

AGENDA ITEM 5

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

1. Peter Burt to ask the Lead Councillor for
Government Spending on Local Authorities

Since last year's Council Budget meeting, what representations has Reading Borough Council made to central Government ministers about the need to increase government spending on local authorities ?

REPLY by Councillor Terry Leader of the Council

Reading Borough Council has been actively engaged in the various consultations that Central Government has run about Local Government funding.

We argued for five things:

- 1) An increase in the total pot of funding available for Local Government
- 2) The need to target Local Government funding to the areas of greatest need
- 3) The need for a multi-year funding settlement
- 4) The need to address cumulative SEND deficits
- 5) The need to increase flexibilities about the use of capital receipts

I'm delighted to say that the Government has delivered on the first four of those things, and has indicated a willingness to discuss options around the fifth.

2. Peter Burt to ask the Leader of the Council
Council Tax

What representations has Reading Borough Council made to central government ministers about the need to replace the unfair and unpopular council tax system with a new system of local government finance ?

REPLY by Councillor Terry Leader of the Council

Reading Borough Council does not currently have an agreed policy position on replacing the existing council tax system. As a result, the Council has not made any formal representations to central government on this issue.

The Government ran a detailed consultation exercise between June and September last year about modernising and improving the administration of Council Tax. Reading Borough Council was an active participant in those consultations.

This was a comprehensive exercise, the largest consultation on improving the Council Tax system since its introduction in 1993.

We are awaiting the Government's announcements about how the system will be reformed following that consultation.

3. Jo Musominari to ask the Lead Councillor for Climate Strategy and Transport
School Streets

The safety of our children as they travel to school is of great importance. While in Reading we want to encourage active travel such as walking and cycling to school, many children are put off as they face crossing busy roads to get to school and negotiating heavy traffic in the vicinity of school gates. At the same time residents living close to schools suffer from an influx of traffic that can make it difficult to access or leave their properties at certain times of the day. For example members of the community close to Highdown Secondary School in Caversham Heights have raised concerns about traffic and road safety around the school particularly during morning and afternoon drop off and pick up times. The Headteacher of Highdown School has also expressed concern about the safety of students arriving and leaving the vicinity of the school and is interested in solutions. In light of these concerns, would the Council be able to comment on the effectiveness of the School Streets programme in general in Reading, and on the potential for introducing additional school streets in areas of high traffic such as around Highdown School ?

REPLY by Councillor Ennis Lead Councillor for Climate Strategy and Transport

Thank you for raising the issue of school travel safety. The Council agrees that the safety of all children as they travel to and from school is of great importance to all of us.

There are a number of interventions that the Council could consider, which may reduce the risk to children or improve the safety during peak school travel hours, and could include measures such as, introducing lower speed limits, traffic calming measures or through implementing school street schemes.

The Council set up its first school street over four years ago, and since then has facilitated the introduction of six school street schemes across the borough, with five still in operation. School Streets can create a safer and healthier environment for everyone, including local residents, by reducing the levels of vehicles in the street outside of a school and with it the risk of a collision. They can provide a more relaxed environment, contributing to the better health and wellbeing of our children, as well as encouraging active travel with less traffic in the area and improving air quality outside of schools.

Our current approach to school streets is for these to be marshalled with volunteers from either the school or local community during the school streets operation. However, the Council recognises that this comes with a resource requirement which impacts on the long-term sustainability of the scheme and the propensity for new school street schemes to be introduced.

We are therefore currently, working with consultant support with expertise in school streets, reviewing the Council's approach to both school streets and road safety and risk reduction in and around schools, with a view to putting forward an approach that can be rolled out to more schools across Reading. Whilst this may involve promoting school streets we will also be reviewing alternative measures such as controlled crossings, traffic calming, reduced speed limits and other options recognising that these may be more appropriate in some locations, but all with the same intent, to improve the safety of children during their journeys to and from school.

Transport officers intend to present the outcomes of this review to Councillors later this year. The implementation of any measures outlined in this work will be subject to identifying appropriate funding streams.

With regards to the issues at Highdown Secondary School, Transport officers have previously held discussions with staff from the school to assess the viability of introducing a school street.

These plans were not taken forward at the time and one of the factors for this was due to the large number of closure points that would be needed to introduce an effective school street for the school, and the resources required to marshal these. Following the conclusion of the review into the Council's approach to School Streets, and School Road Safety, Transport officers will re-engage with the School, to discuss what measures could be reasonably introduced to support school travel.

