

COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES - 28 JANUARY 2025

Present: Councillor Dennis (Mayor);

Councillors Mpofu-Coles (Deputy Mayor), Asare, Ayub, Ballsdon, Barnett-Ward, Cresswell, Cross, Davies, Eden, Edwards, Emberson, Ennis, Gavin, Gittings, Griffith, Hacker, Hornsby-Smith, Hoskin, Juthani, Keane, Keeping, Lanzoni, Leng, Lovelock, Magon, McCann, McElroy, McEwan, McGoldrick, McGrother, Mitchell, Moore, Naz, Nikulina, O'Connell, Rowland, R Singh, DP Singh, Stevens, Tarar, Terry, Thompson, White, Williams, Woodward and Yeo

Apologies: Councillors Goss

28. MAYOR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

(a) Former Councillor and past Mayor Ron Jewitt

The Mayor paid tribute to and remembered a former councillor and Mayor, Ron Jewitt. Ron Jewitt was elected to Reading Borough Council at the first election of the reconstituted Council in 1973 and continued to be a member until 1991, representing Caversham Ward. He also had the honour of being Mayor of the Borough in 1984-85. The Council stood for a minute's silence in Ron's memory.

(b) Holocaust Memorial Day

The Mayor invited the Council to join him in a minute's silence in respect of Holocaust Memorial Day for which of commemorative event was held on 22 January 2025 and to provide a period of reflection for the victims of the all too many wars that were currently being waged around to world.

29. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 15 October 2024 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Mayor.

30. PETITIONS

(a) Susanne Clausen presented a petition in the following terms:

Save Open Hand Open Space: Protect Reading's Cultural Lifeline at Brock Keep

Brock Keep, a vital heritage building and home to Open Hand Open Space (OHOS), is under threat. For over 40 years, OHOS has been a cornerstone of Reading's cultural life, providing affordable artist studios, supporting exhibitions, performances, and community

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engagement. Now, OHOS faces an uncertain future as the building is at risk of sale and closure.

A Historic Landmark with a Living Purpose

Brock Keep was built in 1877 as a Victorian military keep, serving as accommodation for soldiers and as an armoury for the Brock Barracks. Designed by architect Major H.C. Seddon, the Keep is a remarkable example of nineteenth-century military architecture, with its distinctive crenellated roofline and historic brickwork. A Grade II listed building, it is an integral part of Reading's rich heritage and identity.

A Vital Asset for Oxford Road

Located on Oxford Road, Brock Keep is a landmark in one of Reading's most diverse and dynamic areas. OHOS brings creativity and cultural activity to the heart of Oxford Road, enriching the community by offering:

- Affordable studios for artists to work and thrive.
- Free and accessible exhibitions, workshops, and performances that invite participation and connection.
- A welcoming space that bridges art, heritage, and the vibrant community of Oxford Road.

Brock Keep and OHOS play a vital role in supporting the cultural and social life of Oxford Road. Losing this space would not only impact artists but also deprive the area of an important community and cultural resource that inspires creativity and engagement.

Our Cultural Offer to Secure Brock Keep

We have made a **cultural offer to bid for Brock Keep**, with a vision of preserving it as a sustainable arts and cultural hub for Reading. This offer recognises the building's historical significance and outlines our commitment to maintaining Brock Keep as a vibrant centre for creativity, cultural exchange, and community activity. Our proposal ensures that artists and the public can continue to benefit from this unique space for generations to come.

Why OHOS Matters

OHOS has transformed Brock Keep into a living, breathing hub for artists and residents alike. It stands as an example of how heritage buildings can be repurposed to serve today's communities while preserving their historical significance. Without OHOS, we risk losing both a creative centre and an asset to the identity and vitality of Oxford Road.

We call on Reading Borough Council to:

- Recognise Brock Keep as a valuable historic and cultural asset.
- Protect OHOS and its role in supporting the cultural life of Oxford Road and Reading.

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- Support our cultural offer to secure Brock Keep for the community.

