

AGENDA ITEM NO. 6

(C) QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

1. Councillor Hacker to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport and Consumer Services: Year of Culture

Could the Lead Councillor please update me on plans to celebrate a Year of Culture in Reading in 2016 and what role the Council is playing in making this happen?

RESPONSE by Councillor Gittings (Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport and Consumer Services):

Thank you Councillor Hacker and I would be delighted to provide an update on the widespread support for the Year of Culture in Reading in 2016 and the excellent progress being made.

As you are aware our consultation about a culture and leisure strategy for Reading over last summer generated a huge amount of energy, enthusiasm and commitment. What emerged from this enthusiasm and the acknowledged need to raise the profile of cultural activity in the town was the concept of a 'Year of Culture' for Reading, owned and delivered by local people and organisations under the umbrella of the Cultural Partnership and championed by the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP).

This is very much a partnership approach and a Cultural Life Working Group (CLWG) has been established from members of the LSP, Cultural Partnership board and most importantly the vibrant community of arts, cultural and heritage organisations. This partnership approach is fully reflected by a Cultural Life event that was held in January of this year organised by Readipop. This event was attended by over 50 people from a diverse range of organisations and was hosted by Reading University with support from the Council. The event focused on further planning and development of proposals for the Year of Culture by interested local groups. The event has helped strengthen networks within and across the cultural sector and provided a strong basis for further involvement of grass roots organisations and the development of an exciting programme of activity for the Year of Culture.

In this context the role of the Council has been one of facilitation and support, not least in its continuing leadership role for the Cultural Partnership. The Council is providing over £60,000 to help support delivery of the Year of Culture, £40,000 for the commissioning of a delivery partner to plan and co-ordinate activity, and £24,000 for grants to local organisations to enable them to develop and deliver activities in 2016. The Cultural Partnership will oversee the use of these resources.

The Council has also worked with its arms-length economic development company, Reading UK CIC, who are taking a lead role in commissioning the proposed delivery partner with the support and expertise of Council arts development and theatre staff. This will help ensure that strong links are made with the programme of town centre events and activities through the course of the year and enable strong connections to the business community, reflecting the importance of culture and heritage to the overall success of the town.

The commissioning process for a delivery partner is well underway and interviews with shortlisted candidates will be held tomorrow (25th March) and I am confident that once we have this resource in place then progress will be further accelerated with ongoing support from the Council and the wide range of partners who are already on board.

2. Councillor Hacker to ask the Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport and Consumer Services: Abbey Ruins

Reading was successful in the first stage of its bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund to restore the Abbey Ruins and develop the historic Abbey Quarter. Could the Lead Councillor update me on progress towards receiving full funding for this vitally important work?

RESPONSE by Councillor Gittings (Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport and Consumer Services):

I would like to thank Cllr Hacker for drawing attention to this vital work to protect Reading's unique and important heritage. The Council secured a first stage development grant for the 'Reading Abbey Revealed' project from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) in June 2014. This initial grant allows the project team to develop the more detailed plans required for the second stage application that will be submitted to HLF on the 1st September 2015. The application is progressing on time and on budget, and related consultation activity has been very well received by local people.

The second stage application will be focused on the conservation of the Abbey Ruins and Gate and interpretation of the whole Abbey Quarter, including a new display at Reading Museum and a linked programme of events and activities. **This will support the Council's vision for the Abbey Quarter, pulling together its significant historic sites, buildings and structures under a single, co-ordinated approach.**

Two consultants have been appointed to work up the separate activity and interpretation plans required for the next application. The development of these plans involves extensive engagement with stakeholders and the public. An online survey about the project ran between 5 January and 5 February 2015 and was completed by 1,053 people who have been hugely positive and supportive. This was the most responses the consultants had ever received for an HLF project indicating the strength of local interest.

