

AGENDA ITEM: 6

QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

1. Councillor Raj Singh to ask the Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Community Safety:

Street Cleaning

Given ongoing concerns raised by residents across several Wards about litter, fly-tipping, and the general cleanliness of our streets, can the Lead Councillor confirm:

- Whether current street cleaning schedules are being fully met,
- What monitoring is in place to ensure standards are maintained,
- Whether there are any plans to review resources to improve street cleaning across Reading, particularly in high-footfall or problem areas, and
- Can the Council publish the schedule of street cleaning days for each Ward or area on its website?

REPLY by Councillor Rowland Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Community Safety.

I'd like to thank Councillor Singh for his question. The Council recognises the importance of maintaining clean, safe, and welcoming streets for all residents, businesses, and visitors. I will address each point raised as follows:

1. Street Cleaning Schedules

Street cleansing operations are in place borough-wide to ensure regular maintenance of both residential and commercial areas. In the town centre and district shopping areas, cleansing takes place daily from 05:30am, every day of the year except Christmas Day. Residential streets are scheduled to be swept fortnightly, with some higher-density areas such as terraced streets with limited off-street parking receiving weekly sweeps due to higher footfall and litter. In addition, all litter bins across the borough are scheduled to be emptied at least once per week, with more frequent collections in busier locations. While we aim to meet these schedules as consistently as possible, factors such as staffing levels, weather conditions, operational constraints and emerging issues may occasionally require adjustments and alterations of scheduling. In such instances, priority is given to areas of greatest need, including town centres, transport hubs, and known hot-spot or problem locations.

2. Monitoring and Standards

A range of monitoring arrangements are in place to ensure cleansing standards are upheld. This includes routine inspections carried out by our supervisory teams, regular feedback with ward Councillors and residents, and the use of photographic evidence and mapping systems to track persistent issues in particular areas. We also liaise and work closely with colleagues in enforcement to address fly-tipping and other waste-related offences, using intelligence-led approaches.

3. Review of Resources and Improvement Plans

Streetscene managers regularly review the cleansing schedules as part of our ongoing internal service improvement plans. We recognise the need to adapt to increased footfall in some areas, emerging issues or problem areas and rising public expectation around environmental standards. This includes considering how we can make better use of existing resources and improve coordination with related services such as waste enforcement, green space maintenance and highways. We consistently seek to ensure the service through maximising operational efficiencies where possible. Given the multiple competing needs and budgets across the Council, we continually seek to protect and enhance the services and if funding or resource possibilities become available.

4. Publication of Cleaning Schedules

While I understand the interest in publishing detailed ward-level cleansing schedules, in practice, doing so would not provide an accurate or reliable reflection of the service delivery nor allow for the flexibility and responsiveness that the service must also provide. Street cleansing is influenced by multiple variables, including seasonal and weather conditions, vehicle and equipment availability and staffing. Furthermore, to maintain operational efficiency and prioritise resource on cleansing where there is the greatest need whilst upholding environmental standards, scheduled streets may not be swept if they are assessed to already meet an acceptable level of cleanliness, in line with the Environmental Protection Act. As such, a rigid published schedule could easily lead to the wasting of resources cleaning areas that are reasonably clean or set unrealistic expectations. This would place an unnecessary limiting rigidity on what must be by its very nature also a responsive and dynamic service. This is not to say that internal schedules such as described above are not set out, however, that flexibility factor would be hampered if the Teams were required to “stick to a set schedule” instead of “respond” to hot-spot situations or areas. However, we remain committed to providing clear channels for residents to report local issues on Love Clean Reading for example and for Members to request reactive attention to problem areas as they emerge.

The cleanliness of Reading’s streets is vital to a town we can all enjoy and we welcome ongoing dialogue with Members and residents to ensure service delivery meets local need.

2. Councillor Raj Singh to ask the Lead Councillor for Children: **Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse**

In light of Keir Starmer finally bowing to public and political pressure to launch a national statutory inquiry into grooming gangs - after months of delays - many residents in Reading are understandably asking what lessons apply here locally.

