

## **READING BOROUGH COUNCIL**

### **POLICY COMMITTEE**

**16 FEBRUARY 2026**

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

Councillor Nikulina to ask the Lead Councillor for Climate Strategy and Transport:

#### **Improving Local Access via the Number 20 Bus Route.**

Residents in the Whitley Street and wider Katesgrove area have raised concerns about the Number 20 bus route not stopping on Whitley Street. We have previously approached Reading Buses about this and were advised that the Number 20 operates as an express shuttle for University of Reading students and therefore does not stop between the town centre and the campus.

However, some residents continue to question the lack of a Whitley Street stop. They report that the buses often appear under-used and highlight that an additional stop would significantly improve access to medical services following the closure of Whitley Villa Surgery. It would also benefit students living in the Katesgrove area.

Would the Council consider engaging with Reading Buses to explore whether adding a stop on Whitley Street is feasible and the current route design be reviewed in light of ongoing resident feedback and local access needs?

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

We acknowledge the concerns from residents in Whitley Street and the wider Katesgrove area regarding the White Knight 20 bus route and its lack of a stop in its timetable on Whitley Street.

The White Knight 20 service was developed by Reading Buses as a dedicated fast shuttle service between the town centre and the university campus. It is marketed specifically to students and operates on a term-time only basis, similar to dedicated bus services that operate at many other universities across the country. The timetable and service frequency was designed around the basis that this is a limited stop service between the town centre and university, taking into account boarding times at each stop, and Whitley Street bus stop was not included in this arrangement. Adding further stops to the timetable will impact on the journey times and frequency of the service making it a less attractive and viable service.

Residents have highlighted that the service often appears under-used and that an additional stopping service on Whitley Street could improve access to medical services near to the University, following the closure of Whitley Villa Surgery, as well as benefiting students living in the Katesgrove area. It should be noted that Whitley Street is currently served by other routes, including Routes 5 and 6/6a, which both operate 24 hours a day.

While Reading Buses runs this service on a commercial basis, Reading Borough Council will engage with Reading Buses and the university to explore whether adding a stop into the timetable at Whitley Street is feasible in light of ongoing feedback and local access needs.

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### COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 2

Councillor White to ask the Leader of the Council:

#### Homes for Reading tenants staying in homes

Labour councillors have repeatedly given the impression that allowing the tenants of Homes for Reading to stay in their homes would be unlawful – this is following the Labour-run council's housing company nearly going bust and tenants being evicted ahead of homes being transferred back into the council's Housing Revenue Account.

In April 2024, Councillor Emberson said that these homes must be "lawfully allocated", and in June 2025, Councillor Yeo said that the Council was unable to allow the residents to stay in their homes "as the properties will become subject to an Allocation under Part 6 of the Housing Act," and that "like all other Council homes, they must be allocated ... in line with our published Allocations Scheme." In January of this year, Councillor Terry said that "the Council considered all options to keep Homes for Reading tenants in their homes," but that "legislation requires that residential properties that the Council own must be let as an allocation through the Council's Housing Register."

However, the Council has used its lawful discretion not to allocate the properties through the published allocation scheme, but instead (in order to charge a significantly higher rent) allocate them separately to key workers. A quick look at Shelter's website confirms that the Council could instead have legally used its discretion to keep the Homes for Reading tenants in their homes.

Does the Leader of the Council agree that this would have been a legal and lawful option? Yes or no?

Can the Leader give us an entirely accurate answer, and tell us what consideration was given to that option, and why it was ruled out?

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

The reason that Policy Committee, of which Cllr White is a member, took the decision to consult on the closure of Homes for Reading Ltd was due to the company's inability to repay the loans that were owed by it to the Council in a timely manner, and the impact that would have had on the finances of the Council. As a result of the decision to close the company, the properties owned by it are being transferred to the Council to form part of its social housing stock.

Every local authority in England is required to have a social housing allocation scheme; and must allocate housing in accordance with that scheme. The Council has no discretion to allocate social housing other than in accordance with its allocation scheme. To be absolutely clear, and for the avoidance of any doubt, the relevant provision of the Housing Act 1996 is section 166A, subsection 14, which states that, "*A local housing authority in England shall not allocate housing accommodation except in accordance with their allocation scheme.*"

As members will know, the Council has an allocation scheme, the current version of which was implemented in May 2024 and appears published on the Council's website. That scheme prioritises those with the greatest need for the allocation of housing and includes the allocation of certain provision to keyworkers.

Whilst local authorities do have a limited degree of discretion in the formulation of their allocation scheme, any use of that discretion must be exercised lawfully, fairly and proportionately.

However difficult it may be on an individual level, the Council's position is that to have removed our current allocations scheme would not have been fair, proportionate or lawful in the circumstances, as this would have impacted other applicants on the register who also have acute housing needs and significant vulnerabilities and would expose the Council to significant risk of legal challenge in relation to fairness, transparency, and equal treatment of applicants on the Housing Register.

Any former Homes for Reading tenants with high need will of course be considered as part of the Council's existing and comprehensive allocation scheme.

Acquiring properties with sitting tenants would circumvent the Council's allocation scheme altogether and expose the Council to significant risk of legal challenge. The properties need to be vacant to allow them to be allocated lawfully and fairly, in accordance with the Council's allocations scheme.

With approximately 5,000 households on the Council's Housing Register, and only around 300 council homes becoming available each year, this Council will always seek to prioritise those most in need for social housing. Keyworkers, vital to our communities and often facing significant challenges in relation to finding housing locally, are clearly defined within this Council's agreed allocation scheme.

On balance, and having regard to the Council's statutory duties, equalities obligations and the legitimate expectations of other applicants, it would not have been fair or lawful for these tenants to become social housing tenants outside the allocations scheme.

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### **COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 3**

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

#### **Cutting Staff Club secretary**

Reading Council's staff club is key to keeping staff morale high. It is disappointing that as part of this budget the staff club secretary role is being cut. The staff club have outlined a number of options. Why is this Labour administration determined to get rid of the staff club secretary role and reduce the capacity of the staff club to organise events?

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

Thank you, Councillor White, for your question.

This Labour administration is determined to deliver a balanced budget for Reading.

As you will have seen in the Budget papers, there are financial challenges and it is incumbent on all council departments to consider opportunities to reduce spend. The Council must ensure it can prioritise support to meet the rising need, and cost, of supporting the vulnerable adults and children who need our services.

This Council is proud of the number of opportunities for staff to establish and engage across the organisation, with staff determining and engaging with networks that best meet their current needs. These groups exist and have strong engagement from current employees, but we are unable to provide all with funding, and therefore our approach must be consistent across all staff engagement groups.

The Staff Club operates on a model of charging current and former staff for activities, and historically this has been subsidised by the Council funding an administrator.

The Staff Club have been signposted to alternative approaches taken by other councils to run their Staff Activity Clubs, where these have been achieved without the support of funding via the Council and its residents.