

Reigate and Banstead Borough Council

Questions by Members

Published 11 June 2020

Due to the coronavirus outbreak, the April meeting of Council was cancelled. Consequently, the Leadership agreed to receive written questions from Members, and publish responses to them in the usual way.

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Question 1: Planned extension of Permitted Development Rights

It appears the Government is moving towards further relaxations of the permitted development rules allowing up to two extra storeys of housing units to be built on top of existing blocks of flats without the need for planning consent. We have already seen the effects of previous relaxations, which are often adverse. In light of this:

- Assuming this is right and consultations are underway or forthcoming, please can the Council confirm it will take a strong line to object to this further proposal and respond to the Government to prevent this from becoming part of the planning system.
- Please can the council confirm how this would impact office-to-residential conversions such as in Furness House in Brighton Road and Quadrant House, Princes Way in Redhill.
- Please can you also confirm which property developments in Redhill Town Centre in recent years (the council-led scheme on Marketfield Way car-park, the recently approved flats in Brook Road, the two developments on the south-side of Marketfield Way, Sainsbury's development and the now-lapsed development on Redhill station's car parks) have relinquished permitted development rights, to confirm whether or not further increases in the scale of such developments would be committed if this proposed government change was to go ahead.

Response:

This Council has consistently lobbied against and objected to the expansion of permitted development rights relating to office to residential conversions and will continue to do so for any proposed new regulations which would allow new flats to be created in upward extensions without planning permission.

Without knowing how the new regulations may work (given this detail is yet to be published), it is unfortunately impossible to say if or how it may apply to the office to residential conversions that have already taken place in Redhill.

With regards the recent flatted developments that have been granted planning permission, there is no general restriction of permitted development rights through condition given flatted buildings do not currently benefit from permitted development rights and it is not possible to remove such rights when they do not yet exist. If and when the new regulations do come to pass then we will of course consider removing permitted development rights for new developments which come through planning at that time.

Question 2: Food banks and community support

We welcome the incredible work that has been done by this council to support the vulnerable in our community with food parcels, reintroduction of the meals-on-wheels service and in coordinating food bank donations across the borough. The need for this basic support has clearly spiked in recent weeks as a third food bank has opened up in the central area of the borough (run the homeless charity Renewed Hope) who are offering support to 50-60 households every week. Nationally the Trussell Trust Food bank network saw an 81% increase in the use of food banks in the last two weeks in March over the same period last year, which seems to mirror what is being seen in Reigate and Banstead. With this in mind, and the council starting plans to move forward from 'lockdown' into 'recovery', please confirm that the Council will review the continuation of its increased support for welfare in our communities and stronger partnership working with the voluntary sector, including the meals-on-wheels service, and will the council seek additional support for this continuity of additional services from the government, as well as during the lock-down period.

Response:

Thank you for your recognition of the Council's Covid 19 welfare and community response work.

At present our continuing welfare response work and our recovery work streams are working in parallel.

In the shorter term we are planning our response to the possibility of a second wave. However, in the longer term we also need to understand that some of our Category A Shielded and other vulnerable residents will need continued support for some time to come.

Our recovery work includes planning to support residents' existing and future welfare needs. In tandem with this work we recognise the need to continue to support to our voluntary and community sector partners; Both streams will be invaluable in informing future Council decisions on services.

Question 3: Emergency income support

Will the Council call on the government to provide a Coronavirus Emergency Income Support Scheme or some kind of local Universal Basic Income, which enables the increasing number of households who have been pushed into relying on food banks by the current crisis to all instead feel the dignity of being able to afford to meet their own needs?

Response:

Since the current COVID-19 started the government has announced a range of areas of financial assistance for people and businesses, as well as providing local authorities with additional funding to assist people with their council tax payments and loss of income for businesses. Additional assistance and support has been provided by financial organisations and lenders including mortgage holidays and payment holidays for loans and credit cards.

Changes in legislation around national benefits has led to the increases in housing benefit payments for many households, including the increase in the Local Housing Allowance from April 2020.

The government's furlough scheme has ensured that employees who have found themselves unable to work, continue to receive up to 80% of their earnings whilst they are in this position.

Reigate & Banstead has been providing much needed vital assistance to its residents, who have found themselves financially vulnerable or unable to leave their homes, through our Community Support Centre, and the Mayor's fund is in place to help those with urgent needs.

The Council will continue to prioritise support to residents and businesses, in line with government guidance and funding streams, and ensure that all government funding that is made available to the Council is maximised in support of its residents and businesses.

Question 4: Local Housing Allowance in the current crises

As rents in this Borough are significantly higher than the national average, will the council call on the government to raise the Local Housing Allowance so that all households in Reigate and Banstead can still afford to feed their families once they have paid their rent?

Response:

The local housing allowance 5 year rate freeze was lifted on the 1 April 2020 when all rates were increased, areas have different rates as does each property by bedroom number.

RBBC have been awarded £340,034 in Discretionary Housing Benefit funds for this financial year which is a 31% increase on last year. Anyone in receipt of housing benefit or the housing element of Universal Credit that needs extra financial support for a period with rent payments can apply for a discretionary housing payment (DHP). This interaction with households also gives officers the opportunity to assist those struggling with referrals to our money support team and housing team as appropriate.

No one knows how the housing market will react to the pandemic and that includes the private rental market, but we will certainly be monitoring this and working through our objectives in the Housing Delivery Strategy to enable more housing that is affordable for local people.

Question 5: Local Walking and Cycling Measures

Please confirm how the Council is working with Surrey County Council to ensure we receive a fair share of the emergency funding for improvement of walking and cycling (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/2-billion-package-to-create-new-era-for-cycling-and-walking>). This is intended to provide for pop-up bike lanes with protected space for cycling, wider pavements, safer junctions, and cycle and bus-only corridors. Please can the Council confirm what plans exist for consulting the public (such as using the [commonplace.is](https://www.commonplace.is) tool) and bringing in improvements in Reigate and Banstead in coming weeks, noting the government plans for all retail to be able to re-open from 15 June 2020.

Response:

Surrey County Council as Highway Authority has responsibility for introducing emergency walking and cycling measures.

Government guidance is that measures should be introduced as swiftly as possible, with Highways Authorities seeking input from stakeholders during the design phase. I can confirm that SCC has engaged with the Borough Council about potential emergency measures, and that the two authorities will continue to work together to bring measures into effect as soon as possible to support the opening of town centres.

We understand from SCC that as these emergency measures will be temporary, no public consultation is required. However, there is a statutory 14 day publicity period between the making of the relevant orders and them taking effect.