

YOUR HOUSING



AUTUMN 2022

Inside...

- > Advice on the cost of living crisis
- > New housing opportunities for you
- > Estate changes to enhance your communities



Reading
Borough Council
Working better with you



WELCOME FROM FROM READING BOROUGH COUNCIL'S LEAD MEMBER FOR HOUSING **ELLIE EMBERSON**

Welcome to Your Housing, a publication designed to keep all of our tenants updated with what is happening around Reading to increase the services and value we provide and help you build the communities you live in.

I've been out across Reading speaking with some of you about our new build housing as well as our commitment to retrofit and enhance homes. I'm excited about the future for our tenants and would urge you to share your feedback.

The new homes we're building are of really high quality, and as well as looking fantastic inside and out, we are building to passivhaus principles. This means not only do our new council homes help us fight the climate emergency by producing much less carbon, but they're more efficient and will help keep energy bills lower than they would normally be. We're also taking similar measures to upgrade our existing stock to be more environmentally friendly, efficient and cost effective.

On that subject, I'm sure everyone is feeling the pressures of rising bills, and that's another area we can help with. Pages 4 and 5 have details of how we can help you, and our friendly team is ready to help if you are worried about money. Just look at some of the statistics on those pages to see how much we've managed to earn clients in benefits they were eligible for.

Over the coming months we will be contacting tenants for your views. You may receive a phone call, a text, an email, or postal survey from our Tenant Participation Team or an independent

company called 'NWA Social and Market Research' asking what you think of the Housing Services provided to you. If you are contacted, we'd be very grateful if you would take the time to give your views. These surveys are important to us as the results help us to understand where we need to target resources and make improvements to service areas that will benefit you. Thank you.

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Allocations Scheme changes increase opportunities for you

We're working on introducing a number of key changes to the Allocations Scheme to help create and maintain well-balanced, thriving communities. This is all possible thanks to your feedback which saw almost 700 of you respond to our public consultation. The new scheme was approved by Councillors last November and is being implemented over the coming year.

The changes will make the scheme clearer and easier to understand and improve the opportunity for you to move within Reading and obtain accommodation that better suits your needs. We also know that tackling anti-social behaviour is a concern for many of our tenants, and it is therefore a key priority for us. Changes to the Allocations Scheme enable us to be tougher on those who persistently create issues.

They key areas in which we are implementing change are:

- Awarding some priority to existing tenants who wish to move to give them an opportunity to move to communities they can invest in.
- Increasing priority awarded to tenants who are severely overcrowded in their properties and who need a larger home..
- Providing more opportunities for essential workers, such as social workers, teachers, nurses, health and care workers, police and fire officers to access affordable housing.
- Taking stronger actions against those who are

evicted from our communities for anti-social behaviour. Currently those who are evicted as a result of anti-social behaviour cannot join the Council's Housing Register for 3 years from the date of their eviction, but the changes would include the option to increase that time to 5-10 years for those who continue to behave poorly.

- Creating a new register specifically for people who require an adapted property so the Council can better match the needs of those who have a disability with properties that are adapted or lend themselves to adaptation.

A key theme from talking to tenants is that you want clearer communication about housing applications and medical bandings. In response we're implementing the following measures:

- A review of our Housing IT systems and the information on them, to ensure it is more accessible to officers in the call centre so your queries can be quickly and easily resolved first time
- Improving the case recording process so all records are up to date, accurate and comprehensive
- Reviewing our standard letters. Our objective is letters are sent out in good time and that they are clear and concise. If further information is required, then we aim to be clear on what is needed and why.

You can find details of our allocation scheme at <http://www.reading.gov.uk/allocationscheme>

Helping you cope with the cost of living crisis

With record breaking energy bills and the increasing cost of everyday essentials including food, people's money is being squeezed more than ever before. Many of you may be worried about this, and what effect it is having on being able to keep a roof over your head. Remember you're not alone, we're here to assist you - and these are just some of the ways we can do that:

Money Matters

We have a Money Matters website to bring together all the advice and support available to residents of Reading who may be struggling financially with a number of issues including benefits, money advice, redundancy, and the cost of living. The website has both national and local support agencies that offer support at the level you need to improve your situation. Go to www.reading.gov.uk/money-matters

If you are struggling to pay your rent

Contact the dedicated team of Rent Officers who are trained to help you to overcome any issues you have making your rent payments. This can include making a referral to the Debt Advice Team or making referrals for further support including food parcels. You can contact the Rents Team on **0118 937 2784**.



