



**20 November 2024**

<b>Title</b>	Annual Reports for 2023/24 on (i) the Reading Climate Emergency Strategy and (ii) the Council's corporate greenhouse gas emissions
<b>Purpose of the report</b>	To note the report for information
<b>Report status</b>	Public report
<b>Report author</b>	Ben Burfoot, Sustainability Manager
<b>Lead Councillor</b>	Cllr Ennis, Lead Councillor for Climate Strategy and Transport
<b>Corporate priority</b>	Healthy Environment
<b>Recommendations</b>	<p>The Committee is asked to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Note the progress in reducing Reading Borough's carbon emissions, which have fallen by 54% since 2005.</li> <li>2. Note the progress in reducing Reading Borough Council's corporate emissions, which have fallen by 72.7% since 2008/09.</li> <li>3. Note that while progress is being made, the Council and other partners will need to increase the pace of emissions reduction to meet the targets for a net zero Reading, and a net zero Council, by 2030.</li> </ol>

## 1. Executive Summary

1.1. This report presents Annual Reports for 2023/24 for two key elements of Reading's response to the climate emergency:

- The 2023/24 Annual Report on the Reading Climate Emergency Strategy 2020-25 (Appendix 1): this report has been prepared by the Reading Climate Change Partnership and reflects activity by a range of partners across Reading, not just the Council. The headline messages from the report are that, in common with the rest of the UK, emissions for 2022 (the latest year for which data is available) fell compared to 2021. This followed an uptick in emissions in the year after the pandemic. The long-term trend remains positive with Borough emissions falling 54% since 2005. This is a further reduction on the 51% reduction reported in 2021. Reading saw the 12<sup>th</sup> largest reduction in emissions out of 374 UK local authority areas. Reading's per capita emissions also remain the lowest in Berkshire. The pace of emissions reduction will, however, need to increase significantly to get back on track to achieve the Strategy target of 'net zero by 2030'.
- The 2023/24 Annual Report on the Council's corporate greenhouse gas emissions (Appendix 2): this report is produced annually by the Council and tracks progress with implementation of the Council's Carbon Plan and the targets within it. The headline message from the report is that the Council's carbon footprint has been cut by 72.7% since 2008/09. This does not represent a reduction on the previous year and therefore indicates that the Council is no longer on track to meet its interim target of an 85% cut in emissions by 2025. As concluded in the previous year which saw modest reductions, further action and investment will be needed to achieve this target, and to make progress towards the ultimate target of becoming a net zero organisation by 2030. It should also be noted that some factors that affect emissions

are beyond the Council's control even in the case of emissions from the Council's direct operations.

## **2. Policy Context**

- 2.1. In 2019 the UK government committed to a national statutory target of 'net zero carbon' by 2050, having updated the Climate Change Act to aim for a 100% reduction in emissions compared to the 1990 baseline. The UK's 'carbon budget' is designed to achieve a 68% reduction in UK emissions by 2030 and 78% by 2035. The Committee on Climate Change, the government's statutory adviser on climate change, has, however, warned in its latest (2024) report to Parliament that the UK is not on track to meet its 2030 targets with only one third of the required emissions being covered by credible policies. The Committee has also highlighted the delays and cessation of key policy areas such as electric vehicles, heat pumps and regulations on landlords by the previous government all putting these targets at even greater risk. It should be noted there has been a change of government since the above report was published and at the time of writing the autumn budget is awaited to understand the new policy framework although the labour party manifesto gives an indication.
- 2.2. Prior to the adoption of the national 'net zero by 2050' target, Reading Borough Council had declared a climate emergency at its meeting in February 2019, committing to the more ambitious aim of a net zero carbon Reading by 2030. In November 2020, the Council subsequently endorsed the new Reading Climate Emergency Strategy 2020-25 (prepared by the Reading Climate Change Partnership, of which the Council is a founding member) based on the 'net zero by 2030' ambition. At the same time the Council adopted a new corporate Carbon Plan for the period 2020-25, including an interim target to reduce the Council's own emissions by 85% by 2025 *en route* to net zero by 2030.
- 2.3. This report presents Annual Reports on both the Reading Climate Emergency Strategy and the Council's own greenhouse gas emissions, covering the financial year (2023/24).