The Council is committed to reducing the risk or perceived levels of risk to school children on journeys to and from school. As well as discussing options with Highdown School, Transport officers would be very happy to discuss similar issues and options with any other schools across Reading, in relation to their own school's situation.

4. Sinead Gibson to ask the Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Community Safety
Deaths and Domestic Abuse

I would like to ask about how Reading identifies and reviews deaths where domestic abuse or coercive control may be a contributing factor.

Where there is a suicide or unexplained death, and there is a known history of domestic abuse or concerns raised by family members, what is the process for those cases to be routinely screened by the Reading Community Safety Partnership for a Domestic Homicide Review or similar safeguarding review?

Since 2019, how many such deaths have been screened, and how many progressed to a full review?

What joint protocol exists between Reading Borough Council, Thames Valley Police, health partners and the coroner to ensure information is shared and these deaths are not treated solely as medical or accidental when there may be safeguarding concerns?

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

I'd like to thank you Sinead, for coming forward this evening on this topic and as ever, I would like to express my sincere sympathy and condolences for the tragic loss of your daughter. And along with my colleagues, I would like to thank you for your activism in this area spurred on by your desire to see better for others.

When there is a suicide or unexplained death, and there is a known history of domestic abuse, coercive control or concerns raised by family members, there are several pathways in which cases are routinely screened.

Firstly, the Reading Community Safety Partnership is responsible for overseeing Domestic Homicide Reviews. Secondly, the Safeguarding Adults Review Panel is responsible for overseeing Safeguarding Adults Reviews (SARs).

Domestic Homicide Reviews

Statutory guidance states that when a domestic homicide occurs, the relevant police force should inform the Community Safety Partnership (CSP) in writing of the incident. In Reading this means that Thames Valley Police will notify Reading's CSP and the CSP then has overall responsibility for requesting a Domestic Homicide Review (DHR) to be carried out. CSPs are best placed to do this as they are made up of multi-agencies including police, local authority, fire and rescue authorities, probation service and health.

In Reading, once any notification has been sent through, the CSP will ask delegated officers to carry out a Scoping Review to explore whether the case fits the criteria for DHR as per the Home Office Guidance. DHRs are also known as Domestic Abuse Related Death Reviews (DARDRs). If a Scoping Review recommends that the case meets the criteria for a DHR/DARDR, an Independent Chair will be commissioned to carry this out, overseen by the CSP and delegated officers. The overview report and executive summary of the DHR would be suitably anonymised and made publicly available, following agreement from the Home Office Quality Assurance Panel.

Since 2019 there have been four deaths in total which have been passed to the CSP and two of these progressed to a full DHR/DARDR.

Safeguarding Adults Reviews (SARs)

An SAR may be commissioned where an adult with care and support needs has died; there is known or suspected abuse or neglect; and there are concerns about how organisations worked together to safeguard the adult. SARs are learning-focused reviews of multi-agency practice and do not determine cause of death. Where a suicide or unexplained death occurs and safeguarding concerns are identified, any agency or individual may submit a SAR notification and this will be considered by an SAR Panel. The Panel determines, on a case-by-case basis, whether SAR criteria are met, whether a discretionary SAR is appropriate, or whether alternative learning arrangements should be used.

The SAR Panel cannot provide a definitive figure for the number of deaths in Reading involving domestic abuse or coercive control that have been screened for SAR consideration, or how many progressed to a full SAR, because:

- SAR records do not contain a specific data field identifying domestic abuse or coercive control as a contributing factor.
- Cases are recorded by outcome (e.g. SAR agreed, discretionary SAR, alternative learning, criteria not met), rather than by type of abuse.

The SAR Panel can confirm that deaths, including suicides and unexplained deaths, are routinely and consistently considered by the SAR Panel where safeguarding concerns are raised.

Information Sharing and the role of the coroner

In addition to the CSP bringing together the relevant partners including Reading Borough Council, Thames Valley Police and health partners, we have an Information Sharing Agreement that allows data and information to be shared between partners, including when a crime has been committed. This ensures that the right review and learning can take place so that we identify any failings, any opportunities for improvements and recommendations that help prevent future tragedies.

Whilst there is no specific protocol in respect to the role of the coroner, the four statutory questions surrounding a death under Section 5 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 include a question as to the circumstances of a death, making it mandatory for the TVP and stake holders to report the full circumstances to the coroner. Families are always asked if there are any concerns and these will always be considered by the coroner if they are relevant to the particular case.

