

HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES - 10 MARCH 2026

Present: Councillor Dennis (Chair);

Councillors Hoskin (Vice-Chair), Ayub, Ballsdon, Barnett-Ward, Cresswell, Cross, Gavin, Hacker, Keane, McEwan, Nikulina, Rowland, Stevens, Thompson and Yeo

Apologies: Councillors

24. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Gavin declared an interest in Item 29 as she was an allotment holder. She left the room and took no part in the discussion or decision.

25. MINUTES OF THE HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS & LEISURE COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 12 NOVEMBER 2025

The Minutes of the meeting of 12 November 2025 were confirmed as a correct record, subject to Minute 13 being amended to reflect that it was Councillor Keane that had declared an interest in Item 19 of the previous minutes.

26. MINUTES OF OTHER BODIES

The Minutes of the following meeting were submitted:

Community Safety Partnership – 25 September and 27 November 2025.

Resolved - That the Minutes be received.

27. QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

<u>Questioner</u>	<u>Subject</u>	<u>Reply</u>
Cllr Ballsdon	Accessibility at Albert Road recreation Ground	Cllr Barnett-Ward
Cllr Thompson	Rough Sleepers	Cllr Yeo

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

28. ROMAN BRITAIN - REIMAGINED IN READING

The Committee received a report explaining that the Roman Britain - Reading Reimagined project was intended to transform Reading Museum's Roman gallery into the new *Discovering Calleva Gallery*, redisplaying Iron Age and Roman objects through immersive, multisensory and accessible interpretation shaped by an extensive community consultation. The project had secured a £714,785 delivery grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund,

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£236,808.50 from other match-funding sources and a further £28,172 non-cash contribution, giving a total project budget of £979,765.50. This would enable the start of the delivery phase, following successful completion of the project's development stage.

The report explained that the new gallery would connect more people with Reading's Roman heritage through updated storytelling, tactile interactives, recreated Roman spaces and 3D-printed handling objects. There would also be a comprehensive activity programme which would widen participation, strengthen partnerships, expand volunteering and paid placements, and enhance learning opportunities for diverse audiences.

The report also explained that £236,808.50 cash in match funding, comprising contributions from project partners and donors including the Earley Charity, Friends of Reading Museum, private donors, and non-cash support, and up to £100,000 from the Council through the Sustainability Fund would be used to progress the delivery phase. Officers were continuing to work on alternative sources of funding to reduce the need for Council match-funding.

The report informed the Committee that strong project governance would be maintained through a dedicated project management structure that would meet regularly to oversee delivery, budget, risks, and compliance with both National Lottery Heritage Fund requirements and the Council's project management standards. Regular updates would be provided through established Council reporting routes, including reports to the Committee at key milestones, ensuring robust oversight, transparency, and alignment with organisational priorities.

Resolved -

- (1) That the £714,785 National Lottery Heritage Fund delivery grant and the commencement of delivery activities, including procurement and recruitment be noted;**
- (2) That spend approval be granted and the use of £236,808.50 match funding be noted;**
- (3) That the project governance and reporting process be noted.**

29. ALLOTMENTS - FEES & CHARGES CONSULTATION

The Committee received a report which gave an update on the responses to the consultation on allotments fees and charges and sought approval of the proposed allotment fees pricing structure set out in Section 3.28 of the report, which was designed to secure the long-term viability of the service while maintaining fairness through the continued use of concessionary discounts. The following documents were appended to the report:

Appendix 1 - Allotment Survey

Appendix 2 - Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) Survey.

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The report explained that the Council managed 20 allotment sites across the Borough, comprising of more than 1,600 worked plots over 41.5 hectares of land. For the financial year ending 31 March 2026, allotment rental income had been projected at approximately £66,193, against an estimated annual service cost of £167,598, equating to a subsidy of approximately £99k. For the 2026/27 financial year, allotment fees would increase by 3.25% in line with inflation.

