

HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES - 11 MARCH 2025

Present: Councillor Eden (Chair);
Councillors Hoskin (Vice-Chair), Asare, Barnett-Ward, Cross, Dennis, Gavin, Hacker, McCann, Magon, Rowland, Thompson, Williams and Yeo

18. MINUTES OF THE HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS & LEISURE COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 13 NOVEMBER 2024

The Minutes of the meeting of 13 November 2024 were confirmed as a correct record.

19. MINUTES OF OTHER BODIES

The Minutes of the following meeting were submitted:

Community Safety Partnership – 31 October 2024.

Resolved - That the Minutes be received.

20. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND COUNCILLORS

<u>Questioner</u>	<u>Subject</u>	<u>Reply</u>
Vicky Barker	Reading West Station Environment	Cllr Rowland

The full text of the question and reply was made available on the Reading Borough Council website.

21. TENANT ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY 2025-2030

The Committee considered a report requesting approval of the new co-produced Tenant Engagement Strategy (TES) 2025-2030, which was attached to the report at Appendix 1. Pat Watson and Gary Saunders of Tenants and Council Together (TACT) and Jordan Hatwell (RBC) attended the meeting and addressed the Committee on the Strategy.

The report explained that the Strategy outlined the Housing Service's ambitions for Tenant Engagement including its Vision and Priorities alongside the details of the Strategy's formulation. The Strategy summarised the planned approach for tenant scrutiny and engagement to ensure that the service was held to account, the voice of tenants shaped service delivery and the service continued to adopt a continuous learning culture. It also aimed to provide assurance that the Housing & Communities Service was meeting its requirements for tenant engagement in line with the expectations set by the Regulator of Social Housing.

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The report stated that officers had used feedback from the group, to develop, plan and implement a range of new engagement opportunities to appeal to a wider pool of tenants, including a digital membership option to all our engagement opportunities. Tenants had asked for the Strategy to be reviewed in two years following the launch of the Strategy and communication plan, to enable as many tenants as possible across a variety of channels to be included in the review process.

The report explained that the TES Working Group had identified the following Vision Statement: 'Tenants are at the heart of everything we do; tenants know their voices are welcomed, respected and acted upon and our properties and estates are places tenants are proud to call home.' The five priorities were:

- 1. Information and Communication:** To ensure that tenants knew their rights, the services they could expect and how the Council was performing compared to national standards and other landlords.
- 2. Tenant Feedback:** Feedback would be recorded, reviewed and acted on, with results shared clearly, demonstrating to tenants that their views made a difference. Tenant groups such as TACT and future engagement panels would use this information to focus on issues that mattered most to tenants.
- 3. Recruitment and Support:** The updated engagement options included informal opportunities alongside formal panels to suit a wide range of availability and interests. Tenants would have clear expectations, access to training and support to overcome barriers like IT access, travel, or caring responsibilities.
- 4. Meaningful Methods of Engagement:** Tenants were experts in knowing how the Council performed as a landlord. A variety of engagement methods including digital tools, surveys, and co-production would gather feedback to drive improvement.
- 5. Complaints:** Tenants needed to know their rights and how to raise concerns. Complaints would be handled on time and reviewed to identify lessons for improvement. There would be a Complaints Scrutiny Panel to monitor complaint handling to ensure high standards were met and there was a culture of continuous improvement.

The report also stated that the Priorities would be delivered through a proposed Menu of Engagement and the Tenant Engagement Model that had been agreed with tenants. A dedicated Communication Plan would underpin the implementation of the Strategy. A recruitment campaign for new involved tenants would start in Summer 2025 and would be aimed at generating as much interest from the Council's tenants as possible to ensure a representative group was established.

AGREED:

- (1) That the Draft Tenant Engagement Strategy and associated Action Plan, as contained in Appendix 1 to the report be approved.**
- (2) That an annual update on the implementation of the Strategy and progress on delivery against the Action Plan be submitted to the Housing, Neighbourhood & Leisure Committee.**

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22. READING FESTIVAL UPDATE

The Committee received a presentation from Claire Armstrong, Melvin Benn, Vicky Chapman and Charlotte Oliver from Festival Republic, which gave an update on the 2024 Reading Festival and set out plans for the 2025 event. The presentation and subsequent discussion included:

