

## **READING BOROUGH COUNCIL**

### **POLICY COMMITTEE**

**21 JULY 2025**

### **PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 1**

Sue Sibany-King to ask the Leader of the Council:

#### **Berkshire Pension Fund**

Now that the world can clearly see that Israel is the aggressor in the Middle East since their unprovoked attacked on Iranian soil and also upon British sovereignty when Israeli pirates illegally boarded a British registered ship, in International waters, and kidnapped foreign nationals ,of various nationalities, abducting and illegally imprisoning them in Israel, all this in addition to invading and/or attacking Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and Palestine whilst still committing genocide, forced starvation and ethnic cleansing, how do you explain your decision to ignore this evidence and continue to allow the administering council for your pension scheme to invest in weapons used by the pariah and rogue state?

**REPLY** by Councillor Terry (Leader of the Council):

As stated in response to previous questions on this subject, the Pension Fund has already set up a Task & Finish group to review its published Responsible Investment Policy. This review will include consideration of a specific statement in respect of conflict-affected areas, and the Fund's approach to new and existing investments in companies with activities in these areas.

The work of the Task & Finish Group is still ongoing so there is nothing more I can add at this point.



## **READING BOROUGH COUNCIL**

### **POLICY COMMITTEE**

**21 JULY 2025**

### **PUBLIC QUESTION NO. 2**

Alison Foster to ask the Lead Councillor for Corporate Services and Resources:

#### **Council Tax**

Can the Council provide clarification on how it intends to respond to the government's proposals for implementing automatic 12-month direct debit payments for council tax, and outline how current and planned practices align with the Citizens Advice Council Tax Protocol, particularly in regard to early intervention, fair collection, and supporting residents in financial difficulty?

**REPLY** by Councillor Emberson (Lead Councillor for Corporate Services and Resources):

The Council is currently reviewing the government's proposals regarding the implementation of automatic 12-monthly payments for council tax and will be submitting a formal response to the consultation ahead of its September deadline.

This response will consider both the needs of our residents and the operational considerations of the local authority.

It is important to note that our existing arrangements already allow customers to request 12 monthly instalments, and we continue to honour such requests at any point during the financial year. We remain committed to offering flexible and supportive payment options to help residents manage their council tax commitments effectively.

Furthermore, the Council is a signatory to the Citizens Advice Council Tax Protocol, and as such, our processes are already well aligned with many of the measures outlined in the government's proposals. We prioritise early intervention, fair collection practices, and tailored support for residents experiencing financial difficulty. These principles guide our current practices and will continue to underpin our approach as we respond to the consultation and evolve our services in line with best practice.



## **READING BOROUGH COUNCIL**

### **POLICY COMMITTEE**

**21 JULY 2025**

### **COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 1**

Councillor Singh to ask the Leader of the Council:

#### **Nepali Community Facility**

The Nepali community in Reading has grown significantly over the years and continues to make a valuable contribution to the town's cultural and civic life. However, they currently lack access to a dedicated community space to hold events, provide support services, and preserve their cultural heritage. Will the Council commit to exploring options for a dedicated community centre or shared space that meets the needs of the Nepali community in Reading and which can be achieved in next one to two years?

Also, given the importance of inclusion and community cohesion, and the Council's stated commitment to supporting ethnic minority communities, will the administration agree to meet with representatives of the Nepali community—along with local councillors—to identify suitable options and potential funding avenues for a dedicated or shared community facility.

**REPLY** by Councillor Terry (Leader of the Council):

The Council understands the value of having access to a dedicated space for a local community organisation, providing both opportunity and certainty for hosting activities that bring people together, and creating a stronger sense of belonging within the borough.

I know that the Nepali community within Reading has been looking at what opportunities are available for a dedicated community space within the borough, and that there has already been engagement about what might be available from the Council's asset portfolio through the local Community Buildings Forum hosted by Reading Voluntary Action, which Council Officers and representatives from the private sector routinely attend.

With an estimated 5000 residents with a Nepali heritage within the borough (which is approx. 2.9% of our population), we will of course continue to explore options with representatives from the Nepali community to realise their ambitions for a dedicated community space.

What options are available to the Nepali community will depend on what facilities are available within the borough, what resources the Nepali community has available to them, and what resources will be needed in the future to ensure the sustainable management and operation of the facility.