Free Debt Advice

We have a friendly team of trained advisors who can help you with any debt problem through free, confidential, impartial advice personalised to you.

We can help:

- Check you are receiving all the benefits you are entitled to.
- Explore ways to increase income and reduce outgoings.
- Advise on bills and debts that need to be paid to keep important goods and services.
- Support you to make an informed decision how you would like to deal with your debts.
- Understand benefit awards and help you to challenge decisions.
- Plan your spending and get back in control of your finances.

In financial year 2021-2022 we:

- Helped 515 residents who came to us for debt advice
- Conducted over 798 telephone appointments
- Helped residents claim £46,732 of benefits per month
- Enabled residents to receive £181,376 in backdated benefits
- Helped residents get debts totalling £229,129 written off



The team also administers the Discretionary Housing Payment scheme which can provide people claiming Housing Benefit, the Housing Costs Element of Universal Credit or Council Tax Support with extra financial support towards any shortfalls in benefits. For more information visit www.reading.gov.uk/discretionary-payments

Don't miss out if you need help with your finances – contact us as whatever the problem we are here to support you.

Visit www.reading.gov.uk/debtadvice
Email: debt.advice@reading.gov.uk
Call: **0118 937 2197**

Looking out for your interests

Last year we identified 313 tenants who could be at risk of financial crisis or struggling financially and reached out to them to offer support, completing benefit checks to identify unclaimed benefits to increase their income and offer further support including budgeting and debt advice.

Winter Watch

A cold home can lead to serious health problems for you and your family, so it's vital that despite rising energy bills you keep your home sufficiently warm to stay well. Many of you will be concerned by increasing costs, but help may be at hand.

This winter if you are a Reading resident on a low income and are over 60, have very young children or have a disability or health concerns, you could qualify for help from Winter Watch with:

- Home energy checks
- Advice on your bills
- Insulation and draught exclusion
- Emergency support to keep warm

If you need help and think you may be eligible, please contact us.

Call **01189 373747**
Email: winterwatch@reading.gov.uk
Visit: www.reading.gov.uk/winterwatch

The future of Council housing is here now in Reading

We are continuing to raise the bar in providing brand new, quality council housing for you, with a £100m investment in over 300 new affordable homes by 2025 to help reduce the housing register and also provide accommodation for key workers and the flexibility for current tenants to move to bigger homes as their families grow.

Earlier this year tenants moved in to **18 brand new affordable flats in Lyndhurst Road**, where the disused Norcot Youth and Community Centre once stood. The eight 1-bed and ten 2-bed flats are over three floors with a communal courtyard garden, 19 parking spaces and a new community centre, with ground floor flats accessible and featuring level access showers.

Another larger block of flats will also be completed soon, with **37 new homes in North Street** due to become available in early 2023. One 3-bedroom home along with twenty 2-bed and sixteen 1-bed flats will become available, all built to high specification.



Two semi-detached homes in Foxhays Road



New home in Ian Mikardo Way

We also have **46 new homes being built currently on the Wensley Road estate**, which will be accompanied by new landscaping and major improvements to the existing block to improve the look and feel of the community. Two 4-bedroom houses and twenty-six 3-bedroom houses will be accompanied by ten 2-bedroom flats and a further eight 1-bedroom flats.

The Lyndhurst Road flats provide a key example of the Council's strategy to make use of disused land and derelict areas within the borough. This was also the case on George Street, where we moved four families in to two 2-bed ground floor flats and two 2-bed maisonettes at the end of last year which previously was wasteland.



Circuit Lane property



37 new homes will be ready soon in North Street

This innovative plan of developing small pockets of disused land to help provide homes for those on the housing register is also progressing in five other areas currently with these all available soon:

- **Foxhays Road** Two 2-bedroom semis each with two parking spaces, and a 2-bedroom bungalow with one parking space
- **Wentworth Avenue** Two 2-bedroom semis each with two parking spaces on an old disused garage site
- **Ian Mikardo Way** 2-bedroom home with two parking spaces on wasteland which was being subjected to fly tipping
- **Camelford Close** 4-bedroom home with four parking spaces on the site of a disused scout hut.
- **Circuit Lane** 2-bedroom home with two parking spaces built in the large garden of an existing council property

Further homes are planned across the borough over the next few years to ensure we give those on the housing register the chance to move into their own home, and our existing tenants the chance to move within our stock.

