

## COUNCIL MEETING – 24 FEBRUARY 2026

### AGENDA ITEM 6

#### QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

1. Councillor McElroy to ask the Leader of the Council:

#### Council Funding

Earlier this year Kier Starmer visited Reading and much to the delight of our three Labour MPs announced that Reading Borough Council will receive nearly £43m from the government for essential services. The MPs took the opportunity to criticise the previous Government for underfunding Councils and celebrated the real difference that this money will make to our communities.

Given this miracle, you can imagine my surprise when the budget papers came out and not only do they include more cuts (again), but also a big increase in Council tax (again).

Can the Leader of the Council tell us, is Reading really getting a £42.8 'cash injection' from the Government? Where does the money come from that makes up that four-year figure?

**REPLY** by Councillor Terry Leader of the Council.

The £42.8m is a combination of £34.4m that the Council is able to collect through Council Tax, plus an additional £8.4m of Central Government funding. This was based on the provisional Local Government funding figures announced in December.

The good news is that following the announcement on 9<sup>th</sup> February of additional funding for Homelessness prevention, the headline figure has now increased to £44.9m, and the additional Central Government funding is now £10.5m.

2. Councillor Raj Singh to ask the Lead Councillor for Housing:

#### Rough Sleeping

In response to my previous question in December on rough sleeping, the administration stated that *“some individuals may decline offers of accommodation or reconnection, but the outreach teams continue to offer support until they are ready to come away from the streets,”* and highlighted that the Council commissions seven supported accommodation projects providing over 270 bed spaces alongside a tenancy sustainment service. The response also confirmed that *during the winter months the Council activates its Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP).*

Since that response, our town has witnessed the tragic death of Kepha Otundo, who died while rough sleeping near Abattoirs Road during severe winter conditions. Residents will rightly question whether repeating that individuals can simply decline support is an adequate position when a life has been lost - particularly when SWEP measures are meant to provide additional protection during extreme weather.

So can the Lead Councillor explain:

1. What escalation procedures exist when someone repeatedly declines accommodation, and whether “continuing to offer support” without stronger intervention is genuinely safeguarding life;

2. During the period when SWEP was activated, how many emergency bed spaces were available, how many were offered, and why someone known to services remained in a tent despite these provisions;
3. Given the claimed availability of over 270 commissioned bed spaces, how many were actually vacant and immediately accessible during the cold weather period when this death occurred;
4. Whether the administration accepts that citing capacity and ongoing outreach is not enough if the current system still allows someone known to services to remain on the streets; and
5. Can you please confirm the latest data for our Council area showing the number of children and families currently living in Temporary Accommodation, how long they have been there on average, and what steps are being taken to reduce those stays.

Reading residents want accountability - and that “offers being made” or protocols being activated are not treated as success if vulnerable people remain at risk on our streets or families are left for prolonged periods in temporary housing.

**REPLY** by Councillor Yeo Lead Councillor for Housing.

Thank you for your question and for raising these very serious issues. The death of Kepha Otundo was a tragic event. On behalf of the Council, I extend my condolences to his family, friends, and all who knew him. Any death of someone experiencing rough sleeping is one too many, and it must drive learning and improvement across the entire system.

The Council commissions a substantial pathway of outreach, supported accommodation, tenancy sustainment and emergency responses; but I agree that quoting capacity or activity is not success in itself – safety and outcomes are what matter. That is why we are bringing the draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2026 – 31 to HNL Committee in March 2026, together with a detailed Action Plan, to further strengthen our offer and ensure increased off the streets options, earlier prevention, faster move on, and clearer accountability across partners, aligned to the National Plan to End Homelessness published in December 2025.

I invite Councillor Singh to attend the March 2026 HNL Committee when the draft Strategy and Action Plan will be considered.

I address each of your specific questions as follows:

1. **What escalation procedures exist when someone repeatedly declines accommodation, and whether “continuing to offer support” without stronger intervention is genuinely safeguarding life.**

Reading’s Council commissioned rough sleeping outreach service follows a clear escalation framework when an individual persistently declines support. This includes increasing the frequency and intensity of welfare checks, multi-agency case reviews and referral to Adult Safeguarding where an individual is at risk of serious harm, or their capacity requires assessment.

While every effort is made to bring people indoors during SWEP, adults who are assessed to have capacity retain the right to make their own decisions about accepting accommodation. Most people encountered by outreach teams meet the threshold for capacity and therefore cannot be compelled by the Council or partner agencies to enter accommodation. Decisions to remain outside – though unsafe – must still be respected.

