1. Francis Jakeman to ask the Leader of the Council:

Unity Community Sports Association/Three Cooks

Last Autumn, the Unity Community Sports Association and The Three Cooks received an instruction to vacate the Cintra Park Sports Pavilion as the Council planned to pass the use of the building on to a local school.

This decision appears to have been made without any reference to, or consultation with, those people who use the building to provide sports training to young people and free lunches and snacks for the elderly.

Due to the public outcry against withdrawing the use of the sports pavilion to help disaffected young people and provide a safe, friendly environment to help end loneliness in elderly people, have you now reconsidered and decided to allow the Unity Community Sports Association and The Three Cooks to continue using the premises?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council)

Firstly, the decision as to whether or not to renew a lease to Unity has not formally been taken. However, officers informed Unity of the Council’s intentions in the Autumn of last year. The Council’s intention not to renew the lease, as explained to Unity, was based on a number of concerns relating to health and safety, financial management and Unity’s growing debt to the Council. Further to this, the Council’s Head of Economic & Cultural Development wrote to the Chair of Unity on the 12th of December 2014 setting out the Council’s concerns, the rationale for recommending that Unity’s lease not be renewed and requesting any further representations. The Council received a response to this consultation on the 10th February 2015 that needs further consideration and I anticipate a decision on the matter to be taken at a future public committee meeting in due course.

However, to set the record straight I would like to state that over the last two to three years, the amount of money that Unity owes the Council for use of facilities such as sports pitches and the pavilion has continued to grow (and is now in excess of £12,000). The Council has made several arrangements for Unity to both reduce their costs and enable them to raise income from managing the facilities at Cintra Park. For example, the Council has given control over sports pitches to Unity at a significantly lower cost than a hire fee and given them the ability to rent to third parties to generate income; Unity have only been charged a peppercorn fee for the lease of the building; and the Council have been undertaking planned preventative maintenance within the pavilion at no charge.

Despite these numerous attempts by the Council to guide and support Unity to provide a safe and financially sustainable service, the level of debt has continued to rise and promises of payment remain unfulfilled. At a time of significant financial constraint it is not an appropriate use of council taxpayers’ money to continue to allow this debt to grow even further and it is not fair on other groups who do pay what is owed.

This is why we have been looking for an alternative arrangement but this does not mean that Unity cannot continue to operate from the building. We have explicitly said to Unity that
we would wish them to continue with their community sports activities under a sub-letting arrangement, but an organisation with appropriate capacity and management skills need to oversee the operation of the facilities in a more efficient, safe and cost-effective way. This would also greatly reduce the financial burden and management responsibility on Unity so that they can focus on community use of the sports facilities.

With regard to The Three Cooks’ use of the building, that commenced in May of last year, this was an arrangement entered into directly with Unity, initially without the Council’s knowledge, and certainly without the Council’s permission as the landlord as required under the terms of Unity’s lease. Whilst we acknowledge that the work of The Three Cooks in providing meals for the elderly is valued they have no formal basis for operating from the Pavilion and I have asked officers to work with them to find alternative accommodation.

So in summary we believe that Unity can continue to provide a range of sports and social activity at Cintra Park and we are working hard to find alternative accommodation for The Three Cooks.

2. Mary Waite to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:

St Martins Precinct

Can the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport provide assurances that, following the recent grant of planning permission, the Section 106 payments from the St. Martins Precinct regeneration will be directed to Caversham highways and environmental improvement schemes?

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

I thank Mrs Waite for a timely question and the opportunity to correct some misleading assertions that have been circulating.

The planning application for extensions and alterations to St. Martins Precinct was approved by the Planning Applications Committee at its meeting on 11th February. The development proposes significant public realm and environmental improvements including tree planting, a new public square, improvements to the landscaping of the existing precinct space and improved routes through and around the site. The approval is subject to the signing of a Section 106 planning agreement and detailed planning conditions.

The Section 106 agreement secures over £430k towards off-site highway works which will be used on schemes identified within the Northern Area Action Plan of the current Local Transport Plan. This covers the area of Reading north of the River Thames. In relation to off-site environmental improvements, the Section 106 agreement has also secured over £96k towards open space, sport and recreation infrastructure as set out in the Thames Parks Plan and a pedestrian route between the new public square and Church Street, to be provided and maintained free of obstructions accessible to all members of the public during Waitrose (and any subsequent occupier) opening hours. There will also be ‘replacement’ public toilets provided and maintained by Waitrose.

In addition I am pleased that £61k has been secured towards the provision of education infrastructure within the north education area of the Borough, as well as an Employment Skills and Training Plan for the construction and end user phases of the development.
In January Cllr Davies and I met with CADRA to be briefed on their commendable work to develop a Vision for Caversham. Arising from the meeting I invited CADRA to make a presentation to next month’s meeting of the Transport Users Forum on the results of their own consultation on a future Vision for the Caversham area.

Any highway and environmental schemes put forward for the Lower Caversham area will be subject to full prior public consultation with the public and the various community groups within the Caversham area. Schemes commanding local support will then be taken for approval to the Traffic Management Sub Committee and any other relevant Committee.

On this basis, I can reassure residents that the contributions secured by the Council from the St Martin’s re-development will be used appropriately effectively.

3. Moira Gomes to ask the Lead Councillor for Housing:

**Bedroom Tax**

In April 2015 the bedroom tax will have been in place for 3 years. Could the Lead Councillor for Housing please tell me:

How many people in Reading are currently subject to the bedroom tax?

How many people have fallen into rent arrears or associated financial difficulties as a result of the bedroom tax?

How many bedrooms in social houses have been freed up by the bedroom tax?

**REPLY by Councillor Davies (Lead Councillor for Housing)**

The total number of households in Reading currently subject to the bedroom tax is 693. This means that hundreds of residents of this town including many people with disabilities and health conditions are struggling even more to make ends meet.

Nationally a group of disabled tenants are challenging the bedroom tax in the Supreme Court which would take many people out of this cruel tax and Labour have pledged to abolish the bedroom tax altogether meaning that no one in Reading would be subject to it within weeks of a Labour government being elected.

As of 1st February 2015, 416 RBC properties were affected by the bedroom tax and out of these properties 106 households were in arrears. To put this in perspective, 60 of these were in receipt of part HB and between 2-3 weeks in arrears. The remaining 46 had higher levels of arrears.

40 tenants who were under-occupiers and under pensionable age have moved since 2013. However, it is not possible to provide definite information as to how many would have been claiming Housing Benefit and therefore been affected by the bedroom tax. This small number demonstrates the unrealistic nature of the bedroom tax - for many people it is simply not feasible to move to smaller properties, both due to simply the shortage of suitable housing - which this government has made worse with its disastrous approach to affordable housing, family circumstances and because many people with disabilities actually require an additional room.