- The 2024 event had been successful, with the introduction of a new stage, further development of measures to address Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) and the provision of quiet, solo and eco campsites.
- Lessons had been learned following the noise bleed from the new Chevron Stage, and this would now be located within a tent for 2025 to reduce clashes with sound from other stages and noise nuisance off-site.
- Campsites would be rebranded for 2025: Meadow (Eco), Garden (Quiet), Valley (Solo), The Grove (Community) and The Fields (Main campsite). Festival-goers would need to sign up in advance for all campsites except The Fields.
- Additional work would be carried out to improve safeguarding. Existing policies and procedures were being reviewed, and new initiatives such as Stamp Out Spiking and Safer Spaces would be introduced. AIR Hubs were also being developed further, and robust security would be in place, especially for under-18s. Back of House drug testing would continue.
- There had been significant carbon reduction in 2024, and the plans for 2025 included working with suppliers to increase the use of renewable energy and reduce waste. There had been a reduction in the number of abandoned tents although many people still mistakenly believed that all tents that were left behind would automatically be passed onto charities for re-use. There would be clearer messages in 2025 that tents should be taken home or packed up and handed in for donation. This could have a significant effect on the total waste, as over 70 tonnes of tents had been left in 2024.
- Organisers were keen to engage with and support local businesses along the Oxford Road.
- Organisers would continue to work with all partner organisations to ensure the smooth running of the 2025 festival.

Resolved - That the presentation be noted.

23. PROGRAMME OF WORKS TO COUNCIL HOUSING STOCK 2025/2026

The Committee considered a report that set out the maintenance work programme for Council Homes for 2025/26. The following documents were appended to the report:

Appendix 1: Works to Housing Stock 2025-2026 Housing Revenue Account (HRA)

Appendix 2: Works to Housing Stock 2025-2026 (General Fund)

Appendix 3: Works to Housing Stock by Ward 2025-2026

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The report explained that Housing 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. As a result, the Council was intending to invest £9.9m in 2025/26 in moving towards zero carbon options in terms of retrofitting existing housing stock in line with the Council's Climate Change ambitions. All options for new funding streams for further thermal efficiencies were considered as and when they were launched.

Resolved -

- (1) That the planned maintenance work programme for Council Homes for 2025/26 be noted;**
- (2) That the Executive Director of Communities and Adult Social Care be authorised, in consultation with the Lead Councillor for Housing, to: (a) tender; and (b) enter into all necessary contracts for individual schemes that began within the 2025/26 work programme as set out in Appendix 1 & 2 of the report subject to sufficient funding being available in the approved Budget (£30.1m) to meet the cost of the schemes.**

24. RBC LANDLORD SERVICES IN YEAR PERFORMANCE REPORT 2024/2025

The Committee received a report which provided an update on Housing Landlord Service performance and key achievements delivered year to date, up to and including Quarter 3 of the 2024-2025 financial year. The report gave assurance that Reading's Housing Landlord Service was delivering the strategic objective of the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023, to deliver improved outcomes for current and future tenants of social housing against the following five consumer standards:

- Neighbourhood and Community Standard;
- Safety and Quality Standard;
- Tenancy Standard;
- Transparency, Influence and Accountability (including Tenant Satisfaction Measures);
- Consumer standards code of practice.

The report set out the key achievements for the year to date, which included low-carbon improvements such as new glazing, insulation and air source heat pumps, implementation of a new IT system, further work under the Local Authority New Build programme and provision of advice and support for tenants. The report also set out details of the types of

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complaints received by the services and the number of responses within the specified time. Housing Ombudsman complaints, the results of the Tenant Satisfaction Survey and the Tenant Satisfaction Measures put in place as a result, damp and mould measures and the Service Improvement Plan.

Resolved:

- (1) That the Housing Landlord Service Performance and key achievements delivered year to date, up to and including quarter 3 2024/25, be noted.**
- (2) That the themes and programmes of the service improvement plan against the consumer standards be endorsed.**

25. ENHANCED ENVIRONMENTAL ENFORCEMENT

The Committee received a report on a proposal to progress a compliant procurement exercise to engage an Environmental Enforcement partner on a twelve-month trial basis. The following documents were appended to the report:

- Appendix 1 - FAQ
- Appendix 2 - Draft Key Performance Indicators (KPI)
- Appendix 3 – Equality Impact Assessment
- Appendix 4 – Corporate Enforcement Policy

The report explained that the Council's current resources were unable to deliver the full range of discretionary environmental enforcement activity desired by residents, as well as delivering education to improve waste behaviours and achieve increased rates of recycling to meet statutory strategic objectives. In order to deliver these discretionary service functions the Council had the choice of either accepting resource limitations or partnering with the private sector in the delivery of its enforcement activity, delivering all activities to an enhanced, high-profile, standard at no additional cost.

