

AGENDA ITEM 6

QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

1. Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods and Communities:
Reading is one of the worst 50 Councils for Recycling in England

Recycling is important as otherwise waste can pollute the natural environment and poison people.

On the Let's Recycle website for the year 2016/17 Reading is identified as one of the worst 50 Councils for recycling in England. Reading Council has an overall recycling rate of 32.1% which puts it at 301 out of 350 councils across England.

The recycling rate in Reading is terrible, does the Lead Councillor agree ?

A simple yes or no will do.

REPLY by Councillor James Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods and Communities.

Reading's recycling rate is not, as the question asserts, 'terrible'. Any recycling rate reflects the sum of the genuine and committed contributions of residents, corporate partners and relevant council services.

The list of English councils, to which the question refers, includes large counties, rural Districts and also urban, single-tier, authorities like Reading. There is a limit to the usefulness and relevance of national comparisons over such a wide and diverse field.

Reading is a great place to live and work for many reasons. However, from the specific perspective of the waste management industry, Reading undeniably has some characteristics which are recognised as representing additional challenges to achieving higher levels of recycling. Two examples of such characteristics are the wholly urban nature of the Reading Borough and the proportion of flats and HMOs. Those characteristics add complexity to the day-in, day-out practicalities of recycling, which are reflected in the recycling rates in areas similar to Reading. We are working on innovative solutions such as communal bins, individual boxes and direct engagement with residents to find an approach that works for them.

Reading Borough Council (alongside our re3 Partners) is going to continue to prioritise the quality of recyclables to ensure that the trust in the service is maintained, and to respect the efforts of residents.

As Members may be aware, the re3 Partnership is in the process of adopting an updated waste strategy and that will be followed by a Reading Waste Action Plan which will focus on service change and delivery.

Following the successful introduction, earlier this year, of a widened range of plastics that can be recycled we look forward to bringing forward further developments in due course. The question is right to acknowledge the important contribution of recycling and it remains a service priority for Reading Borough Council and our waste management partners.

2. Councillor Barnett-Ward to ask the Lead Councillor for Education:
New Secondary School

I would like to start by congratulating the Lead Councillor on his new role: I am sure he will be an effective addition to the front bench. I would also like to welcome the announcement that the preferred site for Reading's newest secondary school is on Richfield Avenue. Providing a non-selective school in the centre of the town will increase educational choice across the Borough and provide for the extra school places we need.

Can the Lead Councillor please give an update on the planning to provide the extra secondary spaces needed in the years between now and the opening of the new school ?

REPLY by Councillor Pearce Lead Councillor for Education.

The local authority is currently in discussion with a number of secondary schools within the Borough and also the Trust managing Chiltern Edge School from 2018. The intention is to ensure that we can provide bulge classes to meet the needs of students over the next two years until the new secondary school opens. It is also important that this is done in the most efficient way that makes best use of additional capacity in the current system and which is the most cost effective and minimises the commitment of significant capital funds to meet, what is in actual fact, a temporary situation.

Feasibility studies and discussions are currently in place with schools and decisions will be made once all the detail is reviewed and discussions concluded. The final arrangements will then be approved by the appropriate Council Committee.

3. Councillor Rowland to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:
Station Hill

Will the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport provide an update on recent developments regarding the ownership of the Station Hill site, and on any discussions he and officers have had with the new owners ?

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

I thank Cllr Rowland for her question.

I have met with the new owners of the Station Hill site, Lincoln MGT (LMGT) on several occasions this year, most recently two days after they formally acquired ownership of the site. LMGT are now keen to progress the redevelopment of the Station Hill site as quickly as possible, picking up where Benson Elliott left off.

Discussions with officers and myself have so far have centred on the existing outline planning approvals and to what extent any revised proposals will deviate from these. Early indications are that they are keen to implement the original outline permission in part, consisting of a large office building in front of the Station (Plot C of the original outline planning permission). The temporary events space and the Biscuit Tin café would continue for the time being until work on that Plot commences.

LMGT are then looking to adjust the remainder of the site's redevelopment. At this stage it is not yet clear what implications there are for the planning process, but detailed pre-application discussions are being arranged with our officers.

On an important aesthetic issue, I have again stressed to the new owners that the current condition of the Garrard Street multi-storey car park is unacceptable as it presents a neglected, almost derelict, image from the Station and surrounding areas. Seen from the Station overbridge as an early view of the central area of Reading it is a disgrace. The

previous owners failed to deliver on a commitment to address this issue, presumably as their priority was disposal rather than development.

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I have therefore made it crystal clear to the new owners, most recently on 12th June, that I expect early proposals from them to address the screening or wrapping of the car park site and have asked LMGT to work with Reading CIC UK in order to bring proposals forward as a matter of urgency. It will be regarded as an early test of their commitment to invest in and develop this area.

4. Councillor Emberson to ask the Leader of the Council:
Universal Credit

Could the Leader of the Council give an update on the roll out of Universal Credit and tell me what the council is doing to support vulnerable people experiencing difficulties while they wait for payments ?

REPLY by Councillor Lovelock Leader of the Council.