Given that neighbouring areas within the Thames Valley Police jurisdiction, such as Oxford, have already seen serious grooming gang prosecutions, and recognising the very real concerns of survivors and vulnerable young people, can the Lead Councillor confirm:

- What specific steps Reading Borough Council has taken, or will now take, to review historic and current safeguarding cases locally to ensure there are no similar unresolved issues in Reading;
- Whether the Council would support an independent local review - beyond internal processes - to reassure residents that no political sensitivities have ever prevented full investigations into organised exploitation here;
- And finally, what immediate reassurances can be given to victims and the wider community that robust safeguarding protections are fully in place today, and will be regularly scrutinised in light of this national inquiry?

REPLY by Councillor Griffith Lead Councillor for Children.

Firstly, I'd like to clarify a point raised by the opposition. The Prime Minister has stated that he commissioned Dame Louise Casey to produce a report in response to the concerns and issues that had been raised. Following her findings, he accepted her conclusions, which included the need for both a national police operation to review past cases of child exploitation and a national inquiry.

It's important that we remain accurate in how we describe these developments. Public concern around this issue has been widespread and deeply felt. Many people have been left dismayed by how it has been handled over the years, and it's vital that all parties treat this with the seriousness and integrity it deserves. Let's remember that at the heart of this discourse are child victims whose lives have been harmed by this, and their families. Let's hold back from making this a political football.

This is a serious matter, and it is right to set out the position here in Reading.

Brighter Futures for Children (BFfC) deliver children's services on behalf of Reading Borough Council. BFfC maintain a dedicated workforce of practitioners and social work qualified managers who oversee the current arrangements for helping and protecting children from exploitation and extra-familial harm. There are strong working relationships between these teams and Thames Valley Police and robust arrangements for partnership working, information sharing and joint responses to any concerns before or as they arise.

Incidents regarding 'group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse' are managed through the complex strategy discussion arrangements, in line with protocols set out by the Berkshire West Safeguarding Children's Board (BWSCB). Recent examples of these arrangements have demonstrated their effectiveness and positive impact on tackling issues across Reading.

Any current safeguarding issues for children are reviewed weekly at an operational, multi-agency meeting where evidence and intelligence are scrutinised and decisions made to progress investigations. Every child open to BFfC where a concern for exploitation and or extra-familial harm have been identified are reviewed within this panel, and any new children are promptly added to the agenda of upcoming meetings. These teams work closely with Children's Single Point of access (CSPOA) including CSPOA having representation at the panel. This ensures timely access to information so that any new concerns of group-based child sexual exploitation are responded to as required.

We recognise the importance of public confidence and transparency in our statutory duties and responsibilities. BFfC maintain a thorough and robust audit and quality assurance programme which includes thematic reviews of exploitation, extra-familial harm and contextual safeguarding. The Council would be open to the idea of an independent review, should credible concerns or evidence emerge that warrant specific action. We will cooperate with any recommendations, requirements and improvements arising from the national enquiry.

To victims, survivors and the wider community, we say this; we hear you, we believe you and we are committed to ensuring Reading is a safe place for you both now and in the future.

Today, Reading has a children's single point of access where professionals and individuals can access support, advice and guidance and where decision making is informed with all the available information. This ensures children are seen as children and access the services and interventions appropriate to their needs. Training is offered for frontline staff on identifying and responding to exploitation and is mandatory for any new starter's induction to the organisation. A shared practice approach promoting restorative and trauma informed practice provides a consistent and evidence informed approach across the Borough. A dedicated and highly skilled exploitation and

missing children's team that work across the partnership and who regularly deliver training with other organisations, including to foster carers, A&E services and in partnership with TVP. BFfC staff access training and refresher training via the evidence lead approach, 'Stay True to you', delivered across the Thames Valley which promotes effective and informed conversations with children and their experience in our communities.