## **READING BOROUGH COUNCIL**

### **POLICY COMMITTEE**

**21 JULY 2025**

### **COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 2**

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

#### **Tree Planting**

In light of the Council's Tree Strategy adopted in 2021—which set a target of planting 3,000 standard trees on Council land by 2030 and increasing borough-wide canopy cover to 25%—can the Lead Councillor provide an update on progress towards these targets, including the number of trees planted to date, ward-level canopy cover improvements, and how the Council is engaging local communities and partners in meeting these goals?

**REPLY** by Councillor Rowland (Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Community Safety):

I'd like to thank Cllr Singh for his question and am pleased that despite representing one of the wards in the town with the highest tree canopy coverage, he is interested in Reading's overall canopy cover.

The Council's Tree Strategy was prepared in 2020 and adopted in 2021 and at that time it was noted in 3.69 of the Strategy:

"This is a genuinely ambitious target which responds to the immediate Climate Emergency we face, whilst reflecting the amount of land that is likely to be suitable and potentially achievable for extended cover."

Further in 3.70:

"To achieve this target, it is evident that the Council recognises that it cannot undertake achieving these results alone. Most essentially, it will need private landowners across the Borough to respond similarly and immediately through their own planting."

Within that Tree Strategy a commitment was made by this Council to plant 3,000 standard trees (or appx 300/year) on Council -owned/managed land by 2030 as part of achieving that goal.

A record of the standard trees that the Council (some in conjunction with partners) has planted to date since 2020 is as follows:

2020-2021	351
2021-2022	340
2022-2023	386 (305 new)
2023-2024	421 (320 new)
2024-2025	355 (312 new)
Total trees (5 years)	1,853 including replacement trees

As you can see the Council is therefore on track to deliver their promised target of 3,000 new trees on Council land by 2030.

These numbers do not ever include the planting of immature whips and/or small orchard trees which have increased recently, even when planted on Council land. These numbers reflect our minimum tree planting standard: 3 to 4 m tall minimum, 5-7 years of age, UK nursery grown alongside the Council's dedicated 2 year initial watering regime to secure the tree's livelihood.

The most recent canopy cover assessment was undertaken in 2022, which is [available on the Council's website](#), and the purpose of this was to re-assess the level of cover based on new ward boundaries. At that point in time, the overall canopy cover in Reading Borough was 17.7%, and the level in each ward was as follows:

Abbey	5.5%
Battle	7.4%
Caversham	18.7%
Caversham Heights	26.8%
Church	20.1%
Coley	17.4%
Emmer Green	24.7%
Katesgrove	13.1%
Kentwood	22.1%
Norcot	15.6%
Park	14.8%
Redlands	19.0%
Southcote	22.3%
Thames	13.8%
Tilehurst	19.1%
Whitley	12.0%

Two wards remained dramatically below the 12% ward-level target in the Tree Strategy, specifically Abbey and Battle. You will be pleased to note on pages 32 and 33 of this evening's CIL report, that Abbey and Battle ward Labour Councillors applied for and received CIL funding totalling £145k to assist in achieving increased canopy cover in those two wards. Planting trees in areas where there is so much built environment and hard standing requires additional costs in getting trees into the ground. I suspect that these CIL additions will continue to be repeated over the years in these wards.

Changes to canopy cover will take time, as trees take between 10 and 40 years to mature depending on species. Therefore, it is not expected that canopy cover will have significantly changed from the 2022 assessment, as a result of recent planting, to undertake a new survey just yet and there is also a cost associated with undertaking a canopy cover assessment, too, that must be considered. Meanwhile, we continue to plant.

It is also worth bearing in mind that roughly only 25% of the footprint of Reading is Council controlled land – a large percentage of that being made up of areas where opportunities for tree planting are very limited, such as sports pitches, surface car



parks, service yards, open water or marshland, or priority habitats that are not characterised by tree cover. It leaves only a small percentage of Reading's overall footprint that we can directly improve with canopy cover. The rest of Reading's footprint remains in private control, and the Council has no ability to force someone to plant trees on their private land if they do not want to, although we certainly encourage people to plant trees privately as they are able.