Responding to Reading's climate emergency, all new homes are being built to passivhaus principles to reduce carbon footprint. Triple glazing, air source heat pumps and solar panels are now standard techniques we are using to be more sustainable, and to help keep your energy costs lower too.

Building energy efficient homes, which ensures bills are kept as low as possible for the residents who live there, is just one of the reasons Reading Borough Council was crowned Homebuilder of the Year at the 2021 UK Housing Awards.

Changes to our existing estates

As well as building high quality new council housing, we're also taking big steps to improve our existing stock.

At **Wensley Road**, improvement work to the existing tower blocks will include new entrances, new triple glazing for all flats, redesigned entrances, better waste facilities and bike lockers. We are expecting the work on this phase to begin early next year.

Over at **Granville Road** we have installed 40 air source heat pumps – low carbon heating sources which use a refrigeration cycle to move heat from the air outside and transfer it as useable heat in your home.

Our housing stock at **Hexham Road** is also receiving an overhaul, with 18 flats and bedsits getting triple glazed windows and a modern external wall insulation system. Also included with in these works is new loft insulation and replacement of gas central heating with ground source heat pumps, and replacement of balcony handrails, main entrance canopies and control entry doors.

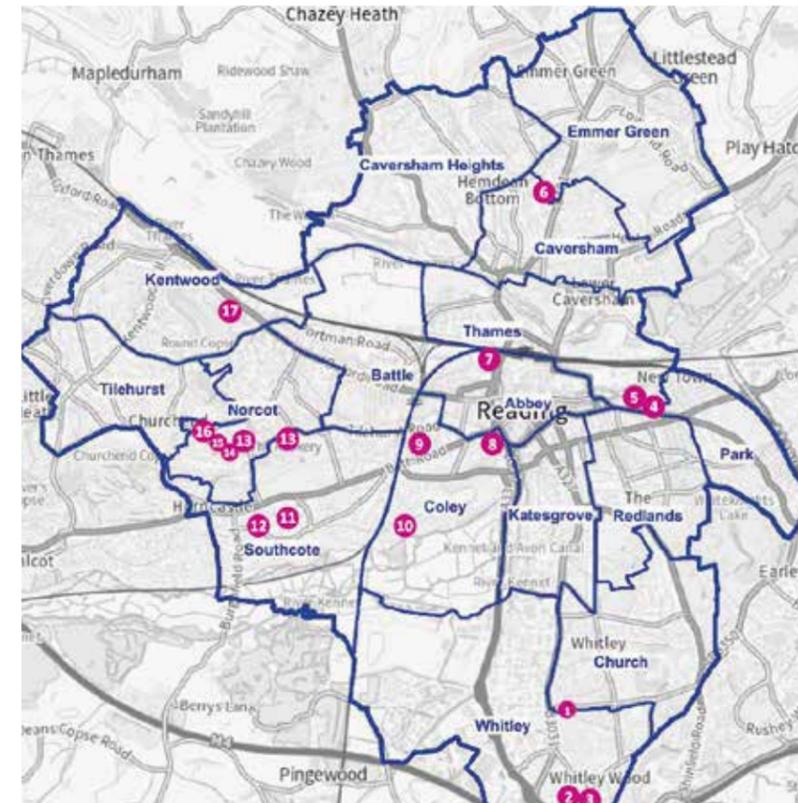
Improving your neighbourhood through the Tenant Improvement Fund

It isn't just our housing stock that we're making better for you, we're also investing in the communities around them. Our Tenant Improvement Fund (TIF) is a pot of money set aside from rents for small scale environmental improvements in your neighbourhoods which funds a wide variety of projects across our estates.

All bids for TIF money are presented to a panel of trained tenants who check the suitability of the bid and that a consultation of local residents has been carried out before they pass it.