RESPONSE by Councillor Barnett-Ward, Lead Councillor for Lead Councillor for Leisure and Culture:

The Keep on the Oxford Road is a Grade 2 Listed Building which requires long term investment in the property and at this time, the Council is not able to commit to the investment needed.

The property is occupied by Open Hand Open Space (OHOS) and Reading Space on a heavily subsidised basis with the Council. Over a number of years, the Council has supported a variety of OHOS bids to obtain external funding, but these have ultimately proved unsuccessful, including a recent bid for Heritage Lottery Fund money.

As a result, the Council has invited bids for the sale of the freehold from both from private bidders and from Reading's voluntary sector, with the current occupiers remaining in situ. Whether the occupiers can remain long term or not, will ultimately be a decision for the buyer of the site. The Council is committed to introducing the current occupiers to any alternative properties that may be available in the Borough whilst the sale process progresses.

The Council recognises the value Open Hand Open Space provides to Reading and will continue to support them as an important part of the cultural sector of Reading.

31. QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

	Questioner	Subject	Answer
1.	Cllr Moore	Two-Child limit on Universal Credit and Child Tax Credit	Cllr Griffith
2.	Cllr Moore	Fly-Tipping	Cllr Rowland
3.	Cllr White	Ceasefire in Gaza and Ending the UK's Arms Trade with Israel	Cllr Terry

(The full text of the questions and replies was made available on the Reading Borough Council website).

32. BRIGHTER FUTURES FOR CHILDREN LTD (BFFC) CONTRACT REVIEW

Further to Minute 42 of the Policy Committee held on 18 December 2024, the Executive Director of Resources submitted a report setting out a review of the performance of Brighter Futures for Children Limited (BFFC) in delivering Children's Services and an assessment of future options. Attached to the report at Appendix 1 was a report from

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CIPFA on the Assessment of Options for Children's Services and at Appendix 2 a Statement of Support from the BFfC Board.

The report noted that, under the direction of the Secretary of State, the Council had established BFfC on 1 December 2018 as a company limited by guarantee to deliver Children's Services (Social Care and Education) through a seven-year service contract which would expire on 1 April 2026. The contract stipulated that BFfC would be given notice of the future for the contract by 31 March 2025 and that a review of the performance of the contract would be carried out to inform the Council's decision.

The report explained that a review of the performance of the contract had been carried out and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) had been engaged as an independent consultant to validate the review of performance and to complete an Assessment of Options for future delivery of Children's Services. CIPFA's report recommended not renewing the contract with BFfC and bringing delivery back in house to be managed by the Council, supported by an Improvement Board (Option 2).

The reasons for bringing the service back in house would be to provide the Council with better direct control of Children's Services, remove a layer of governance and so increase visibility of Service performance likely leading to 'more agile decision making'. It would also remove duplication in reporting and pressure on Council services of maintaining Service Level Agreements, as well as improved integration and synergy with other Council services, joining up decision-making, innovation and improvement.

The BFfC Board had considered CIPFA's report at their meeting on 26 September 2024 and had provided a statement accepting and supporting the recommended option. The Statement also reflected that alternative delivery models for Children's Services were now rarely the preferred option in response to statutory intervention.

The report noted the Company currently had a significant transformation plan in place to address cost pressures and better manage demand, as well as an action plan in place to tackle the issues identified by the latest Ofsted inspection of Children's Services. It was therefore recommended to establish an independently chaired Improvement Board to provide scrutiny and informed input to ensure effective delivery of these plans.

The following motion was moved by Councillor Terry and seconded by Councillor Leng and CARRIED:

Resolved -

- (1) That the contract with Brighter Futures for Children Ltd (BFfC) to deliver Children's Services not be extended beyond 31 March 2026 when it was due to end;**
- (2) That by 1 April 2026, services currently provided by BFfC, including all remaining support services, be brought in house to be delivered directly by the Council;**

