

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE

15 NOVEMBER 2017

QUESTION NO. 1 in accordance with Standing Order No.10

Councillor Dennis to ask the Lead Councillor for Housing:

Rough Sleeping

In view of the growing problem of rough sleeping in Reading can the Lead Councillor for Housing share with this Committee what rough sleeping provisions there are in Reading compared with surrounding authorities and what is the cost compared to last year and in comparison with surrounding authorities?

REPLY by the Chair of the Housing, Neighbourhoods & Leisure Committee (Councillor James):

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

REPLY by the Lead Councillor for Housing (Councillor Ennis):

Reading Borough Council works throughout the year with its voluntary and community sector partners to help people who are sleeping rough. In total the Council spends £1.5m on dedicated specialist support services for single homeless people and rough sleepers - including outreach, supported housing and floating support.

Whilst rough sleeping has increased nationally, and this is reflected in Reading, it is important to note that not everyone on the street, including those who are begging, are necessarily rough sleeping. A considerable number of people begging in Reading are known to be adequately accommodated.

Unlike many local authorities, the Council has a contract with St Mungo's to provide a street outreach team to support rough sleepers into treatment and accommodation all year round. It also funds a floating support service, operated by homeless charity Launchpad Reading, which supports vulnerable people who need help to retain their tenancy or with resettlement.

The Council also funds more than 200 supported accommodation beds in partnership with its single homeless pathway providers, the Salvation Army and Bournemouth Churches Housing Association. This includes assessment spaces; accommodation offering intensive support within a 24-hour staffed environment; and move-on accommodation where individuals develop their basic living skills to move-on into independent accommodation.

The Council also plans to pilot a two year Housing First model of accommodation in partnership with St Mungos, who independently acquired funding to deliver this approach in Reading.

In Winter, a severe weather action plan becomes active and emergency beds in hostels are offered alongside extra support and advice. FAITH Christian Group also operates Bed for the Night which offers 18 bed spaces for homeless people with local connections throughout January and February.

During this time, extra support and advice is also available to prevent people from returning to sleeping rough. Whilst the council makes these services available all year round, people can be more likely to accept help during the winter months. Some people with complex and multiple needs are difficult to consistently engage with support services.

The Council and its partners focus on getting as many rough sleepers as possible off the street and into safe and secure accommodation. However, individuals rough sleeping often have complex and multiple needs. Whilst the Council and other organisations provide a range of services, offers of accommodation are not always taken up, but the Council will nevertheless continue to offer help to people every day.

In addition to the above, under the 'Narrowing the Gap' grant funding programme priority of 'Meeting Basic Needs' the Council also funds the partnership between Christian Community Action, the Churches in Reading Drop In Centre (CIRDIC), Readifood/FAITH and Reading Refugee Support Group. Collectively the partnership provide a range of services and support including a food bank (Readifood); drop-in for homeless individuals; furniture/new home start-up packs; and other practical help to people in crisis who cannot afford to meet their basic needs. Those who are homeless are referred as appropriate to specialist services for support and health care.

Anyone who is worried about someone sleeping rough can get in touch via www.streetlink.org.uk.

Comparative Spend

Local Authorities don't tend to publish this information in a consistent format and no meaningful comparator data is available. Officers have attempted to research expenditure in other areas and this has proven challenging. Any information shared by other authorities has not been for public release.

There is no formal benchmarking system in place. Needs and approaches to meeting it vary from area to area - local authority areas commission services in very different ways for different services, which makes it very hard to compare. For example, some areas don't provide floating support for single homeless people. Another complicating factor is that there are a number of LAs that have received national Trailblazer funding which is a recent pilot - Reading's partnership bid was unfortunately unsuccessful.

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QUESTION NO. 2 in accordance with Standing Order No.10

Councillor McGonigle to ask the Lead Councillor for Housing:

Land for Retirement Properties

As our elderly population increases, how can we ensure there is enough land available for retirement properties while companies wanting to build retirement homes are frequently outbid by other developers?

REPLY by the Chair of the Housing, Neighbourhoods & Leisure Committee (Councillor James):

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

REPLY by the Lead Councillor for Housing (Councillor Ennis):

The Local Plan, which is to be considered at next week's Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport Committee, seeks to identify the amount of new homes the Borough needs. The level of housing required is calculated by assessing needs including accommodation for older people. The Local Plan allocates land for housing development but the market will often determine what type of housing is put forward for planning permission. The Local Plan also seeks to ensure that people can remain in their own homes as their circumstances change. All new-build housing will be required to be accessible and adaptable, as defined in Part M4(2) of the Building Regulations, which means that it can be adapted to meet the access needs of residents, including wheelchair use.

The Council has successfully delivered new extra care housing at Cedar Court, Whitley Rise; is in partnership to deliver additional accommodation at Arthur Clarke where 16 affordable extra care units will be available; and a further 56 affordable units and 24 shared ownership units at Green Park are being constructed. The new accommodation will be offered to Reading's residents and held in perpetuity for future residents.

In addition the Council and housing associations provide a range of affordable sheltered and extra care housing across the town. There are currently 1446 sheltered units (296 provided by Reading Borough Council), and 244 Extra Care units (40 provided by Reading Borough Council).

As reported on this Agenda, the Council also supports residents to continue to live in their current homes by the provision of grants to provide a range of adaptations and alterations such as level access showers. This delivery of this successful initiative has recently been brought back in house resulting in an improvement to the service.

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QUESTION NO. 3 in accordance with Standing Order No.10

Councillor McGonigle to ask the Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods:

Use of Glysohates

Many residents are showing increasing concern regarding the use of Glysohates in our parks and streets. These highly toxic substances have been deemed by scientists to contain carcinogens and are a danger to humans and animals as they leach into our waterways and foods.

While the EU is considering banning the use of Glysohates, they have delayed this decision, it seems because of pressure from agro-chemical companies.

Would this authority consider getting ahead of the game and switch to using alternatives such as Citric Acid, manual removal, burning or simply leaving weeds to grow in places where they do no harm.

Maybe only using Glysohates on the most stubborn and invasive species such as Japanese Knotweed and Giant Hogweed cutting chemical use to a minimum.

Can we put residents minds at rest on this issue?

REPLY by the Chair of the Housing, Neighbourhoods & Leisure Committee (Councillor James):

I invite Councillor Terry, the Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods to make the response on my behalf.

REPLY by the Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods (Councillor Terry):

Currently weeds are treated with a non-selective, non-residual translocated herbicide (Glyphosate product) which will kill off the whole of the weed, including the root of actively growing weeds at the time of application but will not stop new weeds from growing. Once treated the dead weeds are removed during the normal street cleansing operation.

The European Commission's Standing Committee on Plants, Animals, Food and Feed are expected to meet in the middle of December 2017 to debate / decide on the future use of Glyphosate.

In response to this question I have asked officers to prepare a briefing for me outlining the current weed control methods and what suitable alternative options there are for consideration.