As I know you are aware, coercive control as an aspect of domestic abuse has been gaining increased attention and understanding. There is no doubt that suicide is a leading cause of death for women as a result of domestic abuse and /or coercive control and the Coroner's office has confirmed definitively to us that they are "very aware" of the issue. The Coroner's Office is duty bound to raise further questions to the TVP and or other relevant agencies as necessary to ensure

that such instances are not overlooked. Such probing has resulted in triggering DARs or SARs and that practice by the Coroner's office is ongoing.

Reading's Community Safety Partnership is currently waiting for the Home Office to publish new statutory guidance relating to Domestic Abuse Related Death Reviews. It is anticipated that this will further highlight and clarify focus on this very important topic. The Partnership will ensure that the Coroner has the opportunity to be involved in this process to ensure information sharing is improved. The Partnership will then develop a new process to ensure it adheres to the new guidance and that all partners are clear on when consideration should be given to refer a case for a review.

5. Jacqui Mukono to ask the Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Community Safety

Accommodation for Survivors of Domestic Abuse

Reading Borough Council, like all local housing authorities in England, is required by national law, statutory guidance and local strategies to support victim-survivors of domestic abuse into safe accommodation and to consider their needs, including where people have No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF). Within Reading's Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Strategy 2023–26 the council and its partners set expectations for safe accommodation pathways and multi-agency support for survivors and their children who are fleeing domestic abuse, and this strategy is monitored and reviewed through a three-year action plan overseen by the Domestic Abuse Partnership Board.

For survivors with No Recourse to Public Funds, central government statutory guidance (Domestic Abuse Statutory Guidance 2023) and NRPF practice guidance make clear that local authorities must consider their duties under the Children Act 1989 (section 17) and the Care Act 2014 to provide accommodation and support where children's welfare or adult care needs are engaged, even if the person has NRPF, and there are additional discretionary funding options (such as the Flexible Fund for one-off payments and the Support for Migrant Victims Scheme) that can be accessed via referral agencies to assist with fleeing abuse and securing independent accommodation where statutory support cannot be provided.

Reading's Sanctuary Strategy 2025–28 also explicitly includes actions to co-ordinate support for people with NRPF across council services and increase understanding of NRPF within Council planning and policy development, though it does not in itself ring-fence specific funding solely for NRPF domestic abuse cases; rather, statutory duties and any discretionary support must be met within existing service and commissioning arrangements.

In terms of housing allocation and managing perpetrators in social housing, national homelessness and social housing allocation guidance directs local authorities to give reasonable and, where appropriate, additional priority to domestic abuse survivors, to treat those fleeing abuse as homeless under the Housing Act 1996 and to apply the reasonable preference criteria and exemptions to local connection rules so that survivors in refuges or safe accommodation can access settled housing more readily. This is intended to reduce cases where survivors are displaced while perpetrators remain in social housing.

Locally, Reading Borough Council's own housing policy acknowledges duties to ensure that tenants who are victims of domestic abuse, and their children, can live safely in their homes and to work with specialist services such as Berkshire Women's Aid (which provides refuge accommodation and IDVA support) to assess options when safety is at risk.

Accountability and review of how these duties are implemented typically happens through:

- statutory requirement for Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Strategies and associated action plans to be monitored and updated;
- multi-agency partnership boards (such as Reading's Domestic Abuse Partnership Board) that bring together council services, housing, health and the specialist domestic abuse sector to review outcomes and gaps;
- external statutory guidance frameworks which local authorities must have regard to, and
- formal complaints, ombudsman review or judicial review where statutory duties are not met in individual cases.

Given these arrangements and strategic documents, how is Reading Borough Council currently measuring and publicly reporting the number of domestic abuse survivors with NRPF supported into safe accommodation or re-housed into settled housing, and what specific mechanisms ensure accountability when statutory housing or safeguarding duties are not met for survivors of abuse?

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

I'd like to thank Ms Mukono for her question.

Reading Borough Council recognises its statutory duty to support victim-survivors of domestic abuse into safe accommodation. Every three years we refresh and update our Domestic Abuse and Safe Accommodation Strategy, delivered by Reading's Domestic Abuse Partnership Board and overseen by Reading's Community Safety Partnership.

The current Domestic Abuse and Safe Accommodation Strategy (2023-2026) is undergoing a refresh for 2026-2029 and Reading Borough Council has commissioned two consultants to carry out a Domestic Abuse Strategic Needs Assessment which will inform the new Strategy. As a result of this Needs Assessment we are collating various datasets, including lived experience, and exploring and understanding access to safe accommodation for a number of different survivors. This includes a focus on those being supported within safe accommodation arrangements who have No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF). Having the Strategic Needs Assessment completed will give us a more informed dataset, and this will allow us to make commissioning/de-commissioning decisions where necessary.