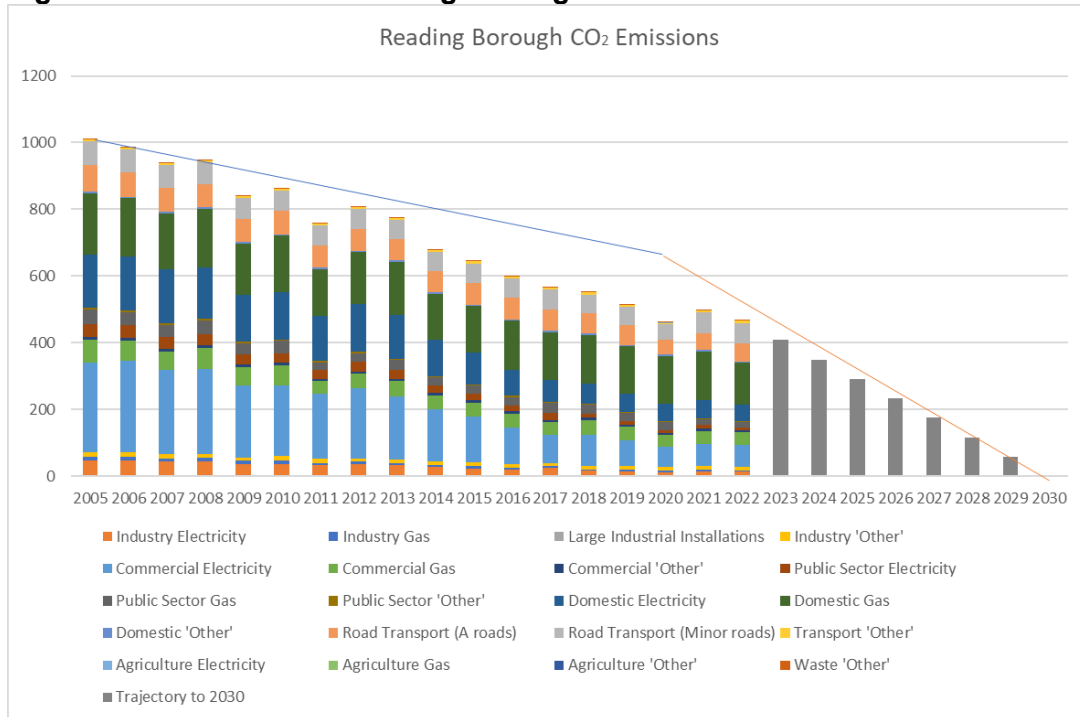
## **3. Key Conclusions from the Annual Report 2023/24 on the Reading Climate Emergency Strategy (see Appendix 1)**

- 3.1 The Annual Report has been prepared by the Reading Climate Change Partnership, and is presented to SEPT Committee to meet the Partnership's commitment to transparent reporting on progress with strategy implementation, and to ensure that it is widely available to the public. As such, the report describes activity by a range of partners who have committed to action within the strategy, of which the Council is just one.
- 3.2 The measure used to track progress towards the target of 'a net zero Reading by 2030' is a national (DESNZ) dataset for 'emissions within the scope of influence of local authorities', published annually. There is a lag in the national data collection exercise so the latest data, published in June 2024, relate to the calendar year 2022.
- 3.3 While the 2021 data showed a 'bounce-back of emissions in Reading compared to 2020, reflecting the easing of pandemic restrictions, the 2022 data show that emissions have reverted to a downward trajectory. Key points are:
  - Reading Borough's emissions reduced by a further 3% between 2021 and 2022.
  - With the exception of the pandemic year, the emission trajectory for Reading has been downwards. This reflects the general pattern for the UK however due to the decarbonisation of the electricity grid over the 2005 to 2022 period. Reading's emissions have fallen by 54% since 2005 – the 12<sup>th</sup> largest reduction out of 374 UK local authority areas.