These results, as well as several stakeholders' interviews, focus groups and workshops, are being fed into the development of detailed proposals for activities and interpretation that will have widespread and inclusive benefits for local people. For example, linking to the Museum's volunteering programme which has impressed our consultant who described it as 'streets ahead of any organisation that they have dealt with in terms of the roles of volunteers and their personal development'.

In parallel our Architect team is working with English Heritage to finalise the detailed physical conservation programme for the Abbey Ruins and the Abbey Gate.

3. Councillor Rodda to ask the Lead Councillor for Health: Waiting Times at the Royal Berkshire Hospital

Could the lead member for health update the council on waiting times at the Royal Berks Hospital?

RESPONSE by Councillor Hoskin (Lead Councillor for Health):

Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust has been challenged by regulators over waiting time reporting and performance during 2014/15. The Trust identified a number of reporting issues in the summer of 2014 and was therefore granted a reporting holiday from the foundation trust regulator (Monitor) and NHS England until January 2015 while the waiting list was validated and reporting processes improved.

The Trust completed this validation exercise and recommenced reporting of waiting time data for January as planned. This showed that there were a number of long waits against the national standard of 18 weeks from referral to treatment. Performance is of particular concern in Ophthalmology where there is backlog of patients waiting for cataract procedures. The Trust and our local NHS Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) are working together to finalise a recovery plan and actions to ensure the national waiting time standards are achieved. Achievement of the 18 week standard across the Trust is planned by October 2015 and in Ophthalmology by December 2015.

The Trust Has also missed its A&E 95% 4 hour waiting time target over the 3 out of 4 winter months since November 2014 with results of:

- November - 96.29%
- December - 89.49%
- January - 92.60%
- February - 92.12%.

The Royal Berkshire Hospital is not alone is facing substantial challenges meeting performance targets in context of constrained funding and rising demand for services. NHS England has announced that it has missed this A&E target for every week of the 18 weeks since November 2014. We should note that these targets have been missed despite the government, in 2010, reducing the expected performance from 98% to 95%.

A&E performance is a crucial barometer of the state of the health and social care system. There are a number of reasons why our local and national NHS is struggling to meet expected performance.

Cuts to NHS Hospital Funding

There have been five years of cuts to the national NHS tariff prices that hospitals are given for NHS work performed. In the words of Chris Hopson, chief executive of NHS Providers, these cuts could lead to trusts unable to “guarantee safe and effective treatment.” An estimated 80% of England’s acute hospital trusts are either in deficit, in other words running at a loss, or at risk of being in the red by the end of this financial year. The RBH is one of those trusts in deficit.

Cuts to Social Care budgets

Massive government cuts to council budgets leading to substantial cuts to social care funding. The Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS) have found that councils in England have reduced their social care budgets by 26%, or £3.5billion over the past four years once inflation and demographic pressures are taken into account. A properly funded and effective social care system is essential for the survival of the NHS, impacting, as it does on a range of pressures from delayed discharges of care to increased emergency admissions and reduced preventative services.

The wasteful and incompetent £3 billion reorganisation of the NHS in England

In the most detailed analysis of the impact of the Health and Social Care Act 2012 the extremely respected and independent King’s Fund’s damning indictment said:

- “Three years were wasted on major organisational changes when the NHS should have been concentrating on growing financial and services pressures.”

- Left the structure of the NHS so “complex, confusing and bureaucratic” that the organisation of the service is “not fit for purpose.”
- “It seems likely that the massive organisational changes that resulted from the reforms contributed to widespread financial distress and failure to hit key targets for patient care.”

In the circumstance of the startling mismanagement of the NHS by our Tory-led government I think everyone on this council should be thankful for the hard work and dedication of NHS staff in Reading providing the best service they can in very difficult circumstances.

4. WITHDRAWN

5. Councillor Hacker to ask the Leader of the Council:
City Deal

Would the Leader of the Council update me with progress on the City Deal and the associated hub at Reading Central Library?

