

**(C) QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS**

**1. Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:  
The Reading area's Performance on Climate Change**

Friends of the Earth say that "The Reading area's performance on climate change is poor compared to other similar local authority areas." Does the Lead Councillor agree with the methodology used to come to this conclusion ?

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

I thank Cllr White for his question.

Whilst the Council appreciate what Friends of the Earth are attempting to do with their campaign, the Council does not agree with their methodology. The most comprehensive data set which exists on cutting carbon emissions is that produced by the Government. This data is derived from actual energy and fossil fuel consumption information.

The Friends of the Earth data is an attempt to compile a score based on a series of arbitrary studies and data sets which were, in our view, not designed to be used in that way and are in most cases incomplete, very dated and/or incomparable.

The local 'Reading Friends of the Earth' group have been in touch with the Council to say that they also had concerns about this exercise. To quote:

"The National and local Friends of the Earth groups are aware of aspects of the work which need to be updated and currently seem unfair"

It is interesting to note that using the FoE scoring system, Reading was shown to be out-performing Bristol on two out of 5 criteria and was very similar on a third. Despite this Bristol was shown to be in the top quartile of local authorities with a score of 80% and Reading was in the bottom quartile with 52%.

However, when using the Government data, and ranked against other UK local authorities emission reductions, Reading is the 9<sup>th</sup> best performer in the UK, compared to Bristol which ranked 51<sup>st</sup>.

In their methodology, Friends of the Earth state:

We have not used these to rank local authorities as the government makes clear that the data is not robust as necessary for such purposes.

In our view the methodology used by the Government is much more accurate and comparable than the data produced by Friends of the Earth.

RBC welcomes the good work that Friends of the Earth does to raise awareness and bring forward climate change action, but we would question whether a new tool of this nature is a good use of their resources. This is especially so when you consider that there is much more robust and verified data available to them. It has the potential to cause confusion with the public and undermine real progress in reducing carbon emissions.

**2. Councillor Josh Williams to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation:  
Inclusive Play Areas**

Green Councillors are pleased to see a renewed focus within the Council on play areas that are inclusive for all. Work being done in the Access and Disabilities Group and especially the new Accessible Playgrounds Group will inform and support the Council as it strives to set new standards of play for all its children.

Will the Lead Councillor take this opportunity to pledge that there will always be accessible, inclusive play equipment in Palmer Park, and that there will always be a play area located at or near the ERAPA play area, for the community of Newtown and east Reading?

**REPLY** by Councillor Rowland Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation.

Since the passage of the Disabilities and Discrimination Act, 1995, and its later replacement with the Equality Act, 2010, any new investment in play by the Council has sought to make play areas increasingly accessible to children and their carers of all abilities.

The Council's commitment to inclusiveness is evident in the focus of the Council's planning for play, and in the fact that £1.6 million capital has been made available to invest in new play equipment and fully accessible safety surfacing for children of all abilities over the next three years, as part of a five-year programme of refreshment and replacement. The recently created Accessible Playgrounds Task and Finish Group (part of the Disabled Access Working Group) plays a key role in this work.

The Council strives to provide excellent and safe play facilities for all its residents and visitors. The Council is also mindful that provision is dependent on resources being available both for new investment and for maintenance of existing equipment.

Palmer Park is one of Reading's most important destination parks, along with Prospect Park, and as I have advised Councillor Williams previously, I am supportive of the role that the former ERAPA site fulfils as a local play area in addition to its attributes for those with accessibility needs. I am continuing to engage with local residents both about keeping the area open, and about finding sources of funding from a range of public and private sources, to explore options to replace the equipment there for children of all backgrounds and abilities.

**3. Councillor Grashoff to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation:**  
**Leisure Needs of Residents**

There are many thousands of families living in and around Reading and with the increase in house building in the area these numbers will only increase. As an active member of a number of social media groups I see time and again people asking for recommendations on what they can do with their families in the area. Reading is well served for culture with the Abbey, our theatres, museums as well as various outdoor events coordinated by organisations such as Nature Nurture. However on a daily basis if you just want a bit of fun over a game of 10 pin bowling, you want to try out ice skating, you want to go cycling through the woods or visit educational, interactive learning centres or you want to have a splash around in a fun and child friendly swimming pool you have to go out of Reading to towns such as Bracknell, Windsor, Newbury or even Guildford.

All this money is being drained out of the Reading economy on a weekly basis which seems like an incredible waste to me, not to mention the fact that most of these families need to use their cars to get to their chosen destination so from the perspective of sustainability it's also not ideal. Given that there is so much housing development going on in Reading to facilitate our ever growing population what provisions are the Council making to ensure that the leisure needs of existing and future residents are being met locally, allowing people to access leisure in a more

sustainable way and that the money that we are currently losing to neighbouring authorities can instead be fed back into the local economy?

**REPLY** by Councillor Rowland Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation.

The Council's Local Plan, adopted as part of this evening's agenda sets out the Council's development needs such as housing and employment for the future as well as protecting and enhancing our town in relation to open space, heritage and our natural environment. The policies of the plan also seek to protect leisure facilities from their loss to an alternative use.

