

Local Government Reorganisation

**Public meeting held at 7.30pm on
Monday 20 October in Main Hall, Calcot**

Present

Parish Councillors: Mr C Taylor (Chairman), Mrs P Furlong-King, Mr N Furlong-King, Mr A Linden, Mrs R Reynolds, Mrs C Basden, Mr M Powers

Public: Around 50 members of the public

Reading Borough Council: Liz Terry (Leader of Reading Borough Council), Gavin Handford (Assistant Director of Policy Change and Customer Services), Ollie Cassells (Policy and Project Officer)

West Berkshire Council: Jeff Brooks (Leader of West Berkshire Council), Justin Pemberton (Community Engagement, Economic Development and Regeneration and Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation), Sarah House (Head of Legal Services)

Mr Taylor opened the meeting by welcoming those present and explaining that Reading Borough Council (RBC) would give a 15-minute presentation, after which there would be an opportunity to ask questions (around half an hour). There would then be a short break before West Berkshire Council (WBC) gave its 15-minute presentation and answered questions for around half an hour.

Ms Terry gave a presentation on RBC's proposal for a boundary change to create a "Greater Reading" Council. There was then a question and answer session (questions are in ***bold and italics*** below).

What effect will the proposed Thames Valley Strategic Authority (TVSA) have?

Having unitary authorities makes for better governance. There's not yet been a final decision on TVSA yet, and it is not known what it might look like. Oxford and Berkshire are talking to one another about it and agree it makes sense to have a Thames Valley authority. Buckinghamshire does not want to be involved but might end up being part of a Mayoral Strategic Authority anyway (MSA).

What is RBC's view on development of green spaces?

The government does include planning and housing in its plans for reorganisation, so this has been considered. WBC's Local Plan has just been adopted and would be inherited by RBC and remain as the Local Plan going forward. There are various Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty which would be protected and not built on. RBC's view is that the need for housing must be balanced, but Reading is a more urban area. In Coley Ward there are water meadows and the Kennet which are protected, as are all the parks and green spaces in Reading. RBC would work with residents to protect green spaces and more rural areas.

Where will the new housing be put?

RBC has a very strong track record for being able to meet its housing targets, and it currently has permission for several more developments in and around the town centre which will create around 15,000 more homes. As much affordable housing is included as possible and council properties are also being built.

In regard to the population figures in the proposals, Mr Handford added that each council provided its own numbers and, in RBC's proposal only current population was included in the 207,000.

In the presentation, you said people in this area use Reading town centre facilities, but it is not a destination of choice, and it has deteriorated badly over the past few years, there are empty shops, and offices are being turned into flats.

Reading is going through a period of transition, the way people shop has changed greatly over the past few years with more shopping online, and this affects all high streets and town centres. One new office block has been built on Station Hill and another is planned. Also, people have different views according to their age, so older residents might enjoy high street shops, while younger ones like to go out in the town at night. RBC is looking at a new town centre strategy which includes more apartments and new play parks for young children so that people can enjoy living, working and being there.

What are the advantages of Tilehurst, Theale, Pangbourne, Holybrook and Purley on Thames moving to Reading?

All councils provide the same services, such as adult social care and children's services. RBC will continue to empty rubbish bins every fortnight, maintain play areas and recreational spaces, resurface roads. The Hexagon is being updated to include a new studio theatre, there will be a new Central Library. People with children, particularly with special needs, have said RBC provides a very good support and education services.

What is your view of the move of the Royal Berkshire Hospital (RBH)?

RBC's current policy is to recognise the need for the RBH to be updated and there are some constraints on the existing site which mean it would be very difficult to have it all there. The hospital is considering some options on the Wokingham side, and RBC will work with RBH to make sure public transport issues are given due consideration. There does need to be a modern, accessible hospital, and it will benefit the whole population. RBC is also working with RBH to look at the possibility of having a new hospital for some issues but having local facilities for problems which do not require a hospital.

RBC recently had to bring its children's services back in-house, how is that better than West Berkshire?

