

Year 1 & 2 Impact Report: Reading's Statement of Intent 2023-2026

Overview

In 2023, Reading's cultural sector came together to co-develop a [Statement of Intent](#), building on the ambitions of the Reading [Cultural and Heritage Strategy 2015–2030](#). While an action plan was initially considered as the intended outcome, sector-wide consultation revealed that a more flexible and collaborative approach—a Statement of Intent—would be more appropriate.

This Statement is designed to be a living document, evolving over time in response to the needs and priorities of the sector. It is a shared commitment, not owned or delivered by any single organisation. While Reading Borough Council led the initial development and continues to facilitate the feedback process, it does not hold sole responsibility for its implementation.

Importantly, the Statement does not commit the Council or any partners to specific financial contributions. Instead, it sets out a collective direction of travel and a set of shared aims around which the sector can align and collaborate.

The following pages highlight key activities undertaken by Reading Borough Council, REDA, their two Business Improvement Districts, Central Reading and Abbey Quarter and the University of Reading during Years 1 and 2 (2023–2025) of the Statement's implementation.

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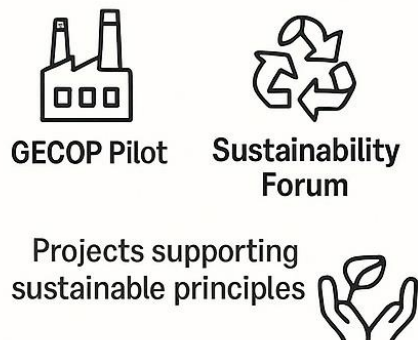
Summary

A brief overview of key projects and outputs.

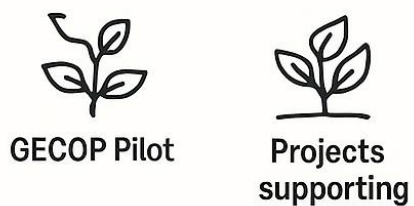
Community of Communities



Custodianship



Custodianship



Forward Focused



Connected



Priority 1: Community of Communities

A place powered by its people, built of vast, diverse communities, rich with culture and stories.

Aim: Increase participation and engagement in culture and heritage by celebrating Reading's diverse arts, culture and heritage.

- **Global Reading Project** (Shared Prosperity Fund¹): Celebrated Reading's diverse cultures through community-led programming, with a focus on South Reading. Report to be shared in September.
- **[Gaia at the Town Hall](#)**: A powerful centrepiece for Reading Climate Festival 2023, inspiring reflection on our shared planet and tangible actions to commit to change.
- **HSHAZ (High Street Heritage Action Zone)**: Continued to animate Reading's historic high street with cultural activity.
- **Co-Creation with Schools**: Projects exploring *belonging and identity* with young people for example '[Moving Stories](#)' developed by Dance Reading. Link [here](#) to more examples of the work done with schools in the Whitley Excellence Cluster.
- **Reading Museum Initiatives**:
 - Successfully achieved Museums of Sanctuary status.
 - Museum on Wheels outreach to Southcote and Whitley libraries.
 - Museums My Way – inclusive programming for neurodivergent visitors.
- **Libraries & Sanctuary Partnerships**:
 - Welcome to Reading events.
 - Lunar New Year celebrations: Cantonese book purchases, workshops, and a Town Hall celebration.
- **Town Centre Celebrations**:
 - Diwali Parade, Pride, Bastille Day, Mela, Windrush, Black History Month.
- **Underrepresented Voices in Berkshire History**: Amplifying hidden histories please click [here](#) to find out more about the George Freeman project.
- **In Year 1 RBC Events delivered the following events**:
 - **Water Fest**: Partnered with Reading Global Festival to programme four stages with 24 acts in Year 1, including: Tongues of Fire, DVI Doli, Bengali Cultural Society, Arash Shokouhi, Maija.

¹ The UK Shared Prosperity Fund aims to improve pride in place and increase life chances across the UK investing in communities and place, supporting local business, and people and skills.

For more information, visit <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-shared-prosperity-fund-prospectus>

- **Children's Festival & Forbury Fiesta:** Two stages and a workshop marquee featuring: Kala the Arts, Shivoaham, Dance Reading, MCDC, Reading Chinese School, Irish and Nepalese dance.
- **International Collaboration:** Live-streamed performance from Royal Comfort School (Zimbabwe).

