

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE - 21 JULY 2026

QUESTION NO. 1

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

South Street Arts Centre

Green Party councillors believe that the redevelopment of the Hexagon, including the new Studio Theatre, is an exciting investment in Reading's cultural future. At the same time, South Street Arts Centre continues to play an important role in the town's cultural life, hosting a diverse programme of theatre, comedy, live music and community events that are enjoyed by many residents.

Could the Lead Councillor provide an update on the Council's plans for South Street Arts Centre, including any future investment or improvements that are planned, and how the Council sees the venue developing alongside the new Hexagon Theatre?

REPLY by Councillor Hoskin:

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

REPLY by the Lead Councillor for Leisure and Culture:

Thank you for your question.

South Street Arts Centre continues to make an important contribution to Reading's cultural offer and remains a valued venue for theatre, comedy, live music, and community events. The Council recognises the role that South Street plays in supporting local artists, audiences and cultural organisations, and the contribution it makes to the town's creative life.

The programme currently at South Street Arts Centre remains a highly valued part of Reading's cultural offer and will continue to play a distinct and important role as part of the redeveloped Hexagon and new Studio Theatre.

As the new Studio Theatre is developed, it is anticipated that some commercial and community users may choose to relocate there, attracted by its modern, flexible design, larger audience capacity and significantly improved accessibility. This would enable those activities to benefit from enhanced facilities while continuing to support a diverse programme of cultural activity across the town.

The Council's immediate priority is the successful delivery of the Hexagon investment programme and construction of the Studio Theatre. This investment will provide enhanced performance facilities, improved accessibility and significant environmental benefits. An update on the progress of this project and the work of the Hexagon will be presented to this Committee in November.

The Council is continuously considering its wider cultural and property strategies in the context of significant financial pressures, the substantial investment currently being made in The Hexagon and the new Studio Theatre, as well as the changing needs and demands of the town. The performance of services is continually reviewed, with delivery models adapted to reflect the changing needs and demands of audiences and performers. No decisions have been taken at this stage and any future proposals would be subject to the Council's established decision-making processes.

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QUESTION NO. 2

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

New Library and Cool Space

Green Party councillors welcome the new library and the Cool Spaces initiative. The library is a very accessible, bright and already a well-used study space. It also functions well as one of the designated Cool Spaces, a service which we hope will stay and grow in the coming years.

Regarding water: Is there existing or is there a plan for a free public drinking water fountain and refill point at these Cool Spaces, including the Library throughout its opening hours?

Regarding information about local events and services: Is there going to be facility for local organisations to place publicity leaflets in addition to the rolling big screen at the entrance?

REPLY by Councillor Hoskin:

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

REPLY by the Lead Councillor for Leisure and Culture:

Thank you for your question and compliments about the new Reading Central Library. Over 25,000 visits have been made to the new library since it opened and we're delighted to see the library being used by so many people. Especially so during the recent warm heatwaves where we were able to make it available as a cool space.

The [Cool Spaces webpage](#) on the Council's website signposts to both Reading Central and Battle libraries, Rivermead and Palmer Park leisure centres, and Whitley Wood Community Centre. All of these sites, except Battle Library, offer free drinking water. Here at the Civic Centre the water fountain is just outside this Council Chamber. We would encourage people to bring their own refillable bottles.

With regards to information about local events and services. There are no plans to provide a facility for holding leaflets and flyers within Reading Central Library. Leaflets and flyers can be displayed at some of our branch libraries including Caversham and Battle, please speak to a member of library staff who can help.

At the Civic Centre there is a dedicated screen located in the reception for promoting local events and activities. Interested groups can email details of their events and activities to VCS@reading.gov.uk.

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QUESTION NO. 3

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

Extreme heat causes 2,700 excess deaths across the UK

The 'Today' programme reported 2,700 excess deaths in the first two heatwaves in the UK, mostly people over 65 years old with underlying health conditions.

The Committee on Climate Change has been forecasting for years that heatwaves will be the 'silent killer'.

Green councillors believe we have a duty of care to our residents, workers and visitors to adapt to our changing climate and protect ourselves from extreme heat.

Could the relevant Lead Councillor outline what work Reading Council is doing to help residents adapt to extreme heat, particularly through its housing, neighbourhoods and leisure responsibilities?

REPLY by Councillor Hoskin:

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

REPLY by the Lead Councillor for ?:

Reading Borough Council recognises that extreme heat is a serious and growing public health, climate adaptation and health equity issue and has already identified these risks through its Climate Change Adaptation Framework and Climate Emergency Strategy. Our local Climate Risk Assessment highlights the impacts of rising temperatures on health, wellbeing, productivity and essential services. We therefore see heat not simply as an environmental issue, but as one that affects public health, housing, neighbourhoods, leisure services, business continuity and community resilience.

