

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

17 DECEMBER 2025

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 1

Councillor R Singh to ask the Lead Councillor for Housing:

Rough Sleeping

Over the weekend, I noticed a few people sleeping rough in cardboard boxes along the main shopping streets in Reading. With winter fast approaching, temperatures are dropping, and it's deeply worrying to see people exposed to those conditions at night.

I understand that the most recent rough-sleeping count recorded around 57 individuals, adjusted to 42 after verification, and that the Council has received an additional £945,000 of government funding to tackle homelessness.

Could the Lead Councillor tell us what further action is being taken ahead of winter to reduce visible rough sleeping in the town centre, and specifically, how many of those identified as rough sleepers are military veterans?

And what targeted support is being put in place to ensure those veterans - and others on our streets - are not left outside in freezing conditions this winter?

REPLY by Councillor Yeo (Lead Councillor for Housing):

Thank you for raising this important issue. I share your concern about the risks posed by cold weather to anyone sleeping rough in Reading. The Council continues to work proactively with partners to reduce rough sleeping and ensure that no one is left outside in freezing conditions.

During the winter months the Council activates its Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) which is triggered when temperatures reach zero degrees or lower for three consecutive nights. This intervention has operated each winter in Reading for over a decade, providing a critical safeguard that ensures that no individual is left outside in freezing conditions, and it prevents deaths on the streets of Reading year after year. Under SWEP, emergency accommodation is offered to anyone sleeping rough, regardless of their local connection or immigration status. This year, the offer includes 14 bed spaces at Willow House, hosted by the Salvation Army, plus additional emergency accommodation as required. Temperatures have already fallen low enough to trigger SWEP this year. The protocol was activated for three consecutive nights, from 19th to 21st November, during which several individuals were accommodated – either verified as sleeping rough or assessed as being at significant risk of doing so. Council officers within the Rough Sleeping Initiatives Team monitor weather conditions all year round to ensure SWEP is activated promptly whenever cold or heatwave threshold temperatures are met.

Alongside SWEP, the Council is using rough sleeping grant funding to support our charity partner FAITH in delivering Bed for the Night (B4N) – a proven and successful intervention over many previous years. B4N provides emergency accommodation in the form of night shelters for people verified as rough sleeping during the coldest months.

Once again, for winter 2026, two shelters will operate for three months, from January through to March:

- One dedicated to refugees leaving Home Office accommodation – therefore preventing someone from rough sleeping for the first time; and
- One for anyone verified as rough sleeping who needs a safe place to stay

Together, these shelters will offer 40 bed spaces each night in local church venues, staffed by volunteers from churches and FAITH. Guests will receive a warm evening meal and breakfast, and sites will be regularly visited by outreach teams including St Mungo's, Change Grow Live for substance misuse support, and Reading's Health Outreach Liaison Team. This model not only provides immediate safety and warmth but also creates a stable environment where individuals can engage with support services. These teams work together, and with the Council, to minimise returns to the streets when the shelters close in Spring.

All Year St Mungo's, our commissioned and grant-funded rough sleeping outreach service, work early morning and evening shifts across the week to reach people sleeping rough. The team responds quickly to new reports and makes persistent efforts to engage individuals, understand their situation, and provide support into accommodation. They make referrals to the Council's dedicated Rough Sleeping Initiatives Team for consideration of supported accommodation options. To meet these needs, the Council commissions seven supported accommodation projects, providing over 270 bed spaces and a tenancy sustainment service too. Where someone does not have a local connection to Reading, the team works to facilitate safe reconnections to their home town, or country of origin. While supported housing options may not always match an individual's expectations of what they believe they should be offered, they provide a vital platform away from the streets and into a pathway towards independent living. 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.

Regarding veterans, our rough sleeping outreach team records and monitors anyone who discloses military service. This question is asked during initial assessment and revisited later as trust develops, recognising that disclosure may not occur immediately and can be retraumatising. In the 2025 annual rough sleeping snapshot, one former UK veteran was identified; they are no longer being found sleeping rough and have unfortunately disengaged with homelessness support services. Currently, the outreach team is working with one active client who has disclosed military service; they are homeless but not sleeping rough and are receiving specialist support from St Mungo's to secure stable housing. Military veterans who are homeless are considered to have priority need under homelessness legislation if assessed as vulnerable due to their service. The outreach team recognises the additional risks faced by veterans and ensures that anyone identified as a veteran is promptly referred to the Homelessness Prevention Team. Both outreach and prevention teams provide advice, accommodation referrals, and links to specialist services such as Veterans' Gateway, Royal British Legion, and SSAFA to meet their needs.