2021-22 saw a record 18 projects approved by the panel including:

- New cycle stores at Bevan Close in Tilehurst and Caversham Road in the town centre
- Revamping the alleyways around Oxford Road Recreation Ground
- Communal garden landscaping and improvements in Southcote Lane



No	Location	Project
1	Village Close	Alleyway gate
2	Wrenswood Close	Bin store
3	Bobgreen Court	Bin store
4	Kingsgate Place	New building signage
5	Orts Road	New building signage
6	Scott and Eliot Close	New building signage
7	Caversham Road	Bin area improvements and new cycle store
8	Coley Place	Bin store
9	72 & 80 Brunswick Street	Communal garden and verge improvements
10	235 Wensley Road	Bin store
11	Florian Gardens	New fencing and gates
12	298-300 Southcote Lane	Communal garden improvements
13	Valpy House	New fencing and gates
14	Conwy Close/Usk Road	Alley chicane gate
15	Bevan Close	new bin store roof and directional signage
16	Hollicombe Close	Porch Extension
17	Oxford Road Recreation Ground	New playground equipment & refurbishment of alleyways

Since April this year the Tenant Panel has approved an extra 6 bids, and in the past eighteen months we have completed the works on 17 projects, which are shown on the map. We hope to complete the works on several more before the end of this year.

If you would like to tell us your ideas for improvements where you live, we want to hear from you! You can find our online survey here:

www.reading.gov.uk/tenantimprovementfund

It only takes a few minutes!

You can also send an email to tenant.participation@reading.gov.uk, or call us on **0118 937 2730**.

Focus on... Oxford Road Recreation Ground

In 2021, Oxford Road Recreation Ground was one of several parks awarded funding from the Community Infrastructure Levy, money given to local communities from new housing developments.

The money was used to fund new play facilities at the park, after asking residents what they what they would like to see in the park and what we could do to make the park more welcoming.

Anti-social behaviour and the poor state of the alleyways around the park were highlighted as big concerns for residents, so we added extra money from the TIF to cut back overgrown vegetation, open up better access to the park, and resurface some of the alleyways to make it easier and less intimidating for local residents to use them.





Out and about in your communities

Community Centres - providing better opportunities

We provide community centres around Reading run by community groups, providing activities and events for local residents, and hall hire facilities for family celebrations.

To try to maximise the value and use they provide to local communities, we are reviewing our centres in terms of their condition, maintenance, and the model of delivery of activities and services – with a focus on engaging with residents on how they would like to see them used. We will be undertaking a transition period to take responsibility for these buildings including repair and maintenance, taking the burden off community groups.

We will continue to work with the community groups and residents to deliver activities and opportunities so we can maximise their use and benefit for local people.

Look out for engagement events being held in the autumn so you can share your thoughts and get involved in deciding the best model of delivery for your community centres.

New community centre in Lyndhurst Road

As part of the recent development in Lyndhurst Road, a new community space will be available for hire from the autumn. The team will be holding some drop in events for residents to look round and find out how you wish to use the space.



Holy Brook Nook

Found next to Brook Street West, this area of land is benefiting from CIL (Community Infrastructure Levy) funding and a partnership with Nature Nurture to create a conservation and Forest School. Conservation sessions (Look After the Nook) are held on the first Tuesday of each month and pop-up and play sessions are held on the first Saturday of the month. Some artwork has also started to be created in the surrounding area. Food 4 Families, the award-winning community garden, will also be joining the site.

Detached youth workers

We now have a full team of detached youth workers who create programmes of activities over the summer in areas around Hexham, Coley, Southcote and Whitley. A new youth club is being set up in Southcote by the detached youth workers who will be working closely with Southcote Community Association, running Monday nights from September at the community hub.

Norcot Pantry

For a small weekly subscription of £4, members of the pantry will be able to have access to food including fresh fruit and vegetables and store cupboard favourites that will often value £15-20 or more! Membership is open to the community. The pantry is open Fridays 10am – 12pm and 4pm -6pm, based at Norcot Mission Church, Brockley Close.

Contact Margaret at Norcot.pantry@readifood.org.uk or call **07821 652 024**.

Meet the team...

We like to get out and meet our residents and ensure we have a visible presence on the streets to answer any questions you may have and stay up to speed with the needs of your community. We have two wardens who can regularly be seen out around the Wensley Road, Hexham Road and Dee Park estates – here's who to look out for. Please say hi when you see them in your area!



Ryan
Housing Estate Warden

Hi I'm Ryan, and I've been a Housing Estate Warden since December 2021.

Residents may see me out on patrol looking after your estate and dealing with offences like fly-tipping, dropping litter and vehicles parked in restricted areas. We also log any repairs needed that we come across. Our ultimate objective is to ensure those who live, work and visit feel safe and welcome and work with a range of council departments and partner agencies to achieve that.

Come and say hello if you see me when out and about - you can talk to me about any housing queries or concerns you may have from anti-social behaviour to building cleaning and crime prevention. It's brilliant to be a part of the improvement projects that will greatly benefit the local community.



