges at Reading Station. In Reading Buses, we also own one of the cleanest bus fleets in the UK.

The Council's major transport schemes have an overall objective of promoting use of sustainable transport, walking and cycling. Significant milestones which have been achieved recently include:

- Delivery of the Cow Lane Bridges highway scheme, opening up the opportunity for pedestrians and cyclists to use this route for the first time.
- Continued delivery of the South Reading MRT to provide dedicated bus priority on the A33 corridor, enabling buses to avoid traffic congestion on this major growth corridor between Mere oak Park and Ride site and the town centre.
- Continued delivery of the National Cycle Network (NCN) Route 422 scheme to provide a new east-west cycle route through the town, helping to deliver a comprehensive joined-up cycle network by linking to other local and national cycle routes.
- Progressing delivery of a new railway station at Green Park and the indicative allocation of funding for a major upgrade of passenger facilities at Reading West Station (subject to approval of the scheme business case by the LEP in November).
- As mentioned earlier continuing to press the case for a Third Reading Bridge, additional park and ride sites, and projects to encourage more reliable public transport, cycling and walking, and to future proof new infrastructure so as to be able to adapt to fast changing and cleaner technologies.

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

15 JULY 2019

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 9

Stuart Kinton to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:

Reducing personal car use

Since Reading Borough Council declared a climate emergency in February 2019 what actions have been taken to encourage Reading residents to transition away from personal car use and towards public transportation?

REPLY by Councillor Page (Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport):

I thank Mr Kinton for his question.

Tackling air pollution by providing clean and sustainable transport alternatives is a central theme of the Council's commitment to creating a 'Zero Carbon' Reading by 2030. Our track record is very strong.

As I explained in my previous answers we have provided quick and reliable bus routes, new Park and Ride facilities, new transport interchanges at Reading Station, new cycle routes and Christchurch Bridge, the new pedestrian and cycle bridge over the Thames.

In Reading Buses, we also own one of the cleanest bus fleets in the UK and plans for a new railway station at Green Park are well developed. The Council's major transport schemes have an overall objective of promoting use of sustainable transport, walking and cycling.

Significant milestones which have been achieved since February include:

- Delivery of the Cow Lane Bridges highway scheme, opening up the opportunity for pedestrians and cyclists to use this route for the first time.
- Continued delivery of the South Reading MRT to provide dedicated bus priority on the A33 corridor, enabling buses to avoid traffic congestion on this major growth corridor between Mere oak P&R site and the town centre.
- Continued delivery of the National Cycle Network (NCN) Route 422 scheme to provide a new east-west cycle route through the town, helping to deliver a comprehensive joined-up cycle network by linking to other local and national cycle routes. LCWIP

- Progression of plans for a new railway station at Green Park and indicative allocation of funding for a major upgrade of passenger facilities at Reading West Station (subject to approval of the scheme business case by the LEP in November).
- As mentioned earlier continuing to press the case for a Third Reading Bridge, additional park and ride sites, and projects to encourage more reliable public transport, cycling and walking, and to future proof new infrastructure so as to be able to adapt to fast changing and cleaner technologies.

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

15 JULY 2019

PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 10

Tony Warrell to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation:

Eldon Square Gardens

I am looking for advice on how best to succeed in my endeavours to improve the upkeep and regular maintenance of the Grade 2 Eldon Square Gardens, yet without success since 2005. Placing questions with Council has for no good reason been unsuccessful after the Gardens' redesigning ten years or so. None of the local councillors have ever acknowledged there is a problem on their patch. So I will persist to challenge the Council yet again by listing improvements that should be carried out:

- Replace all the missing waste bins
- Replace the missing bench seat in the north east corner
- Replace the three very tired bench seats on the south side
- Remove all the ground ivy, nettles and borage
- Remove all the exposed litter round the garden periphery
- Remove all the street leaf debris (before patching the road)
- Reinstall flower beds

In conjunction with the similar problems at the central road reservation at Kings Road / Queens Road where questions were put by me to Council I make further requests.

- Replacement of the refuse bin & bench seat (street furniture)
- Reinstall a lot of brick work
- Improve the tree maintenance

It was agreed at Council by Councillor Gittings on the 22/3/16 that after my request, money from Section 106 funding would be used for the necessary renovation.

Will the Council agree to fulfil their promises on these outstanding issues?

REPLY by Councillor Rowland (Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation):

Thank you for your question Mr Warrell, and thank you for highlighting the very special King George V Garden which is the "true heart" of the Eldon Square Conservation Area. The Council continues to maintain King George V Gardens within the budget available to do so. In addition to the routine schedules of grass cutting and litter picking, maintenance has recently included extensive crown reduction/pollarding to the mature lime trees on the northern and north east

boundary of the Gardens and cleaning of the statue of the 1st Marquess of Reading, Rufus Isaacs. Further tree maintenance is programmed for the near future to lift the lower branches and remove basal growth.

Additionally, as the Lead Member for Heritage, I wish to also highlight that as part of the Eldon Square Conservation Area, the Council has a duty to preserve and enhance the character of their conservation areas where possible. However, Council budgets are constrained, as we all are aware. The Council's Parks Team are in dialogue with a local Community Group ('Eldon Square Gardens Community Group') and have agreed in principle to accept their support with future maintenance of the flower beds and shrubs and replanting of the beds over time. We expect this agreement to be formalised in the near future.

The group has several commendable aims which are:

- To protect, conserve and enhance the biodiversity of Eldon Square Gardens
- To position Eldon Square gardens at the heart of the local community
- To protect, conserve, and enhance the heritage of Eldon Square

Additionally, the importance of the listed garden is being highlighted in a re-writing of the Conservation Area appraisal by the Conservation Area Advisory Committee (CAAC), which I understand is proceeding slowly due to resourcing and volunteer constraints. The conclusion of any re-write of an appraisal will always include goals and actions for improvements which are frequently shared amongst Councils and community groups. All of this good will indeed presents an excellent opportunity for some joined up work amongst these groups and perhaps yourself, too.

Together with the Eldon Square Gardens Community Group, the Council recognises that the King George V Gardens is an historic and traditional garden, requiring more specialised horticultural care. The Council is currently drawing up an agreement with the Group for volunteer maintenance of the soft landscaping (excluding the trees). Some limited Section 106 monies are available for the Gardens to support the programme of improvements that will be developed in conjunction with the local community over the coming months. Many of your concerns are already noted for this action.

The planting in the central reservation at along the King's and Queen's Roads is maintained by the Parks Team and is in good condition. The litter and fly tipping has been cleared, and the bin is on the schedule for replacement. Thank you for pointing out the broken brickwork to us again. The s106 to which Cllr Gittings referred related to Queen's Road, but not King's Road. We have reported the damaged brickwork on the King's Road planter to the Highways Team, and they will arrange repair.