RESPONSE by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

The Thames Valley Berkshire City Deal (known as Elevate Berkshire) aims to address the skills gaps, unemployment and underemployment of 16-24 year olds. Overall the aim is to deliver employment and skills support for 4,500 young people across Berkshire.

In the last year, Elevate Me, the online planning tool for young people, has been rolled out across Berkshire Authorities, with all 6 websites now live. To supplement this, hubs have been set up in four of the local authorities, co-locating a variety of service providers, to offer employment support and training to young people across Berkshire. Elevate Berkshire has achieved its targets for the first year with 293 young people being supported into an apprenticeship.

Locally, the new Elevate Reading service will be co-located in Reading’s new community and learning hub at Reading Central library. The new service offer will be provided by partners such as Adviza, Reading UK CIC, Jobcentre Plus, New Directions and Reading Voluntary Action.

The library already offers a wide range of services to a diverse group of users and the addition of partners outlined above will create a vibrant and multi-functional community space, with the added benefit of employment support. Refurbishment work to the third floor of the library is now complete and the hub will be officially launched in early summer.

6. Councillor White to ask the Leader of the Council:
Reading University Living Wage Campaign

Part of the Council’s Living Wage policy which was initiated by a Green Party motion, amended and improved by Labour and which got cross-party support was the Council lobbying other organisations in Reading to get more of them to pay a Living Wage (currently £7.85 p per hour outside of London).

As Reading University Living Wage campaign says: "In 2013, a report into pay inequality in the UK Higher Education sector ranked the University of Reading as the 32nd most unequal of 113 institutions, and also listed it as being in the top-ten employers of minimum wage staff."

In Reading we have a housing crisis and high rents; in 2012 Reading was named as the ninth most expensive place to rent in Britain. Balancing London-like prices with a non-London student loan is a major issue for students and high rents are a problem for low-paid workers in general.

The Green Party stands shoulder to shoulder with students calling for Reading University to pay a Living Wage. Can the Leader of the Council send a clear message, on behalf of Reading residents, to Sir David Bell, Vice Chancellor at the University of Reading that paying a Living Wage will in the words of the campaign, "create a happier workforce, a better University and help create a fairer society"?

Can the Leader of the Council also provide a full list of employers in Reading who now pay a Living Wage, highlighting any recent adopters?

RESPONSE by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

Can I remind Cllr. White that this Labour Council has had its own Minimum Wage or "Living Wage" Policy for over 25 years as an employer. We have also signed the UNISON ethical care charter. Can I also remind him that it was the last Labour Government which introduced a national minimum wage and it is the Labour Party which is committed to raising the minimum wage to £8 per hour in the next parliament if it wins this general election. Can I suggest for once that instead of trying to claim this was originally a Green idea he actually acknowledges that this is a policy we agree about.

Similarly my colleague Matt Rodda has also been campaigning for the Living Wage at the University and I am happy to raise the issue with the Vice-Chancellor.

There is no requirement for a local register of employers' wage policies, regrettably, and the "Living Wage Foundation" only has a regional breakdown of those who have accreditation. I hope that a new government would make the "policing" of this a requirement so that those employers who exploit their workforce will be named.

**7. Councillor Tickner to ask the Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods:
First Stop Bus**

The First Stop Bus has been operating in Reading town centre since December last, helping to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all who enjoy a night out there. Would the Lead Cllr for Communities and Neighbourhoods Please update me on what outcomes are being achieved by this partnership project?

RESPONSE by Councillor Terry (Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods):

The First Stop Bus has been operating in the Town Centre since Dec 2013 and has now treated 475 people, providing help, support and medical treatment. In 71% of those cases the person would have required an ambulance to be called or needed a visit to A&E. This is estimated to have saved over £50,000. The Mustard Tree have been contracted to deliver the service until June 2016 and work on securing funding past that date has already begun.