James
Housing Estate Warden

Hi I'm James, and I've been a Housing Estate Warden since March.

I like to maintain a high visibility presence to the community through foot patrols. We typically deal with issues like fly tipping, obstructive vehicles and anti-social behaviour; however, our role can extend beyond that! Typically you'll see me around the estates, sometimes with the Environmental Officer who keeps the estates clean and tidy and a better place for the residents to live.

If you see me around feel free to ask for help around any issues concerning Council housing or your estate. Ryan and I and will be happy to answer your questions or point you in the right direction!

I am excited to be part of the development of Reading's council estates, with all the work going on to help transform them.

Contact Us

Allocations Team
0118 937 2172
allocations@reading.gov.uk

Antisocial Behaviour Team
0118 937 2161
asb.team@reading.gov.uk

Contact/Call Centre for Housing Services
0118 937 3757

Complaints
0118 937 3787
housing.complaints@reading.gov.uk

Debt Advice
0118 937 2197
debt.advice@reading.gov.uk

Environmental Services
(rubbish and recycling)
0118 937 3787

Housing Benefits
0118 937 3707
benefits@reading.gov.uk
www.reading.gov.uk/counciltaxsupport

Housing Officer
0118 937 2161
neighbourhoodservices@reading.gov.uk

Rent Helpline
0118 937 2784

Repairs
Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm
0800 318296 (freephone) or
0118 937 3757 from a mobile
www.reading.gov.uk/rbctenantrepairs

Repairs
(out of hours emergencies)
0118 937 3737

Tenant Participation Team
0118 937 2730
tenant.participation@reading.gov.uk

The Housing Ombudsman Service

The Housing Ombudsman Service is set up by law to look at complaints about the housing organisations registered with it including housing associations and local authorities. Its service is free, independent, and impartial. For more information on the Housing Ombudsman Service go to:
Website: www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk or <https://socialhousingcomplaints.campaign.gov.uk>
Phone: **0300 111 3000**
Email: info@housing-ombudsman.org.uk

The Tenant Engagement Team



Our role is to support tenants of Reading Borough Council to challenge and to monitor the Housing Service, to tell us what we're doing well and what we need to improve. We also help tenants by providing advice, support, and training to help them feel confident and effective when engaging with the council.

New opportunity to get involved:

We are currently looking for 8 to 10 tenants to join some of our long-term volunteers to help us rewrite our Tenant Engagement Strategy. You do not need any special knowledge or experience, just:

- a willingness to keep an open and questioning mind,
- the ability to think about the 'big picture' (what's going to benefit most tenants not just you)
- be able to join us either on an online meeting or in person once a month (for about 2 hours) to discuss ideas and ensure actions are progressing. Some background reading may be required so that you can fully contribute to the discussions, but this can be done at your own time and convenience

In return we can offer:

- training, advice, and support to help you feel comfortable taking part in the discussions
- help with technology to get you online if you want to take part virtually
- the opportunity to meet other tenants like yourself who care about their homes and environment
- the chance to make a real difference to how Housing Services communicates and engages with our tenants



If you would like to be considered for a place on the panel or for more information on this or any of our other engagement opportunities, please contact: Mary Hull or Antoinette Solera at the Tenant Engagement Team on **01189372730**, Text **07834335309** or email **Mary.Hull@reading.gov.uk**

Tenant Satisfaction Survey 2022

During September, October and November 2022, you may receive a telephone call from 'NWA Social and Market Research' asking you what you think of the housing services we provide for you. NWA is an independent company that works on our behalf to ensure results of the survey are unbiased. If you do a call from NWA we'd be grateful if you would take the time to answer their questions. The survey is very important as it helps us understand where we need to target resources and make improvements to service areas that benefit you the most.

Tell us how we are doing

We always aim to provide the best possible landlord services to you, and welcome your feedback to help us keep improving and meeting your needs. You can email



your thoughts - good or bad!
- or ask us to resolve any issues by emailing **tenant.participation@reading.gov.uk** or by calling us on **01189 372730**.

Should we be unable to resolve things, you can make a complaint at **housing.complaints@reading.gov.uk**, by letter or in person at Civic Offices, Bridge Street, Reading, RG1 2LU, or by calling **01189 373787**. Alternatively go online at **www.reading.gov.uk/contact-us/complaints**