

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

Field Road & Coley District Phase 2 Project

Notes of Public Meeting

**held on 27th July 2006, 6.30pm to 8pm
in Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Reading**

The meeting was chaired by Cllr Paul Gittings.

Presentations to the meeting were made by: Ian Johnson, Reading Borough Council
Clare Hopkins, Wardell Armstrong
Clive Edmonds, Peter Brett Associates
Stuart Chandler, Peter Brett Associates

About 60 people attended this meeting. People were asked to sign register on arrival.

1. Introduction

Cllr Gittings welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Project background

Ian Johnson, the Client Project Manager briefly explained that the Phase 2 project followed on from the earlier Phase 1 project in Field Road. The Phase 2 project concerns three areas in central Reading known as Zones A, B and Be. He described who the various project team members were and that the project had been funded by English Partnerships under their Land Stabilisation Programme.

3. Project Objectives

Clare Hopkins, the Project Management Consultant set out the objectives for Phase 2. These were to determine whether mineworkings were close to or beneath properties in Zones A, B and Be and to determine which properties were "at risk" from mineworkings. She briefly described the various stages of the Phase 2 project.

4. Investigations

Peter Brett Associates (PBA) were the Geotechnical Engineers for the Phase 2 project. First Stuart Chandler explained the various methods of site investigation used in Phase 2 and presented statistics on these investigations. He explained how PBA undertook their interpretations from the available site data. Clive Edmonds then explained how PBA had categorised the different types of mining anomalies detected during the Phase 2 project and how PBA had categorised the level of risk to the properties.

5. The Way Forward

Ian Johnson explained that the project findings had been presented to RBC Cabinet and that the Plans and Tables are available on the website (www.reading.gov.uk/fieldroad) and these are on display in the Civic Centre. Copies can be provided on request.

RBC needs to secure funding for the next phases of this project. It is envisaged that the next phase will involve additional site investigations, targeted on the “at risk” areas which have been identified in Phase 2. Following these further investigations, further funding will then be sought for any land stabilisation works necessary.

First of all RBC will seek to get the current Derelict Land Clearance Order (DLCO) extended to include all the properties in the Phase 2 area.

Funding for EP’s Land Stabilisation programme have changed since the start of Phase 2. There are now additional requirements. RBC’s spending on its own properties will count in project’s favour for the next funding application to EP. If there is a shortfall in funding RBC will need to find other ways to cover the costs and it may be necessary to prioritise the order of carrying out the next stages of work

6. Frequently Asked Questions

Ian Johnson went through a number of FAQs. These were:

Is my property at risk of collapse?

The properties at risk from mineworkings have been explained by PBA in the presentation and can see which these are from the plans. The red properties (category one) are the properties most at risk. In the case of 127 Castle Hill their Insurers are dealing with this. For RBC’s property on Coley Place, RBC have evacuated the building and have carried out further investigations and should be starting stabilisation works shortly.

What should I do if cracks start appearing in my house?

You should notify your Insurers first. Cracking can be due to lots of causes, not just subsidence from mineworkings. RBC Building Control can also be contacted for advice.

What does the DLCO mean for my property?

The DLCO is a means for obtaining funding. It does not mean we are going to start clearing the area with bulldozers.

Will RBC be monitoring the situation?

Yes, RBC officers will continue to monitor the situation. If anyone has concerns about their property they should contact Building Control initially.

How long will it take to stabilise the mines?

This depends on how long it takes to get funding and on what the additional site investigations reveal.

What about the roads – are they affected?

Certain parts of the roads have been identified on the Plans as being “at risk”. This is a matter for RBC Highways who are in discussions with the engineers. It may be necessary to put parking restrictions or weight restrictions in place. However nothing has been decided yet. RBC Highways will let people know when decisions have been made.

7. Question & Answer Session

Cllr Gittings invited questions from the floor. Queries were dealt with by the panel.

Lady from 37 Jesse Terrace asked if checks for chalk mines were made before planning permissions were given.

Ian Johnson explained that this is only done when there is direct evidence of mining anomalies. In these cases special foundations may be required. He understood that when the bungalows in question were constructed they had special foundations due to poor ground conditions.