- Reading's per capita emissions remain the lowest in Berkshire and are also lower than the SE and UK average.

3.4 Reading's performance relative to other areas is therefore strong by this measure. We now need to see significant reductions every year to 2030 as shown in figure 1. Nationally and locally emissions in 2022 were only slightly lower than the pre-pandemic year of 2019. The 2022 data (published in June 2024) showed that the emissions resumed the overall pattern to the long-term downward trend shown in figure 1 of reductions.

**Figure 1: Reductions in Reading Borough Emissions 2005-2022**



3.5 The Annual Report also highlights case studies and celebrates achievements which have been taken forward by partners in Reading during the course of the last year. These include several initiatives led by the Council:

- **Zero Carbon Depot:** The Council completed the acquisition of its 13<sup>th</sup> and last electric waste vehicle in March 2024, effectively decarbonising 25% of its diesel emissions at a stroke. Expansion of solar through the installation of solar canopies at the depot site alongside use of electricity storage and the electrification of the remainder of the vehicle fleets would see the depot come very close to net zero in its operations.
- **Green Events Pilot:** Over the last eight months, ten local authorities of varying sizes from around the country - including Reading - have been exploring how the standards set out in the industry-led Green Events Code of Practice, GECOP, can be used to firm up requirements and provide support to local festivals in cutting carbon emissions and embedding sustainable practices. Four of Reading's festivals agreed to use GECOP as a benchmark against which to assess their own practice, and share learning: East Reading Festival, Reading Festival, Readipop Festival and Water Fest.
- **The 'Green BID' (Business Improvement District).**  
A workshop in 2023 brought together a range of partners from the public and private sector to consider the impact of the town centre on carbon emissions.

Following the 'Yes' vote by the business community for our Green BID plan 2024-29, support was given for 1 of 5 service themes –“Environmental and Sustainable“ earmarking upto £75k per annum over the term, for measures that will help businesses reduce the city centres carbon footprint.

Impact measures from 2023 BID included outcomes such as; 1.336 tonnes of Cardboard recycled (+ 38%), 2.6 Tonnes of WEEE (+ 600%), Walks Festival, Xmas lights 40% energy reduction, Carbon literacy training for staff to encourage behavioural change, Litter picking days.

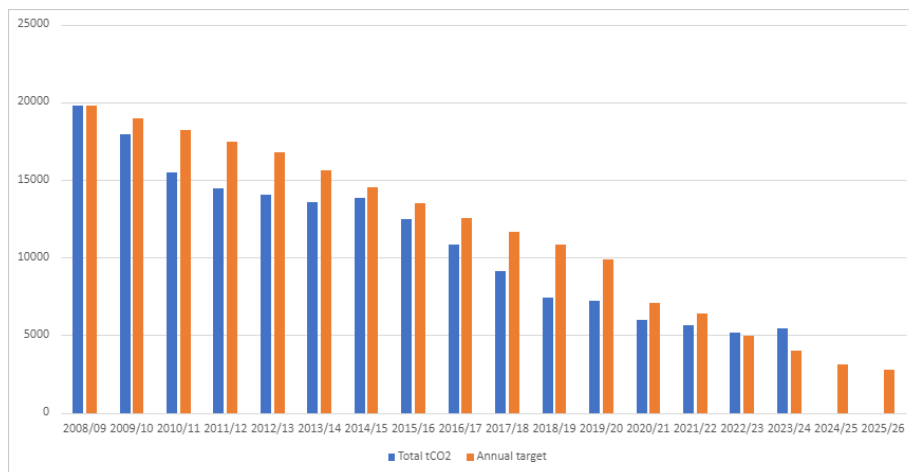
- **Transparency and accountability:** in September 2024 the Council submitted its third annual return to the Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP) whose international reporting platform is regarded as the 'gold standard' in climate reporting for local authorities. In 2023 CDP confirmed that Reading had retained its place on their 'A' list of cities taking bold climate action for the second time. The Council awaits the outcome of its third assessment. (*\*Note unlikely to be notified by the committee date due to software issues with the reporting platform and delays ensued*)

