READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE - 10 MARCH 2026

QUESTION NO. 1

Councillor Ballsdon to ask the Chair of the Housing, Neighbourhoods & Leisure Committee:

Accessibility at Albert Road Recreation Ground

Residents have raised the current lack of accessibility at Albert Road Recreation Ground with me. Has the Council considered potential improvements to ensure the space is inclusive and accessible to all members of the community, and will the Lead Member for Leisure agree to meet with a group of my ward residents and me at the site to discuss these issues?

REPLY by Councillor Dennis:

I invite Councillor Barnett-Ward, the Lead Councillor for Leisure and Culture, to make the response on my behalf.

REPLY by the Lead Councillor for Leisure and Culture:

I would like to thank Cllr Ballsdon for the question.

Reading's Labour Council maintains over eighty parks and open spaces and has invested more than £1.7m since 2024 and over £3.5m since 2021 in public play and sports facilities in those parks and open spaces. Albert Road Recreation Ground was one of my nearest playgrounds when my children were younger so I know it very well and have spent a great deal of time there. The council made improvements to Albert Road Recreation Ground last year: a £100,000 investment that refurbished the popular and free-to-use tennis courts, improved the car park layout and provided a new wheelchair-accessible entrance. We are also looking to refresh the car park markings.

I have not received any representations from residents about accessibility at Albert Road Recreation Ground so I would encourage them, and of course Cllr Ballsdon, to email me with their specific concerns. I will also be happy to bring council officers to meet ward councillors and residents at the park to discuss these concerns in situ.

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QUESTION NO. 2

Councillor Thompson to ask the Chair of the Housing, Neighbourhoods & Leisure Committee:

Rough Sleepers

I am sure we are all shocked and saddened at the deaths of Kepha Otundo and most recently Genevieve Curwen on the streets of Reading this winter. I appreciate that we will discuss the strategy and action plan for preventing homelessness and rough sleeping later this evening, but given the gravity and urgency of the situation, could the Lead Councillor for Housing outline the steps taken by the Council together with St Mungo's and other relevant bodies to understand what happened in these two individual cases and what could have been done differently? Could the Lead Councillor also tell us if any additional measures are being taken right now to identify and help the most vulnerable rough sleepers?

REPLY by Councillor Dennis:

I invite Councillor Yeo, the Lead Councillor for Housing, to make the response on my behalf.

REPLY by the Lead Councillor for Housing:

Thank you for your question. Like many colleagues and residents, I am deeply saddened by the deaths of Kepha Otundo earlier this winter and, most recently, Genevieve Curwen. Every loss of life among people experiencing homelessness is a tragedy, and on behalf of the Council I extend my sincere condolences to their families, friends, and everyone who knew them.

Both individuals were well known to local services. St Mungo's, which the Council commissions to deliver our street outreach service, carried out repeated welfare checks, offers of accommodation, and engagement attempts over a sustained period. In both cases, services escalated concerns through multi agency and safeguarding processes. Despite this, both individuals continued to decline immediate off the streets accommodation offers, including under Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) during recent periods of very cold weather.

Adults assessed to have mental capacity are legally entitled to make their own decisions, even when those decisions place them at significant risk. This is one of the most challenging realities faced by frontline workers and partner agencies. However, it remains the case that no one can be compelled to accept accommodation unless they lack capacity or meet statutory thresholds for intervention.

Given the seriousness of these two deaths, I can confirm that the Council, together with relevant frontline partners, has already begun work to understand the circumstances leading up to each case. This will include a multi-agency review of both individuals'

contact with services, the support offered, the decisions made and the escalation that took place.

We intend to strengthen our approach to learning from all deaths among people experiencing homelessness in Reading – not only those who die while rough sleeping, but also individuals who pass away in emergency accommodation or supported housing. We are therefore working with partners to establish a more formal and consistent review process for all such cases.

This review process must bring together Public Health, Adult Social Care, Safeguarding, Primary Care, substance misuse services and other statutory and voluntary partners, alongside frontline housing and support services such as St Mungo's. It should provide a coordinated, blame-free reflection on practice, so that learning leads to improved multi agency responses for people at risk who are refusing offers of accommodation available to them. Agencies should build a shared understanding of the unmet or complex needs involved and identify where systems or support could be working better.

Alongside this review work, a wide range of services and interventions are already in place to identify and support those at greatest risk, ensuring the most vulnerable people sleeping rough receive help right now.

St Mungo's continues early morning, late evening and weekend outreach shifts, with increased frequency for individuals who decline support or are known to have complex needs – especially during extreme weather. A Council employed Senior Social Worker works alongside outreach services to carry out Care Act assessments on the street, enabling faster safeguarding intervention where needed. Housing, substance misuse and NHS health outreach teams, and the Safer Public Realm team operate a coordinated approach, sharing intelligence and undertaking regular multi agency risk reviews.

Reading continues to provide a wide range of homelessness and rough sleeping support, including immediate emergency responses, supported accommodation and longer-term recovery options, and this gives Reading a strong local offer. SWEP is activated during extreme cold or heat, offering emergency accommodation and welfare support to anyone sleeping rough, regardless of local connection or immigration status. During cold weather, SWEP provides 15 extra beds at Willow House, with additional paid nightly placements arranged as needed, ensuring no-one is left without an off-the-streets option during extreme conditions. Heatwave SWEP provides water, sun protection, cool spaces and, in severe cases, emergency accommodation. The FAITH Christian Group run Bed for the Night winter shelter provides 20 beds from January to March for people sleeping rough who have a Reading local connection.

Reading maintains a broad range of supported accommodation options with capacity for over 270 people, including six direct access spaces – a scale of provision that exceeds that available in many comparable areas. Options include the women only Nova Project; Caversham Road Pods; 36 beds at Willow House alongside 20 cluster-flat units; a 41-unit Young Person's Service; Housing First and couples' units for 37 people; the Accommodation for Ex-Offenders scheme; and over 100 Working Towards Independence bedspaces across 20 properties. Our off-the-streets provision is continuing to grow, with additional direct access rooms and new self-contained units becoming available this year. In addition, tenancy sustainment support is available

borough-wide, across different tenures, through a Council commissioned Floating Support Service.

The Council have secured further funding from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government for 2026/27 to 2028/29. This will help us add capacity where it is most needed.