In addition to the measures I have outlined, the Council actively encourages members of the public to report any concerns about someone sleeping rough through the StreetLink website. This ensures that individuals are visited promptly by the St Mungo's outreach teams and offered support, accommodation, or reconnection where appropriate.

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COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 2

Councillor R Singh to ask the Lead Councillor for Corporate Services and Resources:

Costs of Mayoralty

In light of the recent article revealing that Reading Borough Council spent over £81,000 on travel expenses in 2024/25 — including £2,420.13 by the Mayor — and with the Tax Payers' Alliance calling this level of spending 'extraordinary', will the Lead Councillor for Finance publish a full, itemised breakdown of all costs linked to the Mayor and Civic Office over the last three financial years?

While the Labour-run Council continues to squeeze Reading residents with rising charges and shrinking services, will the Lead Councillor commit to producing an annual public 'Mayoral Cost Report' to ensure full transparency and value for money?

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

Thank you, Councillor Singh, for your question.

Please note that there is no Lead Councillor for Finance although finance does fall within my brief.

To clarify, the spend you are referring to is travel expenses for the whole of Reading Borough Council. I therefore do not agree that the level of spending is 'extraordinary'.

However, in respect of your question this evening, I can confirm the budget for the last three financial years for the Mayor and Civic office is as follows:-

- Financial year of 2022 to 23 - £55,103.33
- Financial year of 2023 to 24 - £40,552.54
- Financial year of 2024 to 25 - £41,891.71

An itemised breakdown is produced as follows:-

Category	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025
Payroll (Mayor's and Deputy Mayor's Allowances)	£11,600.00	£11,600.00	£11,600.00
Taxis	£18,604.40	£3,477.40	£2,420.13
Transport/accommodation for Town Twinning visits	£3,589.16		£1,249.84
Design and printing	£4,016.56	£1,794.27	£173.70
Postage	£174.27		
Gifts			£67.31

Internal refreshments orders	£466.30	£112.35	£193.30
Food and drink	£3,097.70	£5,741.50	£5,088.89
Town twinning events	£5,887.07	£975.00	
Technology	£505.00	£610.00	£490.00
Silverware appraisal			£6,125.00
Alderman Ceremony, pendant and scrolls	£3,028.22	£2,818.46	
Memorial services			£3,080.50
Miscellaneous expenses	£4,134.65	£13,423.56	£11,403.04
Total	£55,103.33	£40,552.54	£41,891.71

This money covers the additional allowances for the Mayor, Deputy Mayor, as well transport for both of them, when needed to civic engagements within our community as well as for twinning visits, ceremonies including the annual Mayor Making and Alderman ceremony, and memorial services.

In 2023, a decision was taken to discontinue the Mayoral car service and instead utilise local taxi transportation. This change has had a significant and visible impact on transport costs over the three-year period.

In 2022, the Council marked 75 years of friendship between Düsseldorf and Reading. This included several civic events and an official visit from the Lord Mayor of Düsseldorf. Since that time, the Council has not hosted a twin-town delegation on a comparable scale, which is reflected in the variation of costs between years.

Unfortunately, the Council also hosted two Civic Memorial Services during this period:

- In 2023, following the passing of the Deputy Mayoress, Collette Dennis
- In 2024, following the death of former Mayor Bet Tickner

These costs are recorded under Memorial Services. Additionally, the Council continues to mark the anniversaries of the Forbury Gardens attack with annual civic services held each June, which are funded from the Mayoral budget.

To directly answer the question, I will not commit to an annual 'Mayoral Cost Report'. If Councillor Singh read his papers like the rest of us, he would note that the mayoral budget is available annually in the Budget Book.

I hope Councillor Singh can agree with me that civic duty is appropriately upheld in Reading and the spend associated in doing so is appropriate.

The Labour Administration continues to be committed to full transparency and value for money, which I cannot say for neighbouring authorities having spent an hour attempting to benchmark costs with other local authorities and unsuccessfully locating their mayoral budget line.