#### 4. **Key conclusions from the Council's annual greenhouse gas emissions report (see Appendix 2)**

- 4.1 This report has been produced annually by the Council since 2008/09 to track progress with implementation of the Council's Carbon Plan and its publication meets our obligations to report transparently on corporate emissions in line with the relevant emissions reporting protocols. Although the Council's emissions represent only 1.1% of the total for the Borough, they assume greater significance due to the need for the Council to lead by example in setting and delivering ambitious carbon reduction targets.
- 4.2 The headline conclusion of the report is that the Council's carbon footprint for the 2023/24 business year has been cut by 72.7% since 2008-09, a slight increase in emissions from 2022/23. This means that the Council's emissions rose by 1.2% against the baseline. This slight rise in emissions puts the Council slightly above its benchmark for meeting an 85% cut in corporate emissions by 2025. (See Figure 2.)
- 4.3 One of the factors that contributed to the increased emissions was that for the first time in many years the carbon intensity of grid electricity rose instead of falling. This rose by 7% due to a national reduction in renewable generation and an increase in electricity generated by gas fired power stations. Another contributing factor was an update in streetlighting inventory which gave a slight increase in reported emissions. This wasn't, in fact a true increase in emissions but previous reports were a slight underestimate for streetlighting, which is unmetred.
- 4.4 There are a number of major projects currently being delivered which, going forward, will deliver significant additional cuts in emissions. These include:
  - Decarbonisation of the Civic Offices: the Council is replacing gas heating with air source heat pumps as part of the Levelling Up Fund (LUF) project to integrate the Central Library into the Civic Offices, with heat pumps due for installation in 2025.
  - Decarbonisation of the Hexagon campus, using ground source heat pumps which will utilise water extracted from Readings aquifer to replace gas heating. This project will form part of the LUF project which will add a new performance space to the existing Hexagon, along with lighting and insulation improvements, due for completion in 2025/6.
  - Disposal of Central Library as part of the LUF programme, expected in 2025.

- Further investment in solar panel installations at the Council's depot, car parks and other sites.
- 4.5 These projects will make a significant contribution towards our targets but further projects and investment will still be needed in order to meet the trajectory needed to meet net zero. Work is underway to identify these investment needs and a new carbon plan will come forward in 2025/6 which will include details of the pathway to net zero for Council emissions for the years 2025 to 2030.
- 4.6 The overall trajectory of Council emissions since 2008/09 is shown in figure 2, along with notional annual benchmarks aligning to the interim target of an 85% cut by 2025. These benchmarks were based on assumptions made in 2020, at the start of the current Carbon Plan period. The impact of different interventions can be seen in this document. Figure 2 shows that the actual reductions have fallen short of the trajectory set out. This reflects the fact that the Council has set very ambitious targets, and that, with many of the easier and lower cost carbon reduction measures having already been taken, each remaining percentage point of emissions reduction is inevitably more challenging and emissions reductions are dependant on many factors, many of which are outside the Council's control.

**Figure 2: reductions in RBC corporate emissions 2008/09 to 2023/24**



- 4.8 Significantly, the Carbon Plan includes a secondary target to reduce the Council's fossil fuel use to 50% of its 2008/09 level by 2025 through removal of fossil fuel heating and electrification of vehicles. The council used 388,610 litres of fuel/oil, and 11,030 MWh of natural gas in 2023/24. This means that this target, which was achieved early continues to be met – the Council's gas use is currently 59% lower than 2008/09 and oil/fuel is 39% lower than 2008/09, which taken together shows a 57% reduction which represents a significant achievement.