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- (3) That the Executive Director of Resources, in consultation with the Leader of the Council, the Lead Councillors for Children and Education, the relevant statutory officers and Chair of the Board, be authorised to:
- i. Transfer all staff from BFfC to the Council;
 - ii. Remove the secure designated pension arrangements between BFfC, the Council and the Pension Fund;
 - iii. Novate all BFfC contracts to the Council;
 - iv. Take all steps legally required to close the BFfC Company;
 - v. Make any changes required to the Terms of References for Committees to reflect the change of delivery model and remove reference to the Company and contract within the Lead Councillor portfolios;
 - vi. Make any other necessary amendments to the Council's Constitution and Scheme of Officer Delegation to reflect the changes of the delivery model;
- (4) That the Executive Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services, in consultation with the Leader of the Council, the Lead Councillor for Children, the Lead Councillor for Education and Public Health and the Chair of the BFfC Board, be authorised to transfer all property held by BFfC under lease arrangements back to the Council and arrange for the leases to be surrendered;
- (5) That the Executive Director of Children's Services, in consultation with the Leader of the Council, the Lead Councillor for Children and the Lead Councillor for Education and Public Health, be authorised to:
- i. Close the Independent Fostering Agency and transition this to a Local Authority Fostering Service
 - ii. Make all relevant changes to all Ofsted registrations
- (6) That the Chief Executive, in conjunction with the Chair of the BFfC Board and in consultation with the Leader of the Council, Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services and Executive Director of Children's Services, set up an independently chaired Improvement Board including developing its Terms of Reference for noting at Council;
- (7) That the Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services be authorised to execute all legal documents that were necessary to give effect to the above resolutions;
- (8) That the cost of transition be funded from earmarked reserves.

33. ENGLISH DEVOLUTION WHITE PAPER

The Chief Executive submitted a report on the Government's English Devolution White Paper, which set out a range of Policies that the Government was proposing to reform Local Government. The most significant proposal was for devolution to Strategic Authorities covering all areas of England, and for reorganisation of local government to "deliver sustainable and high quality services". The report sought to provide a summary of the proposals in the White Paper and recommendations were set out specifically in relation to devolution proposals. The Council was asked to authorise the Leader of the Council to work with other local authority Leaders to develop a Strategic Authority proposal that included Reading. The purpose would be to secure the benefits and devolved powers proposed within the White Paper for the benefit of Reading's residents and businesses. It was also recommended that, in principle, this would include a Mayor for the Strategic Authority to secure the widest benefits from devolution.

The following motion was moved by Councillor Terry and seconded by Councillor Leng and CARRIED:

Resolved -

- (1) That the report outlining the key elements of the English Devolution White Paper be noted;**
- (2) That the proposed devolution framework within the White Paper, and attached as annex 1 to the report, including the significantly increased resources and powers that a Mayoral Strategic Authority would receive compared to a Foundation Authority be noted;**
- (3) That the Leader of the Council be authorised to work with other local authority leaders to develop a proposal for a Strategic Authority in line with the criteria in the White Paper;**
- (4) That discussions should, in principle, assume an elected Mayor for the new Strategic Authority in order to secure the best outcomes and investment for the residents and businesses of Reading;**
- (5) That the matter be considered again when further information was available to endorse the preferred option.**

34. STATEMENT OF GAMBLING LICENSING PRINCIPLES (GAMBLING POLICY)

Further to Minute 9 of the Licensing Applications Committee held on 14 November 2024, the Executive Director of Economic Growth & Neighbourhoods submitted a report on the revised Statement of Gambling Licensing Principles (Gambling Policy) to cover the period

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31 January 2025 to 30 January 2028. The following documents were appended to the report:

- Appendix RS-1 - Draft Statement of Gambling Licensing Principles 2025-2028
- Appendix RS-2 - Climate Impact Assessment
- Appendix RS-3 - List of Consultees
- Appendix RS-4 - Responses to Consultation
- Appendix RS-5 - Gambling Premises Licence Fees

The report explained that the Gambling Act 2005 required the Council to prepare and publish a Statement of Principles to set out how the Council would fulfil its responsibilities and exercise its functions under the Act. The Act required the Policy to be reviewed every three years and the report explained that the new Policy would need to be in place by 31 January 2025 when the current Policy was due to expire.

A consultation on the revised Statement of Gambling Licensing Principles had been conducted between 16 August 2024 and 13 September 2024 and the responses received were attached to the report. A copy of the full Statement of Gambling Licensing Principles 2022-25 was appended to the report for approval.