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COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 3

Councillor White to ask the Leader of the Council:

Homes for Reading – Equality Impact Assessment

The controversial decision to close Reading's housing company, Homes for Reading, was taken behind closed doors in a confidential meeting of Policy Committee. It has meant a Labour Council using no-fault evictions to throw families out of their homes - a practice that the Labour Party pledged in its manifesto that it would make illegal.

The confidential report that came to Policy Committee said that officers would ensure that a full Equality Impact Assessment would be done and reported back before the decision was taken to evict families. But that didn't happen - instead, the decision was taken by the Finance Director in consultation with the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Council.

An Equality Impact Assessment is a tool that helps ensure decisions, practices and policies are fair and do not discriminate against anyone. Will the Leader tell us why no Equality Impact Assessment was done on the policy to close Homes for Reading, and evict Reading families?

REPLY by Councillor Terry (Leader of the Council):

Thank you for your question Councillor White, but unfortunately it is based on some erroneous assumptions.

- (1) Whilst the item in relation to Homes for Reading Ltd was originally taken in closed session at Policy Committee in January 2024 – this was for the purposes of ensuring that consultation with tenants was well planned and managed effectively. All relevant material presented to the Policy Committee was made available to tenants as part of the subsequent consultation. So to suggest that this was a decision “taken behind closed doors” misrepresents the Council’s commitment to present all the facts to residents and to undertake an extremely thorough consultation process.
- (2) The report to Committee, as you will be aware, committed the Council to allowing tenants stay in their properties until the end of their tenancies – so accusing the Council of using “no fault evictions” is both incorrect and inappropriate and seeks to unnecessarily inflame what is otherwise a very sensitive situation. The evidence shows that the Council has been flexible working with tenants to provide support and move people to new accommodation in an agreed way.

The papers to Policy Committee in 2024 made clear that the Council could no longer afford to keep the Company open as its operating model was not effective and the Company was placing an increasing strain on the Council’s resources. That is why, having taken external advice, a carefully devised strategy of moving the homes into the Housing Revenue Account was agreed as the best way forward. Those homes

are being transferred as they become available, and the Council has made good on its commitment to work with tenants to find them suitable alternative accommodation.

The delegation for the final decision was an officer decision based on the consultation. It was noted in the recommendations that the matter would only return to Policy Committee if there were responses from the consultation which warranted consideration by Policy Committee.

The Council met with the Board of Homes for Reading on 1 February 2024. The Board understood the reasons for the Council proceeding with the consultation for closure, and they made various suggestions as regards the communications with tenants. These suggestions were incorporated to refine the documentation and to ensure that as far as possible tenants had accessible ways to report their concerns to the Council.

The Council commenced a very thorough consultation with tenants of HfR on 19 February 2024.

The response rate to the consultation which closed on 31 March 2024 was high. The most popular means of response was through email: 58% of properties sending emails. 39% attended online resident meetings and 10% made calls to the Contact Centre which were transcribed.

Unfortunately, however, no other viable way forward could be identified from the initial proposal.

The themes which emerged from the consultation covered the wide-ranging concerns from tenants, but importantly equality related impacts were not identified because they were not raised.

A full report was collated by consultants acting on the Council's behalf, and if Councillor White would like to see this it can be provided. The report was considered by officers before they made their decision.

I also note from the question, that Councillor White has not identified any equality impact arising from this decision, which tends to suggest that the work done so far is reflective of the situation initially assessed by officers.

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COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 4

Councillor White to ask the Leader of the Council:

Pension Fund Investments

Israeli Government bonds have been called an investment in genocide, occupation, and apartheid. Pension holders money, many of whom are Reading residents, via the Berkshire Pension Fund, was invested in Israeli Government bonds over many months and years until July of this year. This investment was at a time during which that Government committed genocide, yet despite multiple questions from the Green Party Group on this Council, and from members of the public, the Labour Leader of the Council didn't reveal this investment existed until the last Full Council meeting, where they disclosed that the investment had ended. Why not?

REPLY by Councillor Terry (Leader of the Council):

Thank you for your question Councillor White. Setting of the Investment Strategy for the Berkshire Pension Fund is a function of the Berkshire Pension Fund Committee, which is made up of five Councillors from the Administering Authority: the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead. Their decisions are taken in the light of independent professional advice, legislative constraints and Codes of Practice.