OFSTED assesses children's social care, not education, and it feels RBC's service is better than WBC's. The head teachers think RBC's education team is better than WBC's.

RBC's traffic flow policies are ludicrous, roads are not repaired. It is easier to go to Newbury than Reading. If this is a demonstration of the future of traffic in Reading, it is not good, and your Council Tax is higher, so why would we want to move to Reading?

Until Thames Water has fixed all the leaks, RBC is not able to repair the roads. RBC would also like to discourage lorries from Oxford going through Caversham and along the IDR but does not wish to introduce an ULEZ scheme. Parish councils will not be affected and the services provided following a move to RBC will not be changed, and might be improved. Data shows that very many people use Reading Buses, the train station, the roads, the leisure centres, parks, and RBC provides these services without needing a government loan. RBC has a prudent budget and ensures it has reserves to call on if needed.

How does RBC manage school budgets?

Some schools have significant reserves, others do not, and the schools in Reading work collaboratively together. RBC has never considered withholding anything from schools on the basis of their reserves, it wants to work with the schools to make them the best they can be.

Having lived in both WBC and RBC, I feel the services are better in WBC and, from choice, we use Pangbourne, Calcot and Newbury rather than Reading for services and shopping. The areas RBC proposes taking on have high property values and high council tax values, how much does the increased income influence the proposal? Second question is why is Reading so scruffy?

Some parts of the town centre are in a transition stage. With regard to areas further out, I see the street cleaners, I see bins being emptied, grass being cut. RBC has been working hard with shopkeepers recently to improve the Oxford Road, there's no access to the back of the shops so bins have to be left out the front. It's much better than it has been. It will be a target area for RBC to consider if there's more it can do, perhaps take the traffic out, just leaving buses. Not everywhere in Reading is scruffy – Coley, Whitley and Caversham are all lovely.

If you look at the council tax for WBC, you have to add in parish council precepts and, taking it all into account RBC does charge slightly more, but you don't know what Ridgeway would charge. Both Vale of the White Horse and South Oxfordshire have higher council tax levels and if you include county and parish council taxes, there's not going to be much difference. The council tax collected has not influenced the proposal, the money would simply be used to provide services. It's about what would be a good administrative area for a council in the future. The decision will be made by the Secretary of State in due course.

There were no further questions so Mr Taylor thanked Ms Terry, who left the meeting.

After a short break, Mr Brooks and Mr Pemberton gave a presentation on WBC's proposal for a new "Ridgeway" Council formed with Vale of the White Horse and South Oxfordshire Councils. This was followed by a question and answer session (questions are in ***bold and italics*** below).

What will happen to WBC offices in Newbury if the centre for the new council moves somewhere else?

There will still be officers who live in Newbury and residents have said they want local offices which they can go and visit. There will be local offices in Newbury, in Wantage, in Thame.

If this is such a good idea, why did WBC keep it secret from other Berkshire authorities for so long? Is this proposal driven by WBC having £16 million emergency funding from the government? Over the past year, WBC tried to claw back money from schools and to close Greenfield House. It relented on both, but it does seem this proposal might be all about money.

Over nine months ago, I told Liz Terry and Olivia Bailey, MP, that we were talking to Vale of the White Horse and South Oxfordshire. Several unitary councils are in trouble, it's a question of size, and there's a three-year programme for repaying the emergency funding. With regard to Greenfield House, the voluntary sector approached WBC saying it could provide the services but when WBC investigated, it wasn't possible so the idea was dropped. WBC went to Brookfields School as it had £1.6 million in reserves which could be used to support other schools. Brookfields explained that £1 million was for new classrooms and the rest was for refurbishment. Brookfields should not be paying for these things so WBC took the money and paid £1.6 million for the new classrooms and refurbishment.

Having gone through the last eight or nine weekly residents' bulletins issued by WBC, Tilehurst was mentioned once and it feels like WBC ignores Tilehurst, that it's too far from Newbury.

Geographically, it is further away, but Hungerford is also further away in the other direction.

But Hungerford is regularly included in the weekly bulletins.

