

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

COUNCIL MEETING

22 FEBRUARY 2011

Petition: Reading Council for Racial Equality

“We, the undersigned, urge Reading Borough Council to reverse the decision of Cabinet to stop funding to the Reading Council for Racial Equality, We do not think the saving represents either value or fairness. If the overall grant aid budget is being maintained, then we do not feel it is right for the RCRE grant to be discontinued.

The RCRE is trusted to represent the causes of equality and has built up a reputation of providing support in many ways to local people. RCRE’s role in community relations and community cohesion is important given the constant risk of extremist activity. We urge all councillors to vote against the proposed cut in grant aid.”

RESPONSE by Councillor Skeats (Lead Councillor for Communities, Voluntary Sector and Enterprise):

I can assure the petitioners that the recommendations to Cabinet regarding the Council’s grants programme were the subject of a great deal of discussion over many months in the context of the administration’s commitment to provide increased funding support overall next year to voluntary and community organisations. It should be remembered that this is within the context of a substantially reduced Council budget.

This review, in consultation with many voluntary and community organisations, was founded, quite rightly, on the need to ensure that funding is directed firmly towards the town’s priorities and the outcomes that we seek to achieve in partnership, as well as securing best value for money for our residents and taxpayers.

This has led to a number of changes in the historic grant programme.

We are pleased to have been able to further and better support RVA and the organisations that deliver services to some of the most vulnerable in our community; to support the creation of a service particularly focused on the needs of our Gurkha and Nepalese community, who are held in such high esteem by many people; and to have confirmed funding for the Central Club, who for so long have had aspirations to develop their facilities and activities for the important African/Caribbean community of Reading.

Some of this has only been possible as a result of reducing the grants that were being made for largely historic or other reasons to other bodies, such as RCRE.

It should be remembered that RCRE will continue to receive £22,500 for the successful and well regarded Alafia service for a period of six months with a view to RCRE engaging in the bidding process for a new contract for services to support children with disabilities.

We continue to support RCRE through their occupation of Council-owned offices at No 1 St Giles Court, that come with a subsidy worth £35,000 per annum. In addition,

we permit sub-letting, creating an income stream for RCRE potentially in excess of £25,000 per annum.

Kevin Curley, Chief Executive of NAVCA, has now personally written to the Leader, Cllr Cumpsty in acknowledgement of the increase in funding going towards the voluntary sector across Reading.

Mr Curley wrote: *“The voluntary sector makes a vitally important contribution to the quality of life, especially for disadvantaged people in every part of England. This is especially true when economic conditions are harsh.”* He said it had proved ‘all too easy’ for some local authorities in England found it had cut voluntary sector funding. Referring to the increase in funding levels for community groups in Reading, he added: *“Your decisions represent leadership of national significance.”*

More specifically, RCRE no longer provides a direct casework service; does not assist with Equalities Impact Assessments; and only represents the voice of what appears to be a comparatively small section of the BME community - not all local community organisations choose to take up membership of RCRE. RCRE by its own admission does not cover other equality areas.

Despite repeated requests over a number of years for good management and performance information, RCRE have not been able to satisfy Council officers that their activities and the services they now provide continue to represent the best value for money. The Council has also supported RCRE over the years in their attempts to attract a more diverse range of funding from local statutory agencies.

We all, as a community, have a role in promoting community cohesion and combating extremism and we do so well in Reading. The Local Strategic Partnership has made the celebration of diversity one of its 8 priorities. The voluntary and community sector is well-represented on this strategic body and I have every confidence that partners will continue to promote and be held to account for ensuring that Reading is a place where people get on well together.

The Council has received representations made by or on behalf of RCRE, some of which make reference to a very recent High Court case. I have accordingly asked officers to give consideration to these.

Finally, as we have made clear to representatives of RCRE, should they feel that their services, activities and ‘offer’ would be attractive and align well with what the town needs and the Council prioritises, then they should actively consider applying for grant support through our future programme. Indeed, we have encouraged them to do so and look forward to learning more of their intentions and proposals that demonstrate real delivery, genuine outcomes, tangible improvements and value for money.

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Petition: Hemdean Hill

We, the undersigned, petition Reading Borough Council to install security gates to secure the alleyway located to the rear of the homes at Hemdean Hill and Priest Hill.

RESPONSE by Councillor Skeats (Lead Councillor for Communities, Voluntary Sector and Enterprise):

Reading Borough Council's Community Safety Team has installed security gates on alleyways where crime and disorder has been reported in the area and gating is considered the best and most cost-effective way of reducing it.

A crime reduction survey would normally be carried out by the Neighbourhood Project Officer for the area and the police Crime Reduction Advisor. A consultation would be carried out with local residents whose properties border the alleyway. In order for the Community Safety Team to fund the gating project there would need to be at 70% agreement from residents with **no** objections. In addition a value for money test is carried out before funding would be agreed.

The Community Safety Team was requested to fund the gating of the private alleyway running between Hemdean Hill and Priest Hill. There was however at least one resident who objected to the scheme taking place. Despite the efforts of other residents and the Community Safety Team the objection remains and so the funding request was turned down.

A full guide to alley gating is available on the RBC website.