The Council is already taking action across a range of services. During periods of severe heat, Public Health distributes UKHSA heat-health alerts across the organisation and works with partners to share practical advice on staying safe, recognising heat-related illness and supporting vulnerable residents. Information is promoted through our website, social media, Community Health Champions and voluntary sector networks.

During the recent red heat-health alert, we introduced a local Cool Spaces offer, including leisure centres, the Central Library and a range of voluntary, community and faith venues. This was well received and provides a strong foundation for future work with community partners.

Adult Social Care played a key role in the response, prioritising contact with vulnerable residents and monitoring pressures across the wider health and care system. Housing and outreach services also worked alongside partners to support rough sleepers and people whose health is particularly vulnerable to extreme temperatures. Our Severe Weather Emergency Protocol enables additional support, access to cool spaces and emergency accommodation when conditions require it.

The Council also continues to strengthen its resilience as an organisation. Business continuity arrangements were activated during recent heatwaves to maintain critical services, and lessons learned are informing updates to our Adverse Weather Plan and service-specific heat plans. We are also reviewing how best to protect staff, particularly those working outdoors, travelling during hot weather or working in buildings that can become excessively warm.

Longer term, planning, housing and environmental policies all have an important role to play. Through the Local Plan Partial Update, we are seeking to strengthen measures relating to climate adaptation, green infrastructure and urban greening. New Council housing developments are designed to meet overheating standards, while investment in existing homes, including insulation, windows and energy efficiency improvements, helps create more comfortable and resilient homes.

Parks, trees and green infrastructure are also a vital part of our response. Increasing canopy cover, protecting and enhancing green spaces, and supporting nature-based solutions all help cool the urban environment and improve resilience to heat.

In summary, Reading Borough Council is already taking action across public health, adult social care, housing, homelessness, planning, parks, leisure, libraries and emergency planning to respond to the growing risks of extreme heat. However, recent heat events have reinforced the need to continue strengthening our preparedness. We recognise that extreme heat will become more frequent as the climate changes and remain committed to building resilience, protecting vulnerable residents and ensuring essential services can continue to operate safely and effectively.

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QUESTION NO. 4

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

Soft Plastic Recycling in Reading

Since September 2023, soft plastic recycling pilot schemes have been running in Reading. It was announced that in later 2025 that these schemes were being expanded.

As part of the governments "Simpler Recycling " plan, local authorities are required to have plans in place to collect soft plastics from households and businesses from March 2027. Green Councillors have long lobbied for improved recycling in Reading and one way to achieve this would be through collection from houses of soft plastic

Please can we get an update on trial? What measures are being used to decide if the local pilot has been a success or not?

Is the council on track to meet the government's target of collections for all household and businesses by March 2027 and what are the next steps in achieving that goal?

REPLY by Councillor Hoskin:

I invite Councillor McGoldrick, the Lead Councillor for Environmental Services & Community Safety, to make the response on my behalf.

REPLY by the Lead Councillor for Environmental Services & Community Safety:

I would like to thank Councillor Clarke for his question.

The FlexCollect project was a nationally funded trial to understand how flexible plastics can be collected and processed ahead of forthcoming legislative changes. The re3 Partnership took part in the trial between September 2023 and July 2024, collecting soft plastics from around 10,000 households in Reading.

The final FlexCollect report found that flexible plastic collections are easy to implement, are popular with residents, achieve low contamination levels and deliver high recovery rates. The success of the Reading trial was assessed using measures including resident participation and satisfaction, material quality, contamination levels, recovery rates, and operational impacts on collection and processing. Reading's results were consistent with the positive findings reported nationally.

The trial also highlighted some challenges, including manual handling and storage requirements, together with a lack of UK processing capacity for the volume of flexible plastics that could be collected through a national rollout.

As Lead Member and a member of the re3 Partnership Board, I am pleased that the trial has provided valuable evidence to inform future service development. Since the

completion of the trial, the Government has recently announced that the requirement for local authorities to collect flexible plastics from households will be delayed until 2030. This reflects some of the challenges identified through FlexCollect, particularly the need for further development of national sorting, processing and end-market capacity.

The re3 Partnership will continue to review the findings from the trial and consider the infrastructure and operational requirements needed to support future collections. The evidence gathered through FlexCollect will help inform future decisions by the Partnership as we prepare for the implementation of the revised national requirements.