Mr J Doak from 17 Field Road asked of the blue colour for a property meant it was affected and how had this been assessed for blocks of properties and he presumed this would not be a high priority for the next phase of investigations

Clive Edmonds explained that for blocks of properties where there were mining anomalies at the north and south ends but where the site investigations for the rest of the block of properties then the properties are at low risk. They are low risk because we cannot be certain at this stage where the mine workings might be in terms of the individual walls between the properties – the investigations only went around the perimeter of the block.

Stuart Chandler explained that within each of the risk categories there were higher and lower limits.

Clive Edmonds suggested that with further investigations it was likely that many of the blue properties would become green.

Mrs W Clarke from 14 Deepdene Close expressed concern that the information on the Phase 2 reports went to the press before the residents. She also wanted to know why no letters had been sent out to individual residents telling them about their property.

Clare Hopkins explained that it was never intended that individual letters would be sent out to individual householders informing them of the outcome for their property. The information was to be put on the RBC website and displayed in the Civic Centre. The only householders receiving letters were those where there was an immediate concern about the property being affected by open mineworkings (like 127 Castle Hill and Coley Place).

Clare Hopkins expressed regret that information on the project had been in the press before this public meeting and before the report findings were put on the website. This had not been the Project team's intention. It was necessary for a Report to go to RBC Cabinet explaining to Councillors what had been found and suggesting the way forward to help resolve the situation before being made public – that is part of the procedures and she understood that the press had picked up the information at the Cabinet Briefing. She was disappointed that the press had published the information at that stage as that was not normally how things were done.

Cllr Gittings agreed that the process of taking the report to Cabinet did take time. He suggested people contact their Councillor (himself or Cllrs Terry Byrne, Catherine Wilton, June Orton, Tony Page or Bet Tickner) if they needed help getting the project information.

Gentleman from Dover Street noted that the Plans showed he had a mining anomaly identified in his back garden and his house was coloured yellow which meant it was "at risk". He wondered if the next stage of investigations would mean drilling holes inside his house?

Stuart Chandler explained that as an engineer he would want to find out exactly where the mine might be and that could mean going inside the house. The extent of the future investigations would however depend on what funding was available. Equipment that is available nowadays meant that investigations could be carried out inside houses more easily and that people did not have to leave their homes but just lose the use of the downstairs rooms for a day or so.

Shaun Stuart from 127 Castle Hill pointed out that there were mine anomalies in the rear of his property, it was coloured red and most people probably knew that the property had confirmed open mineworkings near it. He wondered what was going to happen about stabilising his property.

Stuart Chandler explained that without further funding becoming available to RBC there was no other mechanism for individual people to get this funding.

Ian Johnson pointed out that even though the Phase 2 investigations have found the mineworkings it will still be necessary to do further investigations before starting any stabilisation works. Will need to find out where the mineworkings go and build up a 3-d picture before it is possible to design the stabilisation works and calculate the costs. RBC would want to expedite the future investigations and stabilisation work so that could proceed smoothly from one to the other. RBC will be talking with English Partnerships about this.

Shaun Stuart pointed out that the residents in 127 Castle Hill were very concerned and wondered what they could do about matters.

Stuart Chandler assumed that their Insurance policies would sort this out since the property is suffering from structural damage. He suggested that Mr Stuart talked with team after the meeting.

Peter Stark from 13 Field Road asked if there had been any problems with the stabilisation works done for Phase 1.

Clare Hopkins said that there had been none so far.

Clive Edmonds pointed out that the techniques used for Phase 1 stabilisation had worked well and an excellent job had been done. The techniques are used throughout the country very successfully.

Cllr Gittings said that the Phase 1 area was probably the most stable area of Reading now.

Mr Gayford From Kent commented that adits had been found during Phase 1 and he wondered if any mine adits or shafts been located during the Phase 2 investigations.

Stuart Chandler said that one may have been found in Phase 2 but this was not certain.

Sarah Butcher from 36 Field Road pointed out that in Phase 1 the investigations were done first and then the stabilisation works and this took a long time. She wondered about how practical it would be to do the investigations and the stabilisation works concurrently.

Clive Edmonds pointed out that it is necessary to map out the mineworkings before you can work out what is needed for the stabilisation. This is also necessary to cost the works to get funding.

Clare Hopkins said that ideally the project team would prefer to do the targeted site investigations and then follow on quickly with the stabilisations because it is less disruptive but we would have to follow the funding requirements. RBC will be discussing this sort of approach with English Partnerships

In a follow up question, Sarah asked what RBC are doing to get the funding for the next phases.