Those who have NRPF experience barriers in seeking support, due to their unstable immigration status. As part of the ring-fenced funding from the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) – formally known as 'New Burdens Funding' - the Council has been able to temporarily support survivors of domestic abuse who have NRPF by placing them in temporary accommodation until further arrangements are made. However, the funding formally known as 'New Burdens Funding' has been provided on a yearly basis, with the current funding coming to an end in March 2026. We are waiting on Government to provide us a clear indication of how much funding we will receive from April 2026. This currently makes us unable to commit to future financial plans as this would not be sustainable to survivors in the long run.

We are not legally required to publish domestic abuse cases in relation to NRPF, however, we do regularly report to MHCLG regarding these findings and this information is published by them on an annual basis.

Reading's Sanctuary Strategy 2025–28 explicitly includes actions to co-ordinate support for people with NRPF across council services and whilst this work is currently in its early stages it will ensure that the views and needs of all groups covered under NRPF are fully captured. While we are focussing on meeting our statutory responsibilities and there is no dedicated funding specifically for this area, we will ensure that the necessary engagement and consideration of all NRPF affected groups is built in as part of delivering our statutory duties.

In terms of accountability, cases where statutory duties have not been met for any reason, depending on the route of referrals or where the case sits specifically, can be monitored within contract management meetings between the Council and our commissioned service Berkshire Women's Aid (BWA). Anything that requires escalation will be discussed with the Community Safety Service Manager and will be brought to the attention of the Domestic Abuse Partnership Board for discussion. If further intervention and governance is needed, this will be reported to Reading's Community Safety Partnership which oversees the Domestic Abuse Partnership Board and ensures our statutory duties are delivered.

6. Samuel Fisher to ask the Leader of the Council
No Cuts Needs Based Budget

There are no reasons why this Council cannot set a No Cuts Needs Based Budget. It is not illegal. This has been done historically in Liverpool and Poplar who gained public support alongside Trade Unions. This was done using reserves and borrowing power and demanding back central government funding.

This money was used to build housing, fund services and fulfil the needs of their communities.

Local Council budgets have been reduced in real terms by 40% between 2009/10 and 2019/2020. This averages 4% a year. Councils and authorities which have passed Cuts Budgets, such as Slough, Croydon, Thurrock, Woking, Birmingham City and Nottingham City have still gone bankrupt. Showing that the issue of Austerity is cross party and countrywide. The Council therefore needs to demand the funding from Government. Even if this year's budget is passed the same reduction in services will be asked for next year. In effect there is nothing to lose.

So instead of squeezing 4.99% more out of the working class in Reading by passing a Cuts Budget why does the Council not build mass support by using reserves and borrowing powers to set a legal Needs Based No Cuts Budget to reverse the austerity in Reading?

REPLY by Councillor Terry Leader of the Council

Thank you for your question, and for the opportunity to delve back into the history of Local Government.

For those in the room who don't know, in 1921, Poplar Council (now Tower Hamlets) refused to collect the rates precept which should have been passed on to the cross-London authorities like the London County Council.

The London County Council responded by taking them to Court, and 30 Labour councillors were sent to prison for six weeks.

In the mid-1980's, 15 local authorities including Liverpool campaigned for 'not setting a rate' but in the end Liverpool agreed a budget where mass redundancies were only avoided through £23m of capitalisation (similar to the Exceptional Financial Support arrangement being used by many Councils today) plus a £60m loan from Swiss banks. In effect, they took out a mortgage that had to be paid back by local people in future years.

Subsequently 47 Liverpool Labour Councillors were surcharged £106,000 plus significant costs and temporarily disqualified from office for the 'delay in setting a rate'.

Both of these examples pre-date the current statutory requirements in place for Local Government, whereby a legal budget has to be set by 11th March each year.

The cuts in Local Government funding during austerity were indeed devastating and combined with poor decision-making, led to the financial issues in the Councils you named. I'm proud to say that Reading is not one of those Councils.

And one of the poor decisions made by many Councils, including some in Berkshire, was to make short-term decisions to not increase Council Tax for political gain. Those Councils are now seeing the results of those decisions with insufficient funding to meet the needs of their residents.

Council Tax is now by far the main source of funding for Councils and responsible Councils implement the increases required to fund the services needed by the most vulnerable people in our communities.

Fortunately, austerity has now ended with Reading Borough Council receiving increased Central Government funding of £6.2m over the next three years, which is why the budget being presented to Council tonight for consideration is able to target additional funding to those of our residents who have the greatest need without mortgaging future generations.