The report gave information on the findings from the allotment fee consultation with plot holders, as outlined in Section 3 and detailed in Appendix 1 to the report. The consultation reflected a highly engaged community, with concerns about affordability balanced by acknowledgement that the service must move towards financial sustainability. Feedback on the proposed rent increases was mixed, with respondents evenly split between supporting and opposing an increase. Affordability concerns were a recurring theme, particularly for those on low or fixed incomes, although many respondents also acknowledged the need for the service to be financially sustainable and less reliant on Council subsidy. While a majority of the respondents had indicated they were unlikely to give up their plot if the increases were implemented, around a quarter had said they might be forced to do so, highlighting the importance of maintaining concessionary support for vulnerable groups. The report noted that allotments legislation placed no obligation on councils to subsidise allotments but, stated that councils might charge a lower rent where justified by individual circumstances, such as financial hardship or disability.

The report also explained that, each year, the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) conducted a survey of local authority allotment services, providing insight into sector trends, operational challenges and emerging best practice (Appendix 2). The survey undertaken between June and August 2025 highlighted the increasing financial pressures faced by councils and the range of strategies being adopted nationally to improve cost recovery and long-term service sustainability. Over 63% of councils had reported that they continued to subsidise allotment services, despite efforts to move towards full cost recovery. Concessionary discounts remained widely available, with 60% of councils maintaining reduced rates for eligible groups. However, several authorities had indicated that these schemes were under review to ensure long-term financial sustainability.

Section 3.28 of the report set out the following proposed rent matrix for plots of 125sqm from April 2027:

Site Category	Full Fee	40% Discounted Rate
A Water supply across site	£111.50/year £2.14/week	£67/year £1.29/week
B Water supplied on site but may be a distance from the plot	£80.50/year £1.55/week	£48.50/year £0.93/week
C No water supply	£56.00/year £1.08/week	£34/year £0.65/week

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The report explained that the Council was required to give plot holders 12 months' written notice of any changes to the rent and discount structure. The decision to increase rents had to be taken and communicated to plot holders by no later than 31 March 2026 in order to apply the new rent levels from 1 April 2027.

Resolved:

(1) That the findings of the 2025 Allotment Survey, as summarised in Section 3 and detailed in Appendix 1 be noted.

(2) That the proposed Allotment Fees Pricing Structure set out in Section 3.29, to be implemented from April 2027 following the statutory 12-month notice period, be approved.

30. PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS AND ROUGH SLEEPING: A STRATEGY FOR READING 2026 – 2031

The Committee considered a report seeking approval for the *Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping: A strategy for Reading 2026 – 2031*, along with its accompanying Action Plan. The draft Strategy set out the Council's proposed approach to homelessness and rough sleeping over the next five years. The following documents were appended to the report:

- Appendix 1 Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping: A strategy for Reading 2026 – 2031
- Appendix 2 Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping: An action plan for Reading 2026
- Appendix 3 Review of Reading's previous Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategies
- Appendix 4 Understanding Homelessness and Rough Sleeping in Reading: Strategic needs analysis
- Appendix 5 Consultation Review and Outcomes
- Appendix 7 Online (Go Vocal) Consultation Responses Summary
- Appendix 8 Equality Impact Assessment: Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping: A strategy for Reading 2026-31

The report explained that as part of the development of the proposed new Strategy a detailed assessment of achievements arising from Reading's Preventing Homelessness Strategy 2020 – 2025 and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2019 – 2024 had been completed. A comprehensive Needs Analysis had also been completed, which showed continued population growth, increasing housing costs and sustained pressure on both temporary accommodation and homelessness prevention services.

The report explained that the new Strategy focused on three key priorities:

- (1) early intervention to prevent homelessness and rough sleeping;
- (2) break the cycle of homelessness and rough sleeping when prevention had not been possible; and

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- (3) make sure everyone could access safe, settled, and affordable housing.