However, beyond the Council's own work, there are other routes and partners that we work with to increase canopy cover:

- The Council ensures that its planning policies regarding tree planting are applied in dealing with planning applications. As a result, there were net gains in trees on development sites of 251 trees in 2022-2023 (the first year that the Council monitored and reported on this) and 186 trees in 2023-2024. A figure has not yet been produced for 2024-2025.
- We are in partnership with Trees for Streets, the National Street Tree Sponsorship Scheme to empower local communities to get involved in greening their streets by making it easier for residents, businesses and community groups to sponsor the planting and care of street trees. Trees for Streets has contributed over 50 new trees to date.
- Our Tree Wardens are close partners and support Council planting by identifying potential planting locations, monitoring new planting (e.g. repairing stakes & ties, raising watering concerns) and planting trees (new and replacements). Tree Wardens also monitor some development sites, advising the Natural Environment Team of concerns relating to trees.
- We also work with Trees for Reading / Ethical Reading that seeks corporate sponsorship in planting trees largely in difficult town centre areas. This partnership has contributed roughly 60 trees to our overall planting scheme to date.
- Freely Fruity has been involved in Reading over the past 3 years and have sponsored some large and small scale plantings of orchard trees at various locations such as an orchard that has been expanded in the South Whitley Recreation Ground, Swallowfield Drive, trees in Caversham, north of the River and also in Abbey ward. Due to the smaller size of many of those trees – and the lack of guarantee to provide water for these trees by volunteers, we have not added them to our official tree count, but we have estimated they have added roughly a hundred trees to our footprint to date and expect their work to continue.

The Council also works every year with individual groups in planting trees along with our schemes- and has tree planting events with schools, in parks and with residents and groups in other areas. We most recently welcomed the Windrush community's desire to plant palm trees in the Town Centre- in what Abbey ward Councillors delighted in renaming as the Windrush Roundabout. We encourage communities and Councillors to be in touch, if there is a particular interest or desire in planting trees in a particular area to make a suggestion and be involved in greening their community.



## READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

### POLICY COMMITTEE

21 JULY 2025

### COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 3

Councillor Thompson to ask the Lead Councillor for Corporate Services and Resources

#### Unacceptable Call Waiting Times

For some time now, residents have been finding it nigh on impossible to get through to the Council's Customer Fulfilment Centre by phone. Many residents have told us in frustration that they've had to give up trying to get through after long waits on hold.

One caller told me he spent £19 while waiting 53 minutes to get through on 6 June. When he tried to make a follow-up call on 7 July a recorded message advised him to call back the following week because of the high volume of calls. Some residents can call back on another day, though it will be inconvenient, but many cannot as they have urgent issues to raise with the Council. For these callers, being unable to get through to anyone at the Council makes an already stressful situation even worse. Our residents deserve better.

We would like to know what is the reason for the delays at the Customer Fulfilment Centre and what is being done to tackle the problem?

Also, is the Customer Fulfilment Centre able to record the number of residents who give up on their call to the Council after waiting on hold? If so, how many calls were dropped from 1 May to 30 June??

**REPLY** by Councillor Emberson (Lead Councillor for Corporate Services and Resources)

The Customer Fulfilment Centre provides a wide range of services. The team manage **22 phone lines**, handle **multiple high-volume mailboxes**, process **end-to-end administrative tasks for ten different services**, and offer **face-to-face support**.

In 2024/25, the CFC answered 79% of calls. We have also increased customer satisfaction over the last three years. Satisfaction with the CFC is consistently above 85% and satisfaction with the outcome is consistently above 95%.

Demand fluctuates throughout the year due to seasonal demands from events such as Electoral Services, School Applications, billing cycles, and various campaigns, alongside our regular general enquiries and support. It has been a particularly busy period over the last 3 months, with annual Council Tax billing, significant changes to our refuse service.

Our Council Tax team have also introduced a new "triple touch" approach, involving a text, email, and call to advise of late payments. Given the large volume of account holders we're contacting, this approach is causing a influx of calls to the CFC.

Despite these competing demands, **we are seeing a reduction in the volume of statutory reminders being sent**, which is much better for the Council and Customer.

### **What are we doing?**

Our focus is on continuous improvement, and we have made a range of changes, with more planned, to support our customers.

We are currently procuring our Unified Communications solution, which will include (not limited too) Voice, Voice Automation, Web Bot & AI technology, and various tools designed to streamline our processes and maximise the technology benefits.

