

COUNCIL MEETING – 25 FEBRUARY 2025

QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

1. WITHDRAWN
2. Councillor White to ask the Leader of the Council:

Reading Council to Slash £230,000 from Inequality Budget Impacting Community Projects

As part of tonight's budget Labour Councillors are proposing cutting the budget for tackling inequality in South Reading. The plan would reduce the £340,000 budget by £230,000, leaving only £110,000 available. While staff funding remains intact, money for running projects to tackle inequality is being slashed. The detail of these cuts is hidden in budget papers only available to councillors. Previously, these funds supported community activities covering sports, education, skills development, culture, career advice, and the community ambassadors' network.

Does the Leader of the Council support this cut? And have we simply gone from Conservative austerity to Labour austerity ?

REPLY by Councillor Terry Leader of the Council.

Labour Councillors are committed to tackling inequality within the Borough and delivering fairer communities for our residents, as shown in the updated Council Plan consultation that commenced earlier this month.

Our 'Place based' policy has delivered improvements for our residents within the pilot areas in South Reading.

A product of success for the place-based approach is that local communities, have not become dependent on one-off or time limited projects to deliver the sustainable changes they need. It should teach us that tackling inequality requires ongoing systemic change to how services are delivered, not just in isolation, but across the entire Council and how it works with its partners.

That is why the Council is retaining the officer support to maintain ongoing improvements by finding new opportunities to empower local residents and make our day-to-day services as effective as possible for all residents. This includes identifying any external funding opportunities to enhance the services and facilities available.

It is also important to recognise where the Council continues to commit resources to supporting residents within the Borough. Later this year the Council will be recommissioning services delivered under its Closing the Gap process, ensuring that some of the most vulnerable residents continue to receive the support they need. This includes commissioning services focused on supporting carer's, cost of living and debt, our aging population, women's wellbeing, mental health, refugees and ethnically diverse communities.

Also, earlier this month, the Council has once again supported a wide range of local projects via its Small Grants Fund allocations including groups in South Reading.

Reading Borough remains a place where local communities will always be supported by both our efforts and our innovation, and our decisions on our use of resources will always support and protect all of our residents and their quality of lives.

3. Councillor McElroy to ask the Leader of the Council:

Reading's Labour Council Delivers Labour Government's Austerity Agenda

Council tax is again going up on average by more than £100 (£101). Limited discounts for some vulnerable residents remain less than they were under Council Tax Benefit. According to the Institute of Fiscal Studies council tax is 'highly regressive with respect to property value'. This means that council tax is much higher as a proportion of income for lower value properties.

The Labour Government has ruled out fixing this broken system, making sure that council tax continues to favour the wealthy. As this austerity budget raises council tax while cutting essential services Greens believe it is fair to assume that this Labour Council 100% backs the Labour government in their approach to the country's finances: i.e. tax loopholes for non-doms and the rich, and waiting lists, potholes, black mould and missed bin collections for the rest of us.

Can the Leader tell us exactly what she and the Council are doing to lobby the Prime Minister and Chancellor, to explain that if people wanted Tory policies they would have voted Conservative and that further austerity and tax rises for those who can least afford it will be devastating to the people of Reading ?

REPLY by Councillor Terry Leader of the Council.

I have noticed that the Greens have been leading all their comments on the budget with the assertion that the Labour Government and therefore this Council has an austerity agenda. This is puzzling as the Labour Government's final settlement for local government has seen an overall 6.8% in cash terms increase in councils' Core Spending Power compared to 2024/2025 the very opposite of reducing public spending.

The Government has been clear that it will fix the foundations of local government to put councils on a more stable and secure footing whilst acknowledging that it cannot undo the damage caused by 14 years of Conservative austerity and mishandling of the economy overnight.

The Green's claim that the Council is cutting essential services well that is not correct and let's look at some of the examples given. I am not sure what waiting lists are being referred to but if they mean the NHS waiting lists well Labour has just delivered 2.2 million more elective appointments compared to the same period in 2023 in just 6 months. It has just announced a roll out of an extra 700,000 urgent dentist appointments. And locally following the first £9m of spending on resurfacing over 700 residential roads the next £8m investment has begun with 106 residential roads currently being resurfaced. All of which has so far led to a 39% reduction in the number of potholes reported by the public.

But let me return to the specific question. The figure you are quoting is based on Band D council tax, which we are required to quote. However, 70% of properties in Reading are Band C or below and the increase on these properties will be lower. You also suggest that discounts are limited but this isn't true. Over 24,500 households in Reading will benefit from reductions in their Council Tax and those reductions amount to over £30m per annum.

While the Council Tax system isn't perfect, any suggestion that lower council increases benefit the poor simply isn't correct for 3 key reasons:

Firstly, freezing Council Tax gives a bigger tax break to those who already have the most wealth as it favours those who live in the most valuable homes, where the top council tax bands mean the highest bills.

Secondly, the poorest, most vulnerable people in Reading are the ones who need our support the most. Far from being an austerity budget, this budget sees investment of over £10 million in social care and £900k in supporting people at risk of homelessness. We could not have made that investment without the Council Tax increase and additional government funding.

Thirdly, if a council freezes council tax, then the impact isn't just felt in the year that decision is made, it is felt forever. You only have to look at Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead to see the long-term implications of those decisions. They had stated that they needed a 25% increase in council tax due to losses over a number of years when the previous Conservative administration failed to increase its council tax base.