We will continue to strengthen these arrangements including developing services following the important feedback and contribution from victims and survivors as well as any national learning and further guidance from the future national enquiry.

3. Councillor O'Connell to ask the Leader of the Council:

Trans Rights and Gender Policing

In recent months, we have witnessed a concerning rise in transphobic rhetoric and actions across the UK. Trans people, particularly trans women and non-binary individuals, are being increasingly subjected to surveillance, harassment, and exclusion when accessing public spaces - especially toilets and changing facilities. We were all the more dismayed to hear reports that GLL, who run Reading's leisure centres on behalf of the Council, are restricting access to single-sex changing rooms based on "biological sex". These actions not only breach the spirit and letter of the Equality Act 2010, but also risk normalising discrimination in our communities.

Will the Leader of the Council, therefore, confirm that Reading Borough Council will adopt a clear and enforceable policy that protects the rights of trans and non-binary people, and ensure that this policy is replicated in the actions taken by its contractors including GLL? The policy will include ensuring that Reading Borough Council:

Issue strict regulations against gender-policing in Council building toilets and changing rooms, specifically that Council staff will not

- a. Interrogate any person using these facilities regarding their gender, who is not otherwise causing a nuisance.
- b. Ask individuals to produce documentation to "prove" their gender
- c. Ask individuals to partially or fully undress to prove their gender
- d. Search, touch or otherwise manhandle individuals with the intent of determining their gender
- e. Carry out internet, records or database searches with the intent of identifying an individual's gender with regard to the use of these facilities
- f. Remove individuals from these facilities or call the Police to do so, solely on the grounds of their perceived gender
- g. Advise anyone or adopt any policy of advising anyone to use the disabled toilets solely on the grounds of their perceived gender.

These commitments are not only a legal obligation under the Equality Act, but a moral imperative to ensure that Reading remains a safe, welcoming and inclusive Borough for all.

REPLY by Councillor Terry Leader of the Council.

Thank you for your question, Councillor O'Connell.

Following the Supreme Court judgment, councils and the leisure industry are considering its implications for the services they provide. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has published its draft amendments to its statutory Code of Practice for services, public functions and associations, which is out to consultation until the end of June. Until the consultation has finished and the Code of Practice has been finalised, neither the Council nor GLL will be in a position to finish their review of their policies.

I would like to clarify that neither the Council nor GLL have implemented any policy to “gender-police” toilets or changing rooms. GLL has not implemented any change to policy relating to access to toilets or changing facilities in their leisure centres in Reading.

We will continue to look at all these issues very carefully with a view to continuing to be a Borough where inclusion and diversity is championed whilst complying with our legal obligations to our staff and residents.

4. Councillor Moore to ask the Leader of the Council:
Trans Rights and Data Management

Given the concerning rise in transphobic rhetoric and actions across the UK raised by Cllr O'Connell in her question, will the Council ensure that policy on respecting the rights of trans and non-binary people is consistent across all Council establishments including Council offices, libraries, community centres and leisure facilities?

Specifically, will the Council:

Promptly update the gender recorded for residents when requested to do so;

Manage the data related to such changes as Sensitive in the context of data protection regulations;

Treat trans people for all purposes in the gender they present in, understanding trans people may not have updated their identity records?

REPLY by Councillor Terry Leader of the Council.

Thank you for your question, Councillor Moore.

I fully understand the concerns that have been raised and want to reaffirm our commitment as a Council to treating trans and non-binary people with dignity and respect whilst complying with our legal obligations.

We update all personal data held by the Council, including relating to an individual's gender identity, when requested to do so. Service users have the right to ask how we process their data and request corrections.

All personal data held by the Council is collected and managed in line with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK) GDPR under Article (6) (e) Lawful Basis Public Task. Data relating to an individual's gender identity is categorised as personal data under (UK) GDPR and is stored on the Council's password protected, secure network, with access limited to those processing the data. Special category (or 'sensitive') data is a subset of personal data under (UK) GDPR and does not include gender identity.