Aim: Recognise the demand for cultural hubs and cultural spaces and advocate for Cultural Organisation occupation of empty or new spaces as opportunities arise.

- Launched expression of interest form for community groups – [Community Building Request Form \(office.com\)](#)
- Project to make community centres easier to book when needed by the community – launch of new booking system set for 2025
- Deliver a new studio theatre at the Hexagon to provide additional town centre performance space. sector.
- Launched: [Share Your Space. Support Your Community. | What's On Reading](#)

Priority 2: Forward Focused

A place always looking ahead, positively seeking to build a better future for all that call it home.

Aim: Build a better future through skills, innovation, and inclusive growth.

Skills & Sector Development:

- **Creative Skills Strand** (Shared Prosperity Fund):
 - Addressing local skills gaps in screen industries research [here](#).
 - Work experience with Cultural Services invited two students to take part in a week of work experience at RBC.
 - Palmer Park Workplace Skills Initiative for young people with learning disabilities and/or difficulties.
 - Creative Pathways event at Green Park – over 600 students from primary and secondary schools took part in the programme
 - Lights, Camera, Business! – event at Holiday Inn Basingstoke Road to attract more trades and crafts into the screen industry – 75 attended.
 - Re-skilling courses organized at Reading College this summer for Carpentry, Electrical, Costume and Hair & Make-Up, supported by Screen Berkshire (target 15 businesses per course).
- **Funding & Co-Commissioning:**
 - WEC Commission with CEP, Aspire2, ACE to celebrate belonging and identity report of all work commissioned can be found [here](#).
 - *Romans Reimagined*: Making Roman collections more accessible at Reading Museum.
 - *Reading's Digital Revolution*: Documenting 60 years of IT history with partners including:

- National Museum of Computing, Reading University, New Directions College, and more.
- The Armoured Heart: Cross-sector partnership with TVP, RBC, The Oracle.
- Community Safety Partnership funding of county lines and fake news workshops and performance of CODE for local schools. Reached 700 students from across Reading.
- *Underrepresented Voices in Berkshire History*.
- **Youth Voice:**
 - [Youth Mobilisation Day](#).
 - Reading Climate Festival Steering Group involved youth voice through a Student Council representative.
 - MPR Youth Group.
- Library Summer Reading Challenge - Youth volunteers supporting the challenge - 35 volunteers for Marvellous Makers summer reading challenge in 2024 and 39 volunteers for Ready, Set Read! In 2023.
- Mental Wellbeing Through Culture:
 - Children & Young People's Mental Wellbeing Project delivered.
 - 97% of young people who took part in the project agreed that they were happier as a result.
 - Mapping of existing sector offerings underway.

Priority 3: Custodianship

A place proud to look after its people, its heritage and its landscape. Carefully protecting today, so we all have a tomorrow.

Aim: Protect and care for Reading's people, heritage, and environment.

Sustainability in Events:

- **Sustainability Audit** of Reading Festivals funded by the Shared Prosperity Fund.
- **Green Events Code of Practice (GECOP):**
 - Reading is one of 10 UK councils piloting national guidance.
 - Workshop hosted with RIFF and local organisers.
 - Focus areas: governance, energy, travel, food, waste, water, influence.
 - Follow-up workshop planned to assess 2025 delivery.
 - Sustainability forum set up by leaders in the Cultural Sector.
- **Infrastructure Planning:** Exploring renewable energy and refillable water points at event sites.

Innovation:

- **Hexagon Studio Theatre** development underway in partnership with the cultural sector.
- [Hexagon decarbonisation project](#) – first theatre in country to use ground source heat pumps.

Priority 4: Connected

A place connected in every sense of the word – physically, emotionally, culturally. Rooted in its heritage, its history, its people.

Aim: Connect people with each other and with Reading through its anniversaries, local history, and shared cultural landscape. Celebrate what makes Reading unique and highlight the power of culture to deliver meaningful social impact.