To improve access for people with complex needs, Housing and Adult Social Care have funded a specialist Senior Social Worker to carry out Care Act assessments on the street and coordinate with outreach, health and substance misuse services to support people into accommodation. Housing and the Safer Public Realm Team jointly monitor tents and encampments, coordinating welfare checks, risk management and timely accommodation offers. Where sites meet safety or anti-social behaviour thresholds, possession proceedings are considered to legally remove encampments, with early communication ensuring outreach can intervene and offer support to avoid displacement of rough sleeping and new sites occurring.

**2. During the period when SWEP was activated, how many emergency bed spaces were available, how many were offered, and why someone known to services remained in a tent despite these provisions.**

SWEP has been activated three times this winter, covering 21 nights (as of 18<sup>th</sup> February 2026) supporting 116 unique individuals with accommodation to date. During the SWEP activation covering the period when Mr Otundo sadly passed away, 51 unique individuals were offered and accepted emergency accommodation.

During each activation, the Council provides as many emergency beds as required, including communal spaces at the 24/7 staffed Salvation Army hostel and paid nightly placements. The activation period also creates an opportunity for individuals to move into the Council's commissioned supported accommodation vacancies. The purpose of SWEP is simple: to bring everyone indoors and prevent loss of life during dangerous weather.

Despite this, some people remain rough sleeping, some in tents, because engagement is voluntary and individuals may feel unable or unwilling to use indoor provision due to trauma, anxiety, fear of losing belongings, distrust of services or attachment to familiar outdoor locations. As noted in the response to Question 1, adults assessed to have capacity are entitled to make their own decisions about accepting or declining accommodation, and services cannot compel them to come indoors.

Tents are not safe: they offer poor protection from severe weather, can create a false sense of security, carry fire risks, and make people less visible to outreach and emergency services. For these reasons, the Council does not hand out tents or sleeping bags, as doing so can unintentionally prolong rough sleeping and delay or prevent engagement with safer accommodation.

**3. Given the claimed availability of over 270 commissioned bed spaces, how many were actually vacant and immediately accessible during the cold weather period when this death occurred.**

The 270+ commissioned bed spaces and the SWEP beds are different provisions designed for different cohorts of people. The 270+ commissioned bed spaces in Reading are primarily longer stay supported accommodation, not emergency or SWEP beds, and therefore are not designed for immediate access. During the cold weather period in which Mr Otundo passed away, where SWEP was active between 31<sup>st</sup> December 2025 and 12<sup>th</sup> January 2026, SWEP beds were available and being used. During this period 10 people moved into the Council's commissioned supported accommodation services' vacancies. These spaces were available only to people assessed as eligible to access public funds, with a local connection to Reading, and whose needs matched the type of support those services provide.

The Council does not advocate for the operation of a year-round instant access shelter in Reading. National best practice and the Government's Operating Principles for Night Shelters state that permanent communal shelters should be exceptional, and that councils should prioritise self-contained accommodation. Permanent shelters can compromise privacy, fail to support long

term recovery, and risk creating dependency rather than progression. The Council therefore continues to support, as it has done for the last 10 years, FAITH's January – March B4N winter shelter and provides annual grant funding to sustain this model.

National legislation limits what councils can provide to people with restricted eligibility for public funds, meaning the 270 commissioned bed spaces – funded for residents with a Reading connection who are eligible for support – cannot be used for those outside these criteria. SWEP is the humanitarian exception, allowing emergency shelter to be offered to *everyone* during life-threatening weather, regardless of immigration status or eligibility.

**4. Whether the administration accepts that citing capacity and ongoing outreach is not enough if the current system still allows someone known to services to remain on the streets.**

The administration recognises that supported accommodation capacity and outreach alone are not enough, and the preceding answers outline the breadth of multi-agency interventions used to support anyone sleeping rough in Reading. The Council also agrees that we alongside all partners must go further, which is precisely what the draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2026 – 31 and its Action Plan are designed to deliver.

Crucially, these local commitments will be reinforced by the forthcoming Duty to Collaborate within the National Plan to End Homelessness, which places direct responsibility on health, justice, care and other statutory partners to identify risk earlier and take active, shared steps to prevent and relieve homelessness. The new draft Strategy and Action Plan commit to earlier intervention, more varied and accessible off-the-street accommodation options, stronger multi-agency escalation, and a system-wide duty of shared responsibility – all aimed at preventing anyone known to services from remaining on the streets without every possible coordinated response being activated.

**5. Can you please confirm the latest data for our Council area showing the number of children and families currently living in Temporary Accommodation, how long they have been there on average, and what steps are being taken to reduce those stays.**

As at 16 February 2026 there is a total of 327 families residing in temporary accommodation. The average length of stay for those families is 395 days. The Homelessness Prevention Team have Officers dedicated to working with households residing in temporary accommodation to ensure that they are exploring all suitable rehousing options, which include accessing the Rent Guarantee Scheme, searching for affordable private rented properties and supporting them with applications and bidding on Homechoice at Reading.