## 5. Contribution to strategic aims

- 5.1 The Council's efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions as summarised in this report support the following Corporate Plan priorities:
- **Healthy environment:** the Annual Reports record progress on tackling climate change and working towards our goal of a net zero carbon town and Council by 2030.
  - **Thriving communities:** various actions in the Climate Strategy and Carbon Plan are designed to help reduce energy use and thus reduce the exposure of households and businesses to high energy bills, which have been a major source of concern as energy prices have escalated.

- **Inclusive economy:** the Council's Carbon Plan includes investment in energy efficiency and renewable energy which stimulates the low carbon economy and provides employment in this sector.

5.2 The corporate Carbon Plan also contributes to TEAM Reading values, particularly on Efficiency – by minimising the risks and costs associated with energy use and by improving the energy and carbon efficiency of Council operations.

## **6. Environmental and Climate Implications**

6.1. The Council declared a climate emergency at its meeting in February 2019 (minute 48 refers). This commits to the ambitious goal of a net zero carbon Reading by 2030. The Reading Climate Emergency Strategy 2020-25 and the Council's Carbon Plan for 2020-25 align with this goal, setting more ambitious targets for reducing emissions compared to the Council's previous plans. The Annual Reports which are the subject of this report are an important mechanism for tracking progress towards these targets but do not have any material environmental or climate implications in and of themselves.

## **7. Community Engagement**

7.1. Section 138 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 places a duty on local authorities to involve local representatives when carrying out "any of its functions" by providing information, consulting or "involving in another way". While there is no requirement to consult on the Annual Reports which are the subject of this report, they will be made public via the Reading Climate Action Network website and the Council's website. In addition, the Reading Climate Emergency Strategy was the subject of extensive public consultation and engagement prior to publication in November 2020.

## **8. Equality Implications**

8.1. An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) is not required for this report.

## **9. Other Relevant Considerations**

9.1. Consideration has been given to other issues of relevance to this report, the key one being risk management implications. 'Failure to meet net zero carbon commitments', in relation to both Borough emissions and the Council's own operations, is included as a high level risk in the Council's Strategic Risk Register, and the likelihood and impact of this risk is assessed on an ongoing basis. The increase in Borough emissions between 2020 and 2021 inevitably increases the risk associated with achievement of the targets.

## **10. Legal Implications**

10.1. There are no legal implications arising from this report. Completion of the Annual Reports included in this report is not mandatory but is important for transparency in demonstrating progress towards key policy objectives.

## **11. Financial Implications**

11.1. There are no direct financial implications arising from this report although Appendix 2 quantifies the cumulative and annual costs avoided as a result of efforts to reduce energy use and thus carbon emissions within the Council's estate and operations, under the auspices of the corporate Carbon Plan. This suggests that the cumulative costs avoided by the Council from reduced energy consumption since 2008/09 are c£28.5 million (excluding standing charges and other contract charges) compared to if no action had been taken. In 2023/24 alone these avoided costs were estimated at c£6.2m million. With energy prices still at a high level, the value at stake from reducing our energy consumption in line with Carbon Plan aspirations is likely to increase in future years. The report also highlights the need for the Council to make further investment to

achieve its interim target of an 85% cut in corporate emissions by 2025 and ultimate target of net zero by 2030. Work is underway to quantify these investment needs and will be taken forward through the normal budget setting process.

## **12. Timetable for Implementation**

12.1. Not applicable. The next Annual Reports on the Climate Strategy and Carbon Plan will be presented to SEPT Committee in November 2025.

## **13. Background Papers**

13.1. There are none.

## **Appendices**

1. Annual Report 2023/24 on the Reading Climate Emergency Strategy 2020-25
2. Annual Report 2023/24 on Reading Borough Council Greenhouse Gas Emissions