The report added that the strong partnerships between the Council, health services, probation, community groups, and national agencies like prisons and the Home Office helped to prevent homelessness and support recovery. By sharing information, coordinating referrals, and offering joined-up services advice and support could be tailored to each person's needs. Improved coordination would also facilitate access to funding, and ensure support was joined-up, inclusive, and reached those who needed it most. People who had experienced homelessness would also be involved from the start, to help with making services easier to understand and access and reflect real customer journeys.

Resolved:

- (1) **That the publication of *Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping: A strategy for Reading 2026 – 2031* and the accompanying Action Plan be approved;**
- (2) **That annual updates on delivery against the Strategy and accompanying Action Plan be submitted to the Committee for review.**

31. RBC LANDLORD SERVICES – APRIL TO DECEMBER 2025 PERFORMANCE REPORT

Further to Minute 23 of the meeting held on 12 November 2025, the Committee received a report providing an update on the performance of Reading Borough Council's Housing Landlord Service delivered year to date, up to and including December 2025, following the inspection by the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) which had concluded in April 2025.

The report explained that the Service had received positive feedback via monthly meetings with the RSH regarding the progress made to date on the Service Improvement Plan. The Regulator was confident in the improvements that had been delivered so far and was assured by the actions the Service had taken to address the root causes of the issues that had been identified. Based on the evidence submissions, the Regulator had confirmed that the Service was moving closer to achieving sustainable, long-term change and they were considering reducing the frequency of meetings.

The report provided assurance to the Committee that the Service was delivering against the strategic objectives of the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023, with a clear focus on improving outcomes for current and future tenants of social housing.

The report explained that a working group had been established to compile and carry out a tenant census, with the aim of ensuring that the Service held up-to-date information on tenants including protected characteristics to ensure that any additional needs or reasonable adjustments were recorded and used to inform service delivery and achieve equitable outcomes. It was intended to launch the tenant census in April 2026 and this would remain open for up to six months to encourage widest possible participation. The

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census would initially be available online through the Housing Online Portal and officers were also exploring the option of making the census accessible via the corporate Go Vocal platform to increase digital participation. In addition, officers across the service would support data collection through door-knocking, completing the census digitally with tenants. As a final alternative, paper forms would be issued where required.

The report also stated that the Tenant Engagement Team was currently working with a group of engaged tenants to scrutinise two priority areas of the Housing Service identified by the Tenant Voice Panel, the Repairs Service and the handling of Housing Complaints. Ten tenants were taking part in this scrutiny project with six sessions, running through to April 2026. Tenants would review specific aspects of these services and produce written recommendations for service improvement. These findings would be shared with the Regulator of Social Housing and via this Committee. The tenants would be focusing their scrutiny of the Repairs Service on how the Service communicated with tenants throughout the repairs process, as well as reviewing the full tenant journey from the point a repair was first reported to the Council. For Housing Complaints, the group was examining whether there were further opportunities to reduce complaint volumes and to strengthen the way the Service managed and resolved complaints. Work was also underway to develop a wider Tenant Engagement programme. The project plan would be finalised in May 2026 having been agreed by the Tenant Voice Panel, with the intention of launching new engagement activities from that point including obtaining the Tenant Quality Mark on all Housing Landlord webpages. The new Tenant Engagement Programme for 2026 to 2027 would include facilitated focus groups to scrutinise key areas within Tenancy Management and Antisocial Behaviour.

The report also set out details of complaints, response times and Housing Ombudsman complaints for the period April 2025 to December 2025.

Resolved -

- (1) That the Housing Landlord Service Performance and key achievements delivered year to date, up to and including December 2025 be noted;**
- (2) That the themes and programmes of the service improvement plan against the consumer standards be endorsed.**

32. PROGRAMME OF WORKS TO COUNCIL HOUSING STOCK 2026/27

The Committee considered a report which set out the maintenance work programme for Council Homes for 2026/27. The overall work programme budget for 2026/27 was £27.95m which maintained an acceptable reserve balance in the HRA Business Plan. In addition, there were £0.255m of General Fund costs relating to Garages and Temporary Accommodation giving a total programme cost of £28.2m. The following documents were appended to the report:

Appendix 1: Works to Housing Stock 2026-2027 Housing Revenue Account (HRA)

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Appendix 2: Works to Housing Stock 2026-2027 (General Fund)

Appendix 3: Works to Housing Stock by Ward 2026-2027.