Other specific actions include:

- improving our online services, making it easier for customers to access their accounts.
- building Voice Automation facilities for Revenues and Benefits, with text messages containing direct links to online forms
- additional training to speed up the onboarding process and increase the number of cross trained staff
- establishing a triaging mechanism in place to schedule an appointment with one of our more experienced Council Tax advisors.
- piloting online accounts for our tenants. This allows them to create repair requests and monitor these through online accounts.
- developing an in-queue callback solution, which we'll begin to test (pilot) concurrently with the Voice Automation launch. This means customers won't need to wait on hold; instead, they can hang up, and our system will automatically place them in the queue for a callback from an Advisor when it's their turn (if opted into). This will be available during peak times for specific, high demanding services.
- Newly procured systems which we will be implementing shortly:
  - Interpretation & Translation Service, which will allow officers to directly book support via our provider's portal
  - Community centre booking system, which will streamline the process for hirers
  - Concessionary Fares solution, reducing the admin processes

Officers will continue their detailed monitoring of the success of these initiatives and their impact on improving wait times, and these are reported to me on a monthly basis.

## **READING BOROUGH COUNCIL**

### **POLICY COMMITTEE**

**21 JULY 2025**

### **COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 4**

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Corporate Services and Resources

#### **Call Centre Wait Time Too Long**

Residents are still raising long wait times to speak to someone at Reading Council when phoning the call centre.

Earlier in the year the average wait was 42 minutes for residents phoning about council house repairs. Other services such as housing allocations, council tax enquiries and waste have also had call centre wait times that are too long.

Does the lead councillor agree with me that these wait times are totally unacceptable?

What is the average wait time over a whole year for the five services with the worst wait times and how has this changed over the last three years? What further action is being taken to bring down these wait times so that residents can phone the council and speak to someone in a few minutes?

**REPLY** by Councillor Emberson (Lead Councillor for Corporate Services and Resources)

#### **Response**

Our Customer Fulfilment Centre supports residents with 22 different service areas and approximately 22,000 calls into every month. Unfortunately, there are times when some of these lines are particularly busy and this can lead to longer wait times.

Councillors received a briefing on 15 July which highlighted that the busiest times during the week are Monday to Wednesday mornings, and there are seasonal peaks in April-June and in January. It has therefore been a busy period and Officers have worked to manage this by adjusting our call queues, offering call backs and utilising additional staff at the busiest times.

Over the past twelve months, from June 2024 to June 2025, the longest customer wait times were related to:

<b>Service</b>
Housing Allocations – average wait time of 22 minutes
Council Tax – wait time of 35 minutes
Green Waste Enquiries – wait time of 15 minutes
Housing Repairs Existing enquiries - wait time of 28 minutes
Housing Repairs – New - wait time of 8 minutes

As an overall average, wait times last year were 11 minutes, and due to the higher demand in Q1 they have increased to 13 minutes.

As set out in the previous answer, we have a range of improvement activities, and these have been focused on those lines with the highest demand / longer wait times.

Officers will continue their detailed monitoring of the success of these initiatives and their impact on improving wait times, and these are reported to me on a monthly basis.

## **READING BOROUGH COUNCIL**

### **POLICY COMMITTEE**

**21 JULY 2025**

### **COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 5**

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Climate Strategy and Transport

#### **Bus Tickets Too Expensive**

The cost of the off-peak group save ticket has gone up from £5.50 to £8. This is a 45 percent increase and I have already heard that this is putting people off using the buses.

Does the lead councillor agree that this is too expensive and what can be done to bring down the cost of bus tickets?

**REPLY** by Councillor Ennis (Lead Councillor for Climate Change and Transport)

As you know the Council secured £26m of government funding through its first Bus Service Improvement Plan in April 2022. This enabled us to introduce, in March 2023, the Reading All-Bus ticket which provided both a multi-operator adult day ticket, a young person's ticket and both a peak and off-peak group ticket all at a subsidised rate to passengers.

With regards to the Group ticket this was introduced at an initial rate of £9 for the peak ticket and £5.50 for the off-peak ticket which represented a reduction on the previous rate of £10 for a peak ticket and £6.50 for the off-peak ticket. The operators were reimbursed the difference using the Council's BSIP funding award.

The price of all of our All-Bus tickets increased only twice since March 2023 as we used our BSPI funding until March 2025 when the period for using the funding ended. Operators have now set the ticket rate for bus travel on a commercial basis in the absence of any reimbursement from the Council to ensure that they cover their costs.