Ian Johnson said that initially RBC will try to get the DLCO extended.

In a further question, Sarah pointed out that it took two years to get funding for Phase 2 and then another two years to do the investigations. She felt it could be 6 to 10 years before matters are sorted. She wondered if people could sort things out for themselves

Clare Hopkins pointed out that there is no reason why individuals cannot carry out their own investigations and stabilisation works, but it is costly, so you might need to win the lottery first. The funding from English Partnerships is only possible through RBC.

Ian Johnson commented that because we have already done Phase 2 English Partnerships have some idea of what may be involved with the next phases. RBC will be having a lot of discussions with EP. To secure the funding RBC will need to give EP justifications for the funding allocations and show value for money. RBC cannot control the outcome and EP are funding other projects besides this in Reading. He commented that EP regard the Phase 2 project as a model project which has been carried out within budget.

Finally, Sarah drew attention to the fact that the road junction near her property is steep and the condition of the road is poor. Cars often ground and some have crashed into her house. She was concerned about the effect of the vibrations on this part of the road now that it has been identified as being "at risk" from mineworkings.

Ian Johnson said this was a matter for RBC Highways Section and that he would speak with them to let them know of her concerns.

Cllr Gittings suggested that people concerned about this should also contact him.

Mr Hunter, 46 Lower Field Road asked what information about Phase 2 would be going to local estate agents. He is selling his house and although there had been some interest the sale had fallen through because buyers were concerned about it being in an area of mineworkings. He is now renting the property but wonders if RBC will be giving estate agents the information from Phase 2.

Ian Johnson said that the Plans and other information is on the website and therefore available to anyone which includes estate agents. When people carry out searches when buying houses this information will show up. People can tell prospective buyers to look at the website or show them a copy of the Plan.

Mr Norris from 31 Jesse Terrace wondered what the dots and crosses were on the Plans.

Stuart Chandler explained that they were the positions of the probe holes and the boreholes from the site investigations.

Ms Harrison, 36 Lower Field Road commented that the organisation of the Phase 2 project had been fantastic with good communications all the time, so she was concerned that the report was not made available in April 2006 as had been indicated at the last public meeting.

Clare Hopkins accepted this was similar to the point made earlier about the press. It was a fair comment. Procedures had meant that the report went to RBC Cabinet first and this was in July. The project information had then gone straight onto the website. Anyone who had phoned RBC Helpline to find out about the report would have been told about the delay until July.

Mr Drayton from 31 Field Road commented that after the flats at Coley Place had been boarded up there have been a lot of undesirables pitching tents in the garden.

Cllr Gittings said that RBC are aware of this. People can contact the police if they are concerned.

Ian Johnson pointed out that notice has been served on the squatters to leave.

Paul Devall from 124 castle Hill asked if any investigations were done in Castle Hill and whether it was at risk from mineworkings.

Clare Hopkins confirmed that no investigations were done in Castle Hill road during Phase 2.

Stuart Chandler pointed out that mineworkings were found near properties on both sides of Castle Hill but the evidence showed that there were none crossing under the road. Castle Hill was a main thoroughfare during the time when the mines were being worked so it is likely that the mines were located either side of the road at the time.

Ms Manzo from 7 Deepdene Close accepted that the information was available to people looking to buy houses in the area but she felt that anyone reading the information on the Plan keys would still think that properties coloured blue were at risk and yet everything she had heard tonight suggested they were not. She wondered if the terminology on the Plans could make this clearer.

Stuart chandler drew attention to the fact that the Tables included in the website provided more detailed explanations. He suggested that people explain matters to buyers themselves.

Ian Johnson commented that if RBC are asked about this they will direct people to read all the information and they will help explain matters if necessary. The Notes of this meeting will also be on the website, so can refer people to these as well.

In follow up question Ms Manzo asked if the DLCO would affect property values.

Ian Johnson explained that the DLCO information does come up when people do property searches. He commented that everyone expected the DLCO for the Phase 1 area to affect property prices but it didn't once the works had been completed.

Cllr Gittings commented that DLCO is a terrible phrase but it is necessary to have this for funding reasons.

8. Close

Cllr Gittings thanked everyone for their attention. He complimented the panel on the presentations and hoped that everyone had found the information and the Question & Answer session helpful.