It's not just about mentioning Tilehurst, it's about doing things for you. The Parish Council needs to tell us what you need. We are getting things done.

Issues were raised with work carried out on Long Lane; rather than widening the narrow road, a high kerb had been installed. Mr Brooks said he would look into it and come back to the Parish Council.

There's been a lot of talk about geographical and historical similarities between South Oxfordshire, Vale of the White Horse and West Berkshire, particularly the fact that they all have market towns. How can Tilehurst and Calcot be compared to market towns, they are clearly suburbs of Reading?

Mr Pemberton agreed that Tilehurst and Calcot are not market towns but there are other market towns in the district. He disagreed that Calcot and Tilehurst had more connection with Reading than with Newbury. The parishes concerned had always been part of West Berkshire and were valued just as much as every other parish in the district.

Who will decide what happens? Will residents have any say?

The government will decide. They will review the proposals and then have a public consultation. The proposals have to be submitted by the end of November, the outcome will be known by September 2026, and the new councils will have their first elections in May 2027.

I see Tilehurst as a village, it'll be ruined if it moves to RBC.

Reading has always been a dominant town for services, it is logical. Reading has severe deprivation and needs the money.

How will services be affected by the new Ridgeway Council, for example Padworth?

Mr Brooks explained that there are no parishes in RBC and it was not clear how the council would work with parishes. He also said he believed residents had to pay to use Smallmead tip. If Ridgeway Council did not go ahead, West Berkshire would stay as West Berkshire. He wondered where RBC would go next with its "land grab" and attempts to become a city, perhaps Woodley and Earley. If Ridgeway Council did go ahead, it would be for the government to decide whether the boundary with Reading should change. It was important for residents to "make their voices heard".

What influence do we have on a decision to be made by the government?

If you like the idea of moving to Reading, write to Olivia Bailey, MP, and tell her. If you do not like the idea of moving to Reading, write to Olivia Bailey, MP, and tell her.

Mr Taylor added that there would be a government consultation on the proposals so, as well as writing to the MP, there would be an opportunity to respond directly to the government.

I don't go to the offices in Newbury but I do use services online, anyone with the internet can access them.

Mr Brooks said WBC was extending services offered by libraries so residents could access computers, support and the internet in them. WBC was also offering services which parishes could buy in to, for example Pangbourne paid to keep its library open longer and

other parishes paid for pop-up libraries. This all improved local distribution of information and support, meaning there was less need to go to Newbury.

Liz Terry gave two-weekly bin collections as an advantage of moving to Reading. Are there any additional advantages to Tilehurst parish becoming part of a new Ridgeway Council?

Ridgeway Council will have more financial strength and support. There will be 470,000 people which gives more capacity. Resilience will be very valuable in day-to-day services.

Mr Pemberton added that the proposal was very much of its time. Whether Tilehurst sits with WBC or with RBC, most people would agree that the clarity of West Berkshire as a district is very different from Reading, whether economically, geographically, or from a demographic perspective. It's also important to consider how future resources would be allocated. As had been said already, Reading is very dominant, and it would be easy for the resources all to go to the more urban areas. WBC put together a proposal with Oxfordshire because, if it didn't, it feared something would be imposed on it. He explained that extending south was not possible as Hampshire was already in the first wave of the government's LGR programme. Wiltshire was already a unitary authority with a population of 500,000, so going west was not an option. Going east would mean joining with Reading, Wokingham or Bracknell Forest and those areas work very differently from WBC so it would not be in residents' best interests.

Mr Brooks said WBC has good schools, good children's and family services, good adult social care so it made sense for residents to wish to stay in WBC.

I still don't see a specific advantage for Tilehurst staying with WBC.

Mr Brooks suggested parish councils would not continue to exist under RBC.

Liz Terry said RBC would continue with parish councils.

Mr Brooks said he was glad she had as she hadn't done so before.

Mr Taylor said, as he remembered it, the very first statement issued by Reading had included the parish councils.

There were no further questions, so Mr Taylor thanked everyone for attending and closed the meeting at 9.15pm.