The report stated that the Council was seeking to enter a limited twelve-month contract via an established procurement framework to trial this approach. The services would be provided at no cost to the local authority, with the Partner covering the cost of enforcement resources through the receipt of an agreed share of fixed penalty payments. The twelve-month trial would operate on terms that permitted the Council to monitor the performance of the contractor against a range of agreed Environmental Key Performance Indicators. The contract would also ensure that they operated in compliance with the Council's own adopted policies and procedures in their undertaking of agreed activities and adhered to the Council's published schedule of Fixed Penalty rates. A full review of the contractual relationship would be undertaken after six months and, should the trial prove successful, the Council would commence a full procurement exercise to identify a partner to provide continuity of services for a subsequent two years.

Resolved:

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- (1) **That the benefits of entering a 12-month trial contract for the provision of additional Environmental Enforcement Services from an external partner be noted;**
- (2) **That further reports on contract performance be submitted to future meetings of the Committee.**

26. HIGHWAY MAINTENANCE PROGRAMME 2025/2026 & 2024/2025 HIGHWAY MAINTENANCE UPDATE

Further to Minute 22 of the meeting held on 21 February 2024, the Committee considered a report that provided updates on:

- Progress of year-3 (2024/25) of the Council's additional £8M 5-year (2022/23 to 2026/27) Highway Capital Roads & Pavements Investment Programme.
- Progress of the Council's £4M Bridges & Structures Capital Investment Programme.
- The Department for Transport's (DfT's) Highway Maintenance Award 2025/26, Local Transport Block Funding (Integrated Transport & Highway Maintenance) settlement and to seek scheme and spend approval.
- The withdrawal of the DfT's Road Resurfacing Fund (Network North) Allocation for Reading.
- The completed Highway Maintenance 2024/25 DfT Local Transport Block Funding Capital Works Programme.

The report also gave an update on the completed Highway Maintenance 2023/24 DfT Local Transport Block Funding Capital Works Programme. The following documents were appended to the report:

- Appendix 1: 2024/25 Programme Delivered;
- Appendix 2: Proposed 2025/26 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 progress of year-3 (2024/25) of the Council's additional £8M 5-year (2022/23 to 2026/27) Highway Capital Roads & Pavements Investment Programme be noted;**
- (2) **That the progress of the Council's 2024/25 additional £4M Bridges & Structures Capital Investment Programme be noted;**
- (3) **That the Department for Transport's (DfT's) Highway Maintenance Award 2025/26 Local Transport Block Funding (Integrated Transport &**

Highway Maintenance) settlement be noted and the Scheme and Spend be approved;

- (4) **That the withdrawal of the DfT's Road Resurfacing Fund Allocation for Reading (Network North) funding be noted;**
- (5) **That the completed Highway Maintenance 2024/25 DfT Local Transport Block Funding Capital Works Programme be noted.**

27. HIGH STREET HERITAGE ACTION ZONE EVALUATION

The Committee received a report which highlighted the achievements, key successes and learning of the High Street Heritage Action Zone (HSHAZ) project since the start of its delivery phase in 2020. The project team and partners had worked closely and flexibly with stakeholders, the community and funders, Historic England, to develop and successfully deliver the ambitious heritage and culture placemaking project, despite unexpected major challenges over the four years of the programme.

The report explained that the Reading HSHAZ had been an exciting programme of conservation repairs, public realm improvements and community and cultural activity across three areas of Reading - Oxford Road, St Mary's Butts & Castle Street and Market Place & London Street. The programme had been targeted at high streets within conservation areas. The funding had been awarded with a particular focus on Oxford Road conservation area (from the IDR to Reading West bridge), where there had been most need for physical improvement of shopfronts. Reading HSHAZ had delivered a range of projects to understand the heritage of and to improve Reading's urban environment. HSHAZ had worked with owners of eight buildings to improve the appearance of shop fronts to be more in keeping with being in conservation areas. Following community consultation, there had been a series of public realm improvements (including new paving, signage, public art and lamp posts), and four listed town centre monuments had been restored.