The following motion was moved by Councillor Rowland and seconded by Councillor Woodward and CARRIED:

Resolved -

That the revised “Statement of Gambling Licensing Principles” as attached at Appendix RS-1 to the report be approved to be in effect from 31 January 2025 until 30 January 2028.

35. READING YOUTH JUSTICE PLAN 2024-2025

Further to Minute 23 of the Adult Social Care, Children’s Services & Education Committee held on 16 October 2024, the Executive Director for Children’s Services submitted a report on the Youth Justice Plan 2024-25. The report explained that the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and a condition of the Youth Justice Board Grant, had placed a duty on the Local Authority to produce an annual Plan and for it to be ratified by Council. The Plan had already been signed off by the Youth Justice Partnership through the Youth Justice Management Board, which was independently chaired. The plan reported the performance of the Youth Justice Service for 2023/24 against the national and statistical family comparators in the period.

The annual report identified the following areas as priorities for 2024-25:

- Reducing first time entrants into the criminal justice system
- Reducing reoffending
- Reducing the use of custody

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- Addressing disproportionality within the criminal justice system
- Reducing the impact of serious youth violence
- Embedding Child First and Identity Development Practice as the practice model across the partnership
- Improving outcomes for victims of youth crime.

It was reported that the Youth Justice Management Board had oversight of the Plan and performance against the targets, and these were reported through the mechanisms of the management board structure. A copy of the Plan was appended to the report for Council's formal approval.

The following motion was moved by Councillor Griffith and seconded by Councillor McEwan and CARRIED:

Resolved -

That the Youth Justice Plan 2024-2025 be adopted, as attached to the report at Appendix 1.

36. APPROVAL OF THE LOCAL COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME AND THE COUNCIL TAX BASE FOR 2025/26

The Director of Finance submitted a report regarding the Council Tax support scheme, estimated Council Tax collection rate and Council Tax base for the 2025/26 financial year. The report explained that Section 33 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 and the Local Authorities (Calculation of Council Tax Base) (England) Regulations 2012 required the Council, as the Billing Authority, to calculate a Council Tax Base for its area by 31 January each year.

The Tax Base for 2025/26 was calculated for the above purposes as being 59,566.99 (band D equivalent) properties - an increase of 1.06% on the 2024/25 Tax Base of 58,944.73. The declared surplus/deficit on the Council Tax Collection Fund balance would be paid out/recoverable by the Collection Fund in full in the following financial year. The estimated balance as at 31st March 2025 on the Council Tax Collection Fund was a projected net deficit of £0.478m. The Council's overall share of this deficit was £0.408m.

Each year, the Government amended the Council Tax Reduction Schemes (Prescribed Requirements) (England) Regulations 2012 to ensure that pension-age Local Council Tax Support (LCTS) schemes were updated in line with changes in the wider benefits system. The annual update also provided an opportunity to ensure that the residency requirements for accessing both pension-age and working-age LCTS remained consistent with the UK's immigration policy. These updates would be incorporated into the Council's 2025/26 Scheme in accordance with the principles of the Council's original Local Scheme.

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The report also stated that the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and Local Government Finance Act 2012 had replaced the Council Tax Benefit scheme with a locally determined Council Tax Reduction Scheme, which was effectively a type of Council Tax discount. The legislation required the Council to approve the scheme by the end of January preceding the start of the financial year. The recommended Scheme for 2025/26 was unchanged from the Scheme agreed by Council for 2024/25.