The bus helps ease pressure on A&E, saves police time and generally provides a safe place to people in the town centre over the weekend. The service is a successful example of effective multi agency working involving South Central Ambulance Service, Thames Valley Police, Reading Street Pastors, Reading Local Strategic Partnership, Reading Business Improvement District, the Department of Communities and Local Government, the NHS and local Clinical Commissioning Groups.

The bus is also utilised to provide advice on health matters during the day, for example, providing a venue to deliver lessons on alcohol abuse and misuse to schools.

The positive contribution the bus can play to a host of health outcomes in the borough should not be underestimated and the council and other agencies will be working to ensure the bus remains a part of the town for the foreseeable future.

8. Councillor Livingston to ask the Leader of the Council:
Universal Credit

Please could the Leader of the Council update me on the present status of the progress of the national rollout of universal Credit and how it impacts on Reading?

RESPONSE by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

“Progress” would not be the word I would choose as it will be clear from the rest of my answer delay and chaos would be the most accurate description.

Universal Credit’s original timeline advised that all new claims for Housing Benefit would end from April 2014, and be replaced with Universal Credit. The introduction of Universal Credit was delayed and the original timeline wasn’t met. In order to get it underway it is now being introduced in stages.

It is being rolled out across the country to single claimants with no housing costs from February 2015. Reading has been told it must go live for these cases on 14 September 2015. We expect these to be very small numbers because they are the most straightforward cases.

New claims for Housing benefit are due to end between May 2016 and December 2017 rolling out on a geographical basis. The migration of existing benefit claims onto Universal Credit will not begin until January 2018. The migration of employment and support allowance and tax credits cases (along with associated Housing Benefit claims) will occur ‘at some point’.

The change to the roll out means 2.2m fewer people will move on to Universal Credit in 2016-17 than originally intended, 2.9m fewer in 2017-18 and 1.6m fewer in 2018-19. The figures as at the end of November 2014 suggested that potentially there are around 9.5 million Customers expected to move on to Universal Credit by its completion. There will still be significant numbers of the more complex Housing Benefit recipients who have not moved on to Universal Credit until 2020.

The Benefits service in the Council will have to continue to plan for and process a large number of Housing Benefit Cases until 2020 with the bulk of claims not reducing until 2018/19. The current case load for Housing Benefit only is 13,011 of which 26% are pensioners. Even with the Universal Credit roll out the authority will continue to responsible for the administration of all pensioners Housing Benefit claims and all Council Tax Support for working and elderly customers. We will only see a 38% reduction in caseload as a result of full Universal Credit roll out.

Universal Credit will be an 'on line' service with regional service centres doing the processing and the Council will be required to provide a local front line 'Universal Credit Support' service to customers offering help, support and advice in making 'on line' claims, and managing household budgets. As a result of the delays already to the timetable, the DWP has confirmed continued funding for administering Housing Benefit claims, but only, so far, for 2015/16. There has also been some indication that we may be eligible for funding up to £50,000 in 2015/16 which will pay our associated costs for running the new Universal Credit Support service which we will need to negotiate with DWP.

I think it is clear that the situation is confusing for staff and more importantly for claimants.

9. Councillor Ballsdon to ask the Lead Councillor for Education:
Closure of Reading Bridge

Does the Lead Councillor for Education share my concerns that the closure of Reading Bridge clashes with a week of the GCSE/A Level examination period and undoubtedly students' journeys to school will be disrupted by the resultant traffic?

RESPONSE by Councillor Page (Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning & Transport):

The closure of Reading Bridge at any time of the year for these essential works is bound to cause inconvenience, which is why the Council has given over 10 weeks notice so that all road users can make a note of the closure dates and, where possible, bear these in mind when planning trips.

I attach below a copy of the press release that was issued today which gives up-dated information about the closure, and the welcome news that a narrow pedestrian access will be maintained over the bridge during the closure period.

Reading Bridge Closure - Pedestrian Access to be Maintained

24/03/2015

Reading Borough Council Press Release

PEDESTRIANS and cyclists will be able to continue to cross Reading Bridge whilst it is closed to all vehicle traffic for essential strengthening works in May.