- **Celebrating Identity & Heritage:**
 - Biscuit Town Anniversary: Marking Reading's industrial and cultural legacy.
 - Jane Austen Anniversary: Honouring literary heritage and local connections.
 - Walk Festival: Encouraging exploration of Reading's cultural and historical spaces.
- **Social Impact through Culture:**
 - Children and Mental Wellbeing Project: Demonstrating the role of cultural engagement in supporting young people's mental health.
 - Delivering with Community Safety Team: Tackling County Lines and Fake news through cultural projects.
- **Strategic Development:**
 - Abbey Quarter Business Plan: In development aiming to revitalise and animate this historic area as a cultural hub.
- **Sector Collaboration:**
 - Strategic Cultural Network: Informal network established to support long-term planning and delivery of the Statement of Intent.
 - While initial engagement has begun, further commitment is needed from arts organisations to fully embed and nurture the strategy.
 - High Street Heritage Action Zone project completion, report available [here](#).
 - Cultural Education Partnership: Strategy renewal support link to strategy [here](#).

Impact:

Above we have shared links to the larger reports where relevant. Below we have pulled out **some** of the impacts and outcomes from the work that has been delivered.

The Reach:

- Reading Museum welcomed over 18,500 school participants, over 107,000 visitors, and 3.3 million digital visits generating a total Economic Impact of £3.9m annually.
- Reading Libraries welcomed 450,000 from around Reading in 2023 and 2024.
- What's On Reading had 2.2 million visitors in 2024.

New Tables for Culture:

- Working closely with Planners to understand how culture and creativity can feature more securely in the development process. This is a work in progress but successful engagement to date include Station Hill Artwork and My Domain.
- Education: Director of Education has been a huge advocate of culture and creativity in the formal education setting. He now regularly attends the CEP and is keen to embed culture in Public Health outcomes.
- Community Safety: Funding from community safety team has supported a number of cultural initiatives in Reading, including CODE, Fake News etc

Sustainability:

- **Funded through Shared Prosperity Fund:** Four local festivals both independent and Council led participated in a 12 month national pilot with ten other local authorities to develop a national Green Events Code of Practice. This pilot led to:
 - Increased use of renewable energy across the sites.
 - Improving recycling, food waste collection and refillable water points.
 - Banning the use of single use plastics across the site
 - Only using local suppliers and contractors delivering the event.
- Hosted Gaia as part of the Reading Climate Festival. The exhibition saw 12,000 people from all over Reading and beyond attend, reached over 600 school pupils and moved 25% of respondents to join the climate action conversation.

Celebrating Reading's Diversity:

- **Work Funded by Shared Prosperity Fund:** Work was co-created with key stakeholder groups in South Reading, supported by an advisory group. Three grant schemes were created to tackle barriers to access, as identified by community groups in South Reading. 44 small grants, 3 partnership grants (with ongoing work) and 4 boost grants were issued.
- Projects developed with the Whitley Excellence Cluster schools, Arts Council England and Community Safety to support young people's sense of belonging and identity and how to identify signs of county lines. Activity included:
 - 5 productions of CODE and associated workshops (97% attendees felt it helped identify signs of county lines)
- Project with CultureMix Arts, specifically for young people struggling with school attendance. This programme is yet to be evaluated, but outcomes around attendance, sense of belonging and aspiration will be measured.
- Creative lives partnership with BBC Radio Berkshire 'Creative Lives on Air' shined a light on creative activity in South Reading. 8 on air shows highlighted activities and what they mean to the people who take part in them. An onsite live show at Whitley Wood was a 'come and try' event and included an exhibition celebrating people's journeys to Reading, in partnership with Green

Park Station. The activity resulted in raised awareness, new members joining the group, an increased sense of pride and individuals learning new skills about engaging with the media.

- The Celebrating Diversity programme has mapped and made contact with over 240 organisations and reached over 30,000 people in Reading, representing an approximate cost of £5.90 per person. The programme was designed to empower the groups to continue once funding ceased. A survey of grant recipients identified an increase in confidence in fundraising and organising events. Individuals have been linked with relevant partners within and outside of the council and community members have identified their own champions to take work forward. A full evaluation will be available in 2025.

“Please keep doing it as it highlights smaller hidden organisations that are working hard”

“It was a great opportunity for members of our community to talk about their creative activities, reflect on their participation, and to gain publicity for our event.”

“It was great to get the story of our initiative out in the public realm”

“There was no reason to wake up each day...but THIS (being part of a craft club in Reading) is a reason to wake up.” - participant in Whitley Community Development Association’s Knit and Natter group