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QUESTION NO. 5

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

Maintaining wheelchair accessible footpaths

The council maintains the borough's footpath network and has committed to maintaining and improving disabled access to footpaths

The council's ROWIP (<https://images.reading.gov.uk/2023/03/Reading-Rights-of-Way-Improvement-Plan.pdf>) states:

5.3.4 Improving the quality of paths

Improving the quality of paths through resurfacing and signposting forms part of our improvement plan. In Reading, many footpaths are already well surfaced and accessible to everyone, however we also have a rolling programme of improving the quality of the footpath network. Users can expect all footpaths to be signposted and clear of vegetation or obstruction. We also welcome feedback from disabled users or people who would like to use the footpath network but for some reason cannot, so that we can try and make the network more accessible.

Recent experience of wheelchair and pushchair users suggests that this aim is not being met, and that wheeled access is not being seen as a priority.

Ongoing issues on footpath 15 mean that willows growing through and across the path obstruct pushchairs and wheelchairs. This path is a direct pedestrian link between Southcote and Green Park station. Despite many requests and site visits over several years to clear this, officers have concluded that these obstacles are acceptable, despite being in direct contradiction of the stated aims of the council's Rights of Way improvement plan.

Recent works at the entrance to footpath 7 alongside Fobney Marsh at Rose Kiln Lane on Council owned land prevented wheelchair access.

Despite several site meetings and emails, a regular mobility scooter user discovered the way he had used was suddenly blocked by the installation of railings. The formal gate which should be accessible with "RADAR" key had been unfit for purpose and the local collective known as the Marshians, who have taken on the maintenance of the path from the council to save council resources and protect the diverse flora that grows there, figured out a workaround. This was pointed out to officers and ward councillors on site visits and was followed up with emails yet this was ignored. The railings were installed while the kissing gate was left unusable, thus preventing a mobility scooter user from accessing the path.

Footpath 6 is a direct link between Coley, a residential area and the employment leisure and retail establishments along the A33 corridor. It would be a useful and popular walk

between them if it was in reasonable condition. Despite recent Community Infrastructure Levy funded work this path is no more accessible to wheelchair or mobility scooter users than before: all the kissing gates and radar padlocks are unusable and the new boardwalk has raised steps which are obstructing access to them. The recent work has not tackled the worst of the low lying and muddy areas which become deep puddles after rain, so does not fulfil its potential as a healthy and sustainable alternative means of travel. Why were these not addressed at the time?

The council has a duty under the Disability Discrimination Act to ensure disabled people can access facilities. It also has an inspection programme of the rights of way network. How is this programme monitored and progress scrutinised? Can a report on ROWIP progress be brought annually to HNL?

REPLY by Councillor Hoskin:

I invite Councillor McGoldrick, the Lead Councillor for Environmental Services & Community Safety, to make the response on my behalf.

REPLY by the Lead Councillor for Environmental Services & Community Safety:

Thank you, Councillor Cresswell, for raising these concerns.

The Council remains committed to improving access to the Public Rights of Way network for all users, including wheelchair users, mobility scooter users and families with pushchairs. The Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) continues to guide our approach to maintenance and improvement.

Public Rights of Way are inspected and maintained through a combination of annual inspections, routine maintenance and responsive action where issues are identified. Rights of Way on Council-owned land have recently been inspected, with vegetation clearance and minor repairs now being programmed. Routes on highway land are inspected through the Council's highway safety inspection regime, whilst those within parks and open spaces are maintained by Neighbourhood Services teams. Annual vegetation cutback is also undertaken across the network.

Officers continue to work closely with local community groups. Following site visits by Neighbourhood Services officers on 8 July 2026 and Highways officers on 17 July 2026, including discussions with the Coley Water Meadows Friends Group, more than ten maintenance and improvement actions have been identified across the Coley Water Meadows Public Rights of Way network and are being progressed.

Community Infrastructure Levy funding has already supported improvements in Coley Water Meadows and Southcote Linear Park, with further works planned. In considering improvements to Footpaths 6, 7 and 15, officers must balance accessibility aspirations with site-specific constraints, including biodiversity, flood risk and land ownership considerations. These routes will continue to be reviewed and prioritised through the inspection and maintenance programme.

The ROWIP remains closely aligned with the Reading Transport Strategy 2040 and the emerging Local Transport Delivery Plan. Whilst we recognise the importance of Member oversight, we do not currently consider a separate annual ROWIP report to the Housing,

Neighbourhoods and Leisure Committee necessary. Progress is monitored through existing service management arrangements and wider reporting on transport, active travel and infrastructure programmes, although reporting arrangements will remain under review.