The Council is looking at the implications of the Supreme Court judgment for the services they provide to residents and businesses. The Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has published its draft amendments to its statutory Code of Practice for services, public functions and

associations, which is out to consultation until the end of June. We will review this once the final version has been published and we understand the full implications.

**5. Councillor Thompson to ask the Leader of the Council:
Engaging with Trans-Led Organisations**

In line with the Council's stated principle of "Involving, collaborating, and empowering residents" will Reading Borough Council commit to engaging directly with Trans affirming & Trans-led organisations on the drafting and implementation of any new policies arising directly from a Statutory Code of Practice issued by the Equality and Human Rights Commission?

REPLY by Councillor Terry Leader of the Council.

Thank you for your question, Councillor Thompson.

We fully understand the concerns in the trans community following the Supreme Court judgment.

As Leader of the Council, I have already spoken to the Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer and I will be arranging meetings with key stakeholder groups in Reading, such as Reading Pride and No5, in order to hear these concerns directly and reflections on the draft amendments published by the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

When the Code of Practice has been finalised we will be in a better position to finish our review of the relevant affected policies having proactively engaged with our communities.

The Council will continue to engage with all interested parties by inviting comments on any proposed changes to such policies so that they can be considered before the policies are finalised.

**6. Councillor Thompson to ask the Lead Councillor for Housing:
Homes for Reading**

Last summer Reading Borough Council took the decision to close down its wholly owned housing company Homes for Reading, evict the company's tenants when their tenancies end (though the tenants had originally been told that they were moving in to their forever homes), and transfer those homes to the Council's mainstream housing stock to be made available as key worker homes at affordable rents. The decision was taken at the time on grounds of prudence in managing Council finances and keeping the Council financially viable.

Now that Homes for Reading tenancies are coming to an end, however, many families, including families of key workers and families with children who have special needs, are unable to find affordable accommodation and are at severe risk of becoming homeless. In light of the substantial cost to the Council of providing emergency accommodation for homeless Homes for Reading families, and the severe stress these families are under, will the Council reconsider its decision to evict current tenants of Homes for Reading properties and take vacant possession of those properties?

And in the meantime will the Council improve the support services offered to all current Homes for Reading tenants by offering face-to-face meetings with Council staff?

REPLY by Councillor Yeo Lead Councillor for Housing.

Homes for Reading have made the difficult decision to wind up their activity, due to a change in the financial position of the company, and following consultation, this decision was finalised in July 2024, and all tenants were advised that they would need to vacate their homes as a result. As

such, Reading Borough Council have been engaging with tenants since July 2024 to offer support to secure an alternative suitable private rented home to avoid the disruptive environment of temporary housing. Homes for Reading have made this decision fully aware of the impact it will have on its tenants, however following consideration of all the options available this was the only way forward.

Reading Borough Council considered all options to keep Homes for Reading tenants in their homes while the property is being transferred to the Housing Revenue Account, however were unable to allow this as the properties will become subject to an Allocation under Part 6 of the Housing Act once they have been transferred back to Reading Borough Council. As such, like all other Council homes, they must be allocated to applicants registered on Homechoice at Reading, in line with our published Allocations Scheme.

Reading Borough Council has been contacting Homes for Reading tenants in advance of notices being issued to support tenants to find alternative accommodation in an attempt to lessen the impact and all households have been offered a meeting to support the tenants to consider their housing options, although there has been varying degrees of engagement from tenants.

The support offered to all tenants who have engaged with officers has included: support to find an alternative private rented home, financial assistance to help secure this, referrals to the Rent Guarantee Scheme, support with applications to join Homechoice at Reading, and options out of the borough where appropriate via HomeFinder UK. Some more specific advice is tailored to the needs of individual households, such as referrals for support for debt advice, floating support and support from Brighter Futures for Children. Officers have been in regular contact with tenants, primarily over the phone, although face to face appointments have been arranged where this is required and there has been a lot of communication via emails to keep both the officers and the tenants updated.