Resolved: That the successes of the HSHAZ programme set out within the report be noted, including:

- Improving nine shop fronts to be more in keeping with their conservation areas setting, including supplement planning documents and conservation methods that could be used and replicated;
- A series of public realm improvements, including restoring four listed town centre monuments, new paving, signage, four public artworks, two of which would remain in place for at least ten years, and lamp posts, based on community engagement;
- A legacy of materials that would remain accessible to the public including the communities' hidden histories, A semi-permanent exhibit 'Oracle Gates' in Reading Museum, four audio walks, a play, multiple films, school education materials, podcasts, interviews, and a book.

28. READING MUSEUM: FORWARD PLAN 2025-2030

The Committee considered a report which sought approval and adoption of the Reading Museum Forward Plan 2025-2030, as set out in Appendix 1 to the report. The Forward Plan assessed the key achievements of Reading Museum over the period of the last Forward Plan 2020-2025.

The report also sought agreement to dispose of items from the Reading Museum Collection, as set out in paragraph 3.4 and listed in Appendix 2, that had been identified in accordance with Museum's adopted Collection Development Policy 2022-2027. The Collection Development Policy accepted the principle that sound curatorial reasons must be established before consideration was given to the disposal of any items in the Museum's collection. Therefore, disposals should be part of a regular process of collections review to ensure they continued to be relevant to meeting the wider strategic aims of the Museum. A review of collections during documentation and storage projects had identified items of either low quality, poor condition or duplicate mass-produced articles often with no significant provenance, or which would be more appropriately offered to another institution which could provide better care or access to users.

Resolved:

- (1) That the Reading Museum Forward Plan 2025-2030 including the service's statement of purpose and key aims, as set out in Appendix 1 be approved and adopted to ensure the Museum met with the Accreditation standard for UK museums;**
- (2) That it be noted that the Reading Museum Forward Plan 2025-2030 would be submitted to Arts Council England with the Museum's next Accreditation return;**
- (3) That the achievements the Museum had delivered to date be noted, as set out in paragraph 3.2 of the report, including:**
 - welcoming annually over 18,500 school participants, over 107,000 visitors, and 3.3 million digital visits,**
 - generating a total Economic Impact of £3.9m annually.**
 - acclaimed exhibitions such as the Windrush partnership, Reading Festival and Reading Football Club;**
 - ACE-funded Museums Partnership Reading outreach and environmental programmes for diverse audiences and the Museum of Sanctuary award;**
- (4) That Reading Museum dispose of items from its collection identified in accordance with Museum's adopted Collection Development Policy, as set out in paragraph 3.4 and Appendix 2 of the report.**

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29. READING LIBRARIES IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME: STRATEGIC PRINCIPLES 2025 - 2028

The Committee considered a report which set out the proposed strategic principles that would be put for public engagement in 2025, at a date to be confirmed, and would be reported back to a future meeting for endorsement.

The report explained that the current strategic priorities which had been agreed in 2021 required updating to reflect where the service was today and to reflect the future direction of the service given recent successes in securing Levelling Up funding for a new Central Library and Libraries Investment Funding to invest in digital infrastructure. Since the pandemic, usage of library services had largely returned to pre-pandemic levels and the borrowing of items was higher than pre pandemic levels, arresting a long-term trend. Libraries had worked hard to provide digital content, restore events, and had also been successful in gaining large capital investment into both the Civic Centre Library project and in bidding for external funding, including £495,000 from the Libraries Improvement Fund administered by Arts Council England.

The report set out the proposed principles to guide the service from 2025 - 2028:

- Ensuring all libraries in the network responded to the needs of communities and built these into external funding applications;
- Supported children and young people with language and literacy development;
- Improving digital provision, access and content to support learning and skills;
- Supporting improvements for Reading's health, wellbeing, literacy and cohesion;
- Bringing arts, culture, heritage and creativity into library spaces

The report added that officers would seek to consult with library users and non-users on whether these were the areas for the service to focus on and whether anything should be replaced.

Resolved:

- (1) That the draft strategic principles outlined for future public engagement be agreed and this approach for the library service endorsed;
- (2) That the success of the library service in developing against the strategic principles, including continuing to improve performance, with total loans now higher than in 2019, improved and updated ICT equipment at all sites, a better ICT offer at all sites, particularly Tilehurst and Southcote, and a library app, that offered for free a digital library card, access to e-books, e-magazines and learning resources, be noted.

(The meeting closed at 9.24 pm)

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