The following motion was moved by Councillor Terry and seconded by Councillor Leng and CARRIED:

Resolved -

- (1) That the existing Council Tax Reduction Scheme be retained for 2025/26;**
- (2) That the Tax Base calculation for 2025/26 of 59,566.99 band D equivalent properties be approved;**
- (3) That the assumed Council Tax collection rate of 98.75% for 2025/26 be noted;**
- (4) That the 2025/26 Council Tax Reduction Scheme would be updated in line with the Scheme's regulations be noted;**
- (5) That the estimated balance of the Council Tax Collection Fund as at 31st March 2025 was an overall net surplus of £0.478m of which the Council's overall share of this surplus was £0.408m be noted.**

37. COUNCILLORS' ALLOWANCES SCHEME 2025/26

The Executive Director of Resources submitted a report setting out the recommendations of the Independent Remuneration Panel, following its meetings on 8 October 2024, 12 November 2024, 10 December 2024 and 18 December 2024, in relation to the scheme of Councillors' Allowances for 2024/25. The Panel's recommendations were set out in Appendix A to the report and had been reflected in the updated allowances scheme at Appendix B to the report. The Panel would continue to review the scheme each year of the four-year term until 2026/27.

The following motion was moved by Councillor Terry and seconded by Councillor Leng and CARRIED:

Resolved -

- (1) That the Councillors' Allowances Scheme 2025/26, as set out in Appendix B to the report, be adopted.**

- (2) That the Assistant Director of Legal & Democratic Services be authorised to administer the Councillors' Allowances scheme in accordance with the provision in the base budget for 2025/26.

38. PAY POLICY STATEMENT 2024/25

The Executive Director of Resources submitted a report on the draft Pay Policy Statement for 2024/25. The report stated that Local Authorities were required under Section 38(1) of the Localism Act 2011 (the Act) to prepare a Pay Policy Statement that articulated the Council's policy towards the pay of the workforce, particularly senior staff and the lowest paid employees.

The report explained that each local authority was an individual employer and had the autonomy to make decisions on pay that were appropriate to local circumstances and which delivered value for money for local taxpayers. The Pay Policy Statement met the statutory duty to provide the Council with a description of the policy on staff remuneration for annual approval. It provided information on remuneration arrangements for staff directly employed by the Council, excluding staff in schools. Sections 38 - 43 of the Act required that the authority produce a Policy Statement that covered several matters concerning the pay of the Authority's staff, principally Chief Officers. This Policy Statement had met the requirements of the Act in this regard and the requirements of guidance issued in February 2012 and February 2013 by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to which the authority was required to have regard under Section 40 of the Act.

The Pay Policy Statement for 2024/25 was broadly unchanged from the previous year's statement other than it had been updated with the recent nationally agreed pay settlements. The 2024/25 Pay Policy Statement was appended at Appendix A to the report together with revised pay scales.

The following motion was moved by Councillor Terry and seconded by Councillor Leng and CARRIED:

Resolved -

That the Council's Pay Policy Statement for 2024/25, as appended to the report, be approved.

39. CONCERNS OVER DELAYS IN ROYAL BERKSHIRE HOSPITAL REDEVELOPMENT AMID NATIONAL REVIEW

In accordance with Standing Order 14(10)(a), Councillor R Singh received the consent of the Council to alter his motion, as follows:

'Delete the word "has" in the first paragraph starting with the words "The new Labour Government's review of the National New Hospital Programme..."'

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‘Add a new paragraph after paragraph 3, which ends with the words “well-equipped healthcare facilities”, as follows:

4. The Government made an announcement on Monday 27 January 2025 delaying the New Hospital Programme.”

and reword the two subsequent bullet points, under the original point 3 as follows:

“This Council expresses its deep concern regarding:

- The uncertainty introduced by the Government's decision to review the NHP, particularly about the Royal Berkshire Hospital's redevelopment, has led this Council to believe that any delays in the project could significantly compromise the quality of healthcare for Reading residents.
- NHS trusts and local healthcare authorities have highlighted the risk to patient safety and service quality posed by the redevelopment if it is not delivered in a timely manner.”

‘Change the word “the” to “any” in the second line of the first paragraph following “This Council calls on.”’

The following amendment was moved by Councillor Terry and seconded by Councillor McEwan and CARRIED:

‘Delete all words with the exception of the first sentence in the last paragraph of the motion, which reads:

“This Council reaffirms its unwavering commitment to ensuring that Reading residents have access to modern, safe, and efficient healthcare services.”’

Resolved -

This Council reaffirms its unwavering commitment to ensuring that Reading residents have access to modern, safe, and efficient healthcare services.

(The meeting closed at 8.30 pm)