This offer of support has given Homes for Reading Tenants an extended period to resolve their situation beyond the usual two-month period, longer than normal notice periods to source alternative accommodation. Our homeless prevention teams would not normally be involved at such an early stage prior to Notices being served and many tenants have taken advantage of this early notice.

As with all instances of homelessness, the options available to the local authority to prevent homelessness are limited and therefore we are only able to offer these options to everyone threatened with homelessness, which has been the case for Homes for Reading tenants. Face to face meetings have and will continue to be arranged as preferred by the tenant - officers are engaging with the tenants through their preferred means of communication.

7. Councillor White to ask the Leader of the Council:

Welcome to Reading

The country now has a Prime Minister who has said that the previous Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak was “the most liberal prime minister we’ve ever had on immigration”, saying that mass immigration “happened by design, not accident”, calling it a “one-nation experiment in open borders”, and that British government is “broken”.

He has gone on to make a divisive speech claiming that the number of people entering the country is causing “incalculable damage” and echoing the vile language of Enoch Powell by saying that we risk becoming “an island of strangers”.

We do not.

These words can't but help fan the flames of hatred and demonise human beings who seek nothing more than safety, sanctuary and security.

Does the Leader of the Council agree that these statements should be strongly condemned, and will they reiterate that Reading is, and will remain, a place of Sanctuary, where everyone who wishes to make their home here is welcome, no matter where their journey started?

REPLY by Councillor Terry Leader of the Council.

While it is tempting to trade in partisan attacks, selectively quoting each other's Party leaders, I think hidden in this question is a serious point. And one our residents care deeply about.

It is undeniable that our immigration system is broken, like so many other public services left creaking after 14 years of Conservative failure, it was left to descend into chaos. While the Conservatives attempted gimmicks and division this government is getting on with the job of fixing our public services and that includes restoring control of our borders. Our residents expect and want a fair immigration system, one that is governed by rules that are upheld.

Reading has benefited enormously from successive generations of migrants, from the Windrush generation to more recent communities like our vibrant Hong Kong community. It is rightly a source of pride in this place we all call home. Celebrating that fact goes hand in hand with ensuring that residents can have faith in a system that is legal, fair and treats people with respect and dignity.

And I will make no apology for defending the need to strengthen the bonds between neighbours not weaken them, using a common language, working, eating and enjoying time together break down barriers to inclusive communities. It is as important to those who come to our town from any part of the world as it is for residents like me whose parents arrived here a generation ago. To seek a common character in this place is not divisive, it is the opposite.

Reading as a place and as a council, has been, and will continue to be a place that celebrates our diversity and is welcoming to all.

The annual Windrush Day events have allowed us to hear and celebrate the history of those that travelled to the UK and became part of Reading.

This past week, Hexham Community Centre hosted a Windrush celebration, with displays from Reading Museum and Records Office, taking these stories out into community venues for all to see and hear.

The Council continues to support those fleeing war and persecution through a wide range of programmes including the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme, Homes for Ukraine Scheme, and the Hong Kong British National Overseas visa route.

We joined the City of Sanctuary movement in 2016, following a Motion that was unanimously carried by this Council. As set out in that Motion, Reading has a proud history of welcoming diversity, challenging discrimination and supporting refugees, asylum seekers and other newcomers.

That remains our position.

8. Councillor White to ask the Leader of the Council:

Council Spend on Free Food and Alcohol at AGM

Currently, Labour-run Reading Council is facing a projected £9.6 million overspend on its budget. Because of this it is under a non-essential spending and recruitment freeze. This means halting extra spending on non-critical council services and severely restricting recruitment.

At the Council AGM 159 people attended mainly consisting of Councillors and their guests. £4,866 was spent on free food, drink and alcohol.