Can I thank Cllr Emberson for her question. It is good to know that she is taking up this issue and will, I am sure, continue to highlight the concerns often expressed by her predecessor, former Cllr Livingston, who was a persistent critic of this ill thought out and badly implemented Conservative Policy. Even before it is fully implemented, is proving to be "costly and unwieldy", according to the independent National Audit Office and so damaging to the poorest residents here in Reading and across the whole country.

After being told that UC would not be implemented in Reading until 2022, the Government suddenly announced in the Autumn of 2017 that Full Service Universal Credit (UC) was to be rolled out in two stages in Reading according to a claimant's post code. The first stage was from 6th December 2017, which covered most of Reading, with the remaining areas following on from 17th January 2018. Universal Credit Full Service is now live in the whole of the borough for any new claims or for anyone claiming a current benefit where there is a change in their circumstances.

The Council has dedicated officers in place within the Housing Service who are able to help UC claimants with making or updating any changes to their UC claim online where they require this assistance. This team of staff is also responsible for working with families affected by the Benefit Cap. It is a credit to our staff that they have been able to put the support in place with so little time to prepare.

The biggest impact for any UC claimant is the minimum 5 week waiting period for their first payment. The Council offers assistance to UC claimants through Personal Budgeting Support to help them through that 5 week wait and further support is also provided to help claimants to organise an advanced payment, prepare for monthly budgeting and to obtain a food parcel referral where necessary.

I am sure that Cllr. Emberson will agree that in affluent 21st Century Reading it is a disgrace that some local residents are dependent on food parcels to feed their families.

5. Councillor Josh Williams to ask the Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing & Sport:
Swimming and Leisure Provision

After the Arthur Hill swimming pool was closed without consultation, residents are rightly concerned that future swimming and leisure provision is in limbo, with little or no input being sought from residents. What steps is the Council taking to ensure that the public, centre users, and swimming and sports clubs are consulted over proposals to outsource the Council's sport and leisure services? Can the Lead Councillor explain what methods the Council will use to consult widely over this important issue, and how it will ensure that feedback from consultation is listened to and will influence the Council's plans?

REPLY by Councillor Hoskin Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing & Sport.

Thank you for your question Cllr. Williams. As clearly demonstrated in a number of my responses to questions and a petition to tonight's Council meeting, future swimming and leisure provision is very far from being 'in limbo'. We have commenced a formal procurement process with a clear timeline and are investing significant resources to ensure that this complex procurement is managed effectively through to completion.

We have already commenced consultation with a range of user groups and stakeholders and this will continue and feed into the procurement process. The procurement specification is itself based on a detailed and independently conducted 'facilities needs assessment' that has also been endorsed by Sport England. This helps to ensure that local needs are met and in addition this administration has sought to ensure a good geographic spread of leisure facilities so that all of Reading's communities have local access to good quality provision.

I am pushing for the maximum level of both community and sports groups consultation possible within the constraints of the procurement process. It is important that the hard work to deliver these new facilities is visible and apparent to the public and also that residents do have the opportunity to be involved. We will be also conducting an extensive public consultation once we have more detailed proposals to share.

We have been very clear on our overall strategy for a major upgrade of Reading's leisure estate - replacing outdated and poor quality facilities with new ones and to upgrade those that are to be retained and I would hope that this has widespread support from fellow Councillors and the public more widely. Replacement, and much improved, pools for Central and Arthur Hill were also a manifesto commitment for Reading Labour Party upon which we fought and won the recent council elections.

6. Councillor Daya Pal Singh to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:
Major Road Surfacing Programme across Reading

A pledge made to residents by members of the Conservative group stated, that they would ensure a "major road surfacing programme across Reading - fixing all potholes" would be carried out if there was a Conservative Council.

Please can the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport tell me how much it would cost to carry out this work and which services would need to be cut in order to pay for it?

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

I thank Cllr Singh for his question and I have seen the leaflet circulated during the recent local elections in some of the Reading West wards.

This was a thoroughly scurrilous and dishonourable claim from a party that has made no attempt whatsoever to put forward any budget amendment this year to even increase the Council's highway maintenance or pothole budget. Tory members on Reading Borough Council have never ever presented an alternative budget and have never said what services would be cut to pay for any increases on highway maintenance or potholes.

Reading Borough Council Streetcare Services has estimated that the Council would require at least an additional £20m capital investment to address the current backlog of works. Clearly it is simply not possible to resurface all the roads in the Borough within a year and a more realistic approach would see a need for this programme to be spread across a number of years.

Colleagues should also note that there is a significant bridge maintenance backlog which is estimated at approximately £21m and would be in addition to the estimated £20m for roads maintenance. The current 2018/19 Local Transport Plan Award for highway maintenance and bridges from the Department for Transport is just £1.2m, with an additional £176k incentive funding which we are likely to secure as well.

The Council has also received an additional pothole award of £67k, received on 2 February 2018 to use during the current financial year in addition to the £135k from the Pothole Action and Flood Resilience Fund announced by the government on 26 March.

The Council welcomes any financial contributions from central government, but clearly these are grossly inadequate given the scale of the growing backlog on highway and bridge maintenance.

I therefore challenge the Conservative Group on Reading Borough Council to either endorse the contents of the recent leaflet, and explain where the additional money would come from, or else repudiate it - which I suspect is what the majority of them would like to do.