This Council appoints one representative to the Berkshire Pension Fund Advisory Panel. The main purpose of the Panel is to support the Committee in achieving its statutory duties and to provide guidance and advice as appropriate. Although meetings of the Committee and Advisory Panel are held jointly, the Panel members are not entitled to vote on the decisions taken by the Pension Fund Committee.

On the basis of our involvement in the Advisory Panel, I have endeavoured to answer multiple questions from yourself and members of the public about the approach taken by the Fund and the approach of our own representative towards the matters decided by the Committee. These questions were answered fully most recently at the Council meeting on 14 October 2025.

The Council will remain responsive to all issues relating to Pension Fund investments and recognise that they are important to residents and members of staff. However, I would like to make clear that it is not a function of this Council to communicate the investment decisions which are ultimately taken by another local government authority. I do not think it is a realistic expectation that we should be able to anticipate those decisions, or report them proactively.

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COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 5

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Planning and Assets:

Article 4 Direction – East Reading

In the Summer of 2023, residents in Park Ward petitioned the Lead Member for an extension of the existing Article 4 area to cover St Bartholomew's Road. The Article 4 direction puts planning safeguards around the proliferation of Houses in Multiple Occupancy in a road, protecting family homes from being bought up by developers and split up into HMOs.

Councillor Leng said that work could begin on progressing a new or amended Article 4 direction in late 2024. When this didn't happen, the Council said work could start in May 2025. When this didn't happen, the Council said that work could start in late 2025. Now this hasn't happened either, will the Lead Member tell us what has happened? Can the Council do the things it commits to doing?

REPLY by Councillor Leng (Lead Councillor for Planning and Assets):

The answer to the petition and question presented to this Committee in July 2023, explained what an Article 4 was, how an area was designated with an Article 4 direction and what it meant.

The answer described why an Article 4 was imposed in parts of Reading in 2013 to remove the permitted development rights (PDR) to convert a house to a small HMO with up to 6 occupants (Known as a C4 HMO). Meaning a small HMOs would have to apply for planning permission. St Bartholomew's Road falls outside the area and was not included at that time as there were few HMOs identified in the street.

Finally, the answer explained how 2021 census information indicated that St Bartholomew's Road had started to see more HMOs with around 19% HMOs recorded and Policy Committee therefore accepted that consideration should be given to extending the direction area to include St Bartholomew's Road as well as neighbouring areas in a similar position.

During the summer of 2023, the Council's planning policy team had begun preparing a Partial Update of the Local Plan, this process was agreed by the Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport Committee on 23rd March 2023. It is a statutory duty of the Council to ensure that a full set of up-to-date planning policies are in place to guide development and ensure that the latest position on important matters including the policy covering conversions of houses to HMOs across the whole Borough.

At the time, it was anticipated that officers would have capacity to begin work on progressing a new or amended Article 4 direction late in 2024, after the updated Local Plan had been submitted. However, due to unforeseen personal circumstances, extended leave within the Policy Team was required which constrained capacity and contributed substantially to both a delay in submission of

the Local Plan and in turn other policy-related work. This is regrettable but the Council's statutory duty to have an up-to-date adopted Local Plan remains the team's priority.

Cllr Leng met in person with St Bartholomew's residents at the Palmer Park Sports Centre, to discuss issues including the Article 4 (HMOs) as well as parking enforcement.

St Bartholomew's road parking enforcement from April to September is reported as 190 visits with 102 PCNs issued.

The road currently has 56 properties. Council records show that 9 of these properties are licenced currently for Mandatory HMO licensing (5+ occupants). Further checks are needed to verify if there are more properties being used as HMO but officers believe a small number of properties may also fall within scope of the new Additional Licensing scheme which should be introduced by March 2026.

Also, as part of the Council's partnership with the University of Reading, officers have been in contact with the School of Built Environment to discuss collaboration opportunities for research and dissertation projects. An Article 4 review could form part of the evidence gathering and justification stage and could lend itself well to a project.

The Council are aware of the concerns of local residents and thank them for their patience. Planning and other officers have been monitoring the situation and remain committed to progressing the work on gathering the robust evidence required by the Secretary of State to justify extending an Article 4.

It is anticipated that the Local Plan review will be progressed sufficiently by summer 2026 to enable this work to be given priority and a decision taken whether to proceed to extend the Article 4.