The current rate of £8 for the simply Reading off-peak ticket represents a 23% increase on the same ticket price since 2022, however It should also be noted that the previous Reading Buses off-peak Group ticket could only be used after 6pm on Mondays to Fridays as well as weekends and bank holidays however, through negotiations between the Council and the operators, we were able to bring this time forward to after 9:30am Mondays to Fridays as well as weekends and bank holidays, so is now a much better value offering for passengers than the 2022 product.

The increase / improvement to the scope of the off-peak ticket is providing additional benefits to passengers (from its previous 2022 offering) and the DfT were especially positive about our group ticket offer as this was seen as a way of attracting car-load units of travel during the current cost of living crisis. We are pleased that the operators are continuing with this timeframe now the Council's funding has ended.

The peak time ticket cost has remained the same as its 2022 prices at just £10 despite the inflationary costs incurred by the operator.

These Simply Reading tickets can only be used on Reading Buses services. However, the Reading All-Bus multi-operator ticket remains in operation with fares of £10.80 for the peak and £8.80 in the off-peak, adding even further value.

As well as the cost-of-living crisis we have seen over the past few years it is also important to note that costs for bus operators also raised significantly with both drivers' wages, fuel and energy costs rising significantly with inflation.

We believe that travelling by bus in Reading is still good value, particularly when comparing to other towns and cities such as Brighton where a 24-hour group network ticket costs £12 with no off-peak offer.

In February this year the Council secured a further £2.4m funding for its Bus Service Improvement Plan programme. Whilst this is significantly less funding than the original £26m award, the Council is continuing to support infrastructure and operational improvements to aid the continued growth of the public transport network. We are working with Reading Buses to further enhance the Buzz 9 and Buzz 18 services, as well as continuing to offer reduced fares on Park and Ride services.



## **READING BOROUGH COUNCIL**

### **POLICY COMMITTEE**

**21 JULY 2025**

### **COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 6**

Councillor White to ask the Leader of the Council

#### **Labour's Welfare Reforms**

The Labour Government's process of bringing forward proposals for welfare reform has been marked by chaos. Decision making has been irresponsible, leaving disabled people feeling uncertain and anxious – even terrified. Their voices have not been front and centre of the debate about how to build a better social security system and the proposed changes represented a serious threat to Disabled people's quality of life, dignity and equality.

What does the lead councillor want to say to Reading residents to reassure people at this time?

**REPLY** by Councillor Terry (Leader of the Council)

We recognise that the recent proposals for welfare reform have caused significant concern, particularly among disabled members of our community. Understandably, many residents may be experiencing anxiety and uncertainty.

As a local authority, we want to acknowledge those concerns and offer reassurance.

Whilst these proposed changes are the responsibility of the Department for Work and Pensions, Reading Borough Council remains fully committed to supporting our residents through any changes that may arise. We will continue to work closely with local partners to ensure that people are informed, supported, and not left behind.

At this stage, the following changes to disability benefits are understood to be forthcoming:

- From April 2026, new Universal Credit claimants will receive a reduced health-related element.
- This lower rate will be frozen until 2029 and will not rise with inflation.
- Existing claimants will continue to receive the current rate, which will increase annually.
- Those with severe or terminal conditions will be exempt from reassessments and retain full support.
- Proposed changes to Personal Independence Payment (PIP) have been paused and are currently under review, with no immediate impact.

We urge any residents who are concerned about how these changes may affect them to seek support. Help is available through our local welfare advice agencies, who can provide guidance and advocacy.

Through its Closing the Gap commissioning process, the Council provides over £1M of funding each year to a broad range of local voluntary and community organisations to provide advice and support to residents. In commissioning these services, the Council recognises that many residents may be facing more than one challenge within their lives, which is why the services we commission ensure that these organisations can work together to provide the strong network of support were needed.

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.

Finally, direct financial support is available to low-income residents via the current Household Support Fund scheme for this year. Since April we have already provided direct financial assistance to over 1,450 households within the borough, and an additional £75,000 to local voluntary organisations to provide direct cost-of-living support for things like school uniforms, food, and activities to tackle social isolation for older residents. This support will continue throughout the year, including providing vouchers to families with children eligible for Pupil Premium Free School Meals. The Council is also pleased to receive the notification from Government that cost-of-living support for our residents has been confirmed for the next three years in the form of the new Crisis Resilience Fund.