Reading Borough Council has spent the past week in discussions with the contractor and structural engineers investigating whether a walking route can be maintained safely across the bridge. As a result, engineers have come up with a revised work programme which allows for a narrow route fenced-off for pedestrians, around which the essential strengthening work can continue.

The route will be narrow, but wide enough for passing pedestrians, and with care for people pushing prams or using wheelchairs. Cyclists will also be able to use the route, but only by dismounting and pushing or carrying their bikes.

Reading Bridge will be fully closed to all vehicle traffic for a period of two weeks from May 18th to strengthen the 92-year old structure. The surface of the bridge will be stripped away for concrete repairs and specialist carbon fibre strengthening works to take place, followed by waterproofing and resurfacing.

Tony Page, Reading Borough Council's Lead Member for Transport, said:

"Following detailed discussions with structural engineers carrying out this essential project, I'm pleased the Council has been able to secure a pedestrian and cycle route across Reading Bridge whilst it is closed to traffic. This has only been possible by engineers re-organising the work programme, but there is no doubt it will benefit a great many people who use the bridge every day.

"Walking access across the bridge will be via a much narrower route than usual. Whilst that is not ideal, a narrow route across the bridge is preferable to closing it off altogether. Cyclists are being asked to push or carry their bikes and we would ask all pedestrians and cyclists to be aware of others crossing the bridge, particularly making room for people with pushchairs or wheelchair users. I'd also point out that many people already use the nearby weir as an alternative pedestrian route across the Thames."

Reading Bridge is a major strategic route through Reading and the wider region and is now in need of essential strengthening and waterproofing to ensure it can continue to carry the amount of traffic it does in future years.

Road users have been given more than 10 weeks' notice of the full closure to traffic, which starts on Monday May 18 and will run for a period of two weeks, including the two weekends. The second of those two weeks coincides with half term, when traffic levels are lower. When the surface of the bridge is stripped away in the week commencing May 18, the Council's engineers will be in a much better position to evaluate exactly what work is needed to strengthen the bridge and to confirm the length of the closure to traffic.

Fully signed diversion routes will be in place for the duration of the closure. Further details of these routes will be provided on <http://beta.reading.gov.uk/bridges> once they have been finalised. Drivers will be warned of the closures using the Council's Variable Message Signs located on routes approaching Reading Bridge. Reading Borough Council will also be liaising with neighbouring authorities regarding additional signage and advance warnings further afield. Reading Buses have been informed of the closure and will be diverting services accordingly.

Councillor Page added:

"We announced at the start of these essential works that a full closure of Reading Bridge would be unavoidable, at some stage, for this crucial work to take place. The fact is that without this strengthening work permanent lane closures would be necessary on Reading Bridge, which is something I think everyone wants to avoid.

"The surface of Reading Bridge will be stripped away during these two weeks for concrete repairs and specialist carbon fibre strengthening to take place. It is not until specialists strip away the surface that they will know exactly the level of concrete repairs and carbon strengthening work which is necessary. This, of course, will then determine the number of days needed for the closure.

"The Council has given people more than 10 weeks' notice now so that road users can make a note of the closure dates and, where possible, bear these in mind when planning trips."

Over the Easter period - and starting on Monday 6th April - it will be necessary to have a closure on one side of the bridge to carry out some of the concrete repairs and carbon fibre strengthening work on the footpaths, and to keep vehicle vibrations away from the work areas. This will involve both a lane closure and the adjacent pavement being shut for 24 hours

a day, 7 days a week, for a period of up to 20 days. As with previous lane closures, there will still be a lane running in each direction over the bridge, and one of the pavements will remain fully accessible to pedestrians. Off peak lane closures will then resume when this section of the work is complete.

After the two week closure in May, lane closures will then resume until the completion of the project, currently estimated to be in late June or early July.

ENDS