Demand for land in Reading is high and the Council gladly supports a local leisure offer through the use of its own leisure centres and parks. However, it does not have the means to step into the market place and provide commercial facilities such as ice rinks and 10 pin bowling facilities.

Councillor Grashoff will be aware that as part of the Madejski stadium development a regional conference centre and ice rink has been granted planning permission. More recently a planning application has been approved for a new cinema and other 'leisure use' at Broad Street Mall. While, as always, we are in hands of the landowners and the market as to whether these facilities will indeed be realised, the positive determination of these proposals shows the Council's support and welcoming of the provision of additional leisure facilities.

I would endorse Councillor Grashoff's comments related to the cultural offer in our town, recently enhanced by the restoration and opening of the Abbey Ruins and the overall Abbey Quarter Area improvements with the establishment of a new BID for the area.

Finally, and referring to Cllr Hoskin's portfolio, in the near future proposals for our leisure facilities including a replacement for Rivermead and new swimming facilities at Palmer Park will be presented to Policy Committee. I would expect those proposals to drive up participation from local residents that may have felt compelled to travel further afield for certain activities in recent years.

**4. Councillor Robinson to ask the Leader of the Council:  
Arthur Hill Site**

During the last Policy Meeting held on the 26<sup>th</sup> September the decision was made to appropriate the Arthur Hill Swimming Pool site to the Councils Housing Revenue Account with a view to developing the site for Key Workers Housing.

This decision was taken, despite the pleas of opposition Councillors to defer to full Council, following the presentation of a petition signed by 1800 local residents at that meeting - warranting the matter over the Arthur Hill Site's future to be debated at the next full Council meeting, and thus honouring democracy by giving the people and all of Reading's Councillors a voice on the matter.

At the Policy meeting we were advised that the estimated costs of the appropriation and development for the 15 planned units would be in the region of £4.55 million. Which equates to £303,000 per apartment. Given the size of the plot these apartments would not be regarded as spacious dwellings, the location does not afford good views from the windows, in fact natural light would be an issue for those closer to the Kings Road given the proximity of the apartments block adjacent to the site. Furthermore the proposed development of the site is estimated to take at least 2 years during which time, it is not beyond the realms of possibility that the estimated costs could rise.

Whilst I agree that the proposed use is laudable in terms of providing homes for key workers in Reading the facts are that key workers need affordable housing now.

There are plenty of 2 bedroomed apartments already on the market providing more spacious accommodation or being built at costs certainly below the estimated figures mentioned. My question is would it not be a better use of public funds to look at these options for purchase which would provide better value for money and enable key workers to move in in a matter of months as opposed to years ?

**REPLY** by Councillor Brock Leader of the Council.

Firstly, I just wanted to say that I'm delighted to have had the support of Cllr Robinson's Group Leader, Cllr Skeats, for our decision to develop the Arthur Hill site for key worker housing at the Policy Committee meeting on 26<sup>th</sup> September.

A high level appraisal of the Arthur Hill site indicates that it will support 15 flats; a mix of 1 and 2 bedroom properties. The design process is underway and as a minimum would ensure that the flats complied with national space standards and that they had access to natural light.

In order for the Council's Housing Revenue Account (HRA) to acquire properties on the market or to build new properties, the HRA requires a level of subsidy through Right to Buy receipts, Section 106 receipts or Government Grant to ensure that the borrowing required is at a level that means that the purchase or developed scheme is cost neutral to the HRA.

The Council has a current programme of acquisitions where properties are bought from the open market; in order to do so Right to Buy receipts are used to subsidise the purchase. Right to Buy receipts can only be used to subsidise up to 30% of the purchase price which limits the types and cost of properties that can be bought. As a result the focus has been mainly on buying back flats on Council estates that were previously sold under Right to Buy as this is the most cost effective way of recycling the receipts. 27 properties have been acquired since 2015. Perhaps Cllr Robinson might think about lobbying his own party to ensure that the Tory pledge of 'one-to-one replacement' of Council houses sold under Right to Buy is actually possible rather than the reality of local authorities being tied up in red tape?

It is possible to use s.106 receipts to subsidise purchasing properties on the open market and although this would enable the Council to buy more expensive properties s.106 receipts are finite and need to be used carefully. The council has committed to a local authority new council house build programme and s.106 receipts have been targeted for best effect on subsidising this extensive build programme.

Developing properties within the HRA enables the Council to have full ownership of the properties as opposed to becoming a leaseholder in a private development. Becoming a leaseholder would create a complex arrangement around the management of such stock and leave the Council exposed to future costs in terms of planned maintenance arrangements over which it would have no control. Moreover, the Council's development will preserve the locally listed frontage of the building and lead to an exemplar development in accordance with our new Local Plan, especially in terms of our environmental commitments. The scheme is fully affordable within the HRA business case.

As regards key workers, the Council has traditionally been able to assist key workers over the years through affordable housing contributions or shared ownership properties through registered providers. Further units of shared ownership accommodation will become available through the affordable housing programme over the next few years as well as a development of new Build to Rent homes which will be let at rent levels that key workers will be able to afford.

Developing the Arthur Hill site enables the Council for the first time to bring forward units of Council owned homes specifically for key workers.