The report explained that Housing Repairs and Property Services had a responsibility to ensure that the housing stock was well maintained in accordance with the Decent Homes Standard and that Council homes were safe and healthy places to live in. The Service also worked to improve the wider environment on housing estates to meet the needs and aspirations of both the Council and its tenants.

The report added that the Service continued to have a strong focus on improving the thermal efficiency of homes in line with the Council's Climate Change ambitions ensuring homes could be heated efficiently and cost effectively, thus reducing their carbon footprint and reducing fuel poverty. All options for new funding streams for further thermal efficiencies would be considered as and when they were launched.

Resolved -

- (1) That the planned maintenance work programme for Council Homes for 2026/27 be noted;**
- (2) That to the Executive Director of Communities and Adult Social Care in consultation with the Lead Councillor for Housing be authorised to: (a) tender; and (b) enter into all necessary contracts for individual schemes that begin within the 26/27 work programme as set out in Appendix 1 & 2 of this report subject to sufficient funding being available in the approved Budget (£28.20m across HRA and General Fund) to meet the cost of the schemes.**

33. ALLOCATIONS SCHEME UPDATE

The Committee received a report setting out proposed updates to Reading Borough Council's Allocations Scheme in response to updated Social Housing Allocations Guidance and Improving Access to Social Housing for Victims of Domestic Abuse Guidance, both published in July 2025 by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). The proposed changes addressed specific requirements relating to Armed Forces personnel, survivors of Domestic Abuse and Care Leavers albeit they did not alter the Council's overall approach to administering lettings. Further minor amendments were also proposed to clarify wording in the Scheme ensuring it clearly laid out the Councils' responsibilities. Appendix 1 to the report provided details of the recommended amendments, and Appendix 2 set out the full Scheme with tracked changes.

Resolved - That the proposed amendments to the Council's Housing Allocations Scheme be approved, and that the revised scheme be adopted and implemented in April 2026.

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34. HIGHWAY MAINTENANCE PROGRAMME 2026/2027 & 2025/2026 HIGHWAY MAINTENANCE UPDATE

Further to Minute 26 of the meeting held on 11 March 2025, the Committee considered a report that provided updates on and sought scheme and spend approval for:

- The Department for Transport's (DfT's) Highway Maintenance Award 2026/27 Local Transport Block Funding (Integrated Transport & Highway Maintenance) settlement;
- The progress of year 4 (2025/26) of the Council's additional £8M 5-year (2022/23 to 2026/27) Highway Capital Roads & Pavements Investment Programme;
- The completion of the Highway Maintenance 2025/26 DfT Local Transport Block Funded Capital Works Programme.

The following documents were appended to the report:

Appendix 1: 2025/26 Programme Delivered;
Appendix 2: Proposed 2026/27 Delivery Programme.

Section 3 of the report set out details of the works that included highways maintenance, resurfacing of roads and pavements and works to bridges and other structures, plus the costs associated with these works.

Resolved -

- (1) **That the Department for Transport's (DfT's) Highway Maintenance Award 2026/27 Local Transport Block Funding (Integrated Transport & Highway Maintenance) settlement be noted and scheme and spend approval be granted;**
- (2) **That the progress of year 4 (2025/26) of the Council's additional £8M 5-year (2022/23 to 2026/27) Highway Capital Roads & Pavements Investment Programme be noted;**
- (3) **That the completion of the Highway Maintenance 2025/26 DfT Local Transport Block Funded Capital Works Delivery Programme be noted.**

(The meeting closed at 8.43 pm)