Does the Leader of the Council agree with Green councillors that spending almost £5000 on free food, drink and alcohol at a time when there is a non-essential spending freeze is wrong? Next year will the Council commit to donating this money to the local food bank instead?

REPLY by Councillor Terry Leader of the Council.

Civic events such as the Annual General Meeting and Mayor Making ceremony play a key role in celebrating the importance of local democracy, recognising public service, community cohesion and creating a sense of community pride.

They offer an opportunity for the local community, Councillors, Civic Leaders and representatives of partner organisations to come together once a year and mark the formal beginning of a new Mayoral year - an important tradition which celebrates the values and responsibilities of public office.

This year's Mayor Making ceremony was once again well attended by Reading's community and is considered a key moment in our Civic Calendar.

Whilst the Council continues to monitor closely what it is spending and has strengthened the sign off for spending internally, the non-essential spending freeze put in place during the last financial year has been eased, for example there is no current recruitment freeze.

I value civic pride and do not believe the annual Mayor making should become a party-political issue. As to committing money to food banks, councillors have made sure that as part of the allocation of the household Support Fund, this year alone an allocation of £30,000 has been made for food support organisations including Readifood, Sadaka, New Beginnings and St Matthews Church.

9. Councillor White to ask the Leader of the Council: Winter Fuel Payments U-turn

Green councillors welcome the Labour government's U-turn on Winter Fuel Payments. This money will help keep our pensioners warm in the winter. We have campaigned on this as have others.

Thousands of Reading pensioners were set to lose these payments in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis and many would have been facing the terrible choice between paying for heating or eating this winter.

Would the Leader of the Council like to apologise to Reading's pensioners for not joining this campaign to get the Labour government to U-turn?

REPLY by Councillor Terry Leader of the Council.

In recognition of the changes to make the Winter Fuel Payment means tested I asked council officers to provide additional capacity to AgeUK Berkshire to proactively identify and assist

pensioner households in applying for Pension Credits to become eligible for the Winter Fuel Payment, and to provide a £200 payment to approximately 1,000 low-income pensioner households who did not meet the Pension Credits eligibility.

The Council has consistently recognised the challenges that its residents face as the cost of living has risen in recent years. This recognition has manifested into the direct support that the Council continues to provide to our residents all across the borough, including pensioner households on low incomes.

Ahead of the recent announcement from Government on the eligibility thresholds for the upcoming Winter Fuel Payment, the Council was again preparing to make this support available to low-income pensioner households. This year we are also funding local voluntary organisations to provide more support for older residents who are facing social isolation, alongside, and providing funding for, food pantries in areas of need across the borough.

All the above support is in addition to the broad range of services the Council delivers and commissions to provide support to low-income households across the borough. We are currently in the process of recommissioning Cost of Living and Debt Advice services as part of the £1.4M Closing the Gap programme, which will provide support to residents in need for the next three years.

I would also urge any residents who are worried about meeting their cost of living to visit the Money Matters pages on the Council's website. We have developed this to a single place where residents can find out information about what support and advice is available for things such as rent or mortgage payments, clothing, food, heating, free activities and warm spaces.

In the Money Matters pages residents can also find information about new forms of support provided by the Government such as the expansion of the Warm Home Discount which means that more families will get an extra £150 off their energy bills this winter.

This major expansion of support for working families is the latest in a raft of cost-of-living support made possible because the government has stabilised the economy, fixed the foundations and repaired the public finances – deliberate choices which are helping provide security and more money in the pockets of working families.

Since last summer, interest rates have been cut four times, lowering mortgage costs, free school meals have been rolled out for over half a million more children so that they can focus on learning rather than hungry bellies, free breakfast clubs are being expanded to every child in the country, school uniform costs have been cut, the 30 hours of free childcare scheme has been extended to more working parents.

It is always important to recognise that supporting our residents very rarely involves a single approach solution, and I hope that this information correctly articulates the range of support the Government and the Council have provided and continue to provide to low-income households within the borough.