

## READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

13 MARCH 2017

### PETITION NO. 1

From Wendy Thomson:

#### Don't Cut Funding to Berkshire Women's Aid

Reading Borough Council propose to cut funding to Berkshire Women's Aid resulting in a loss of 10 refuge places (from 25 to 15). Berkshire Women's Aid is a charity that helps victims of domestic abuse, including women, men and children.

About 80 per cent of domestic violence victims who use these refuge places come from outside the Reading area. This is due to a reciprocal agreement between women's associations across the country, which work together to get victims well away from their abusers and prevent them from being hunted down.

Chief executive of Berkshire Women's Aid, Liz Terry said: "I would like to encourage as many people as possible to respond to (Reading Borough Council's) consultation. Domestic abuse is a very serious problem, we have seen an increase in referrals and police reports year on year. It is a societal problem that isn't going away any time soon."

The council say: "It is proposed that the refuge budget is reduced and this would result in the number of funded refuge places in Reading reducing to 15 (from 25), 4 of which would remain as a specialist provision for women from the Asian community (currently 8). The number of support hours for each of the households funded by Reading Borough Council would reduce to 6/7.5 hours a week per household (currently 10)."

I grew up witnessing and suffering from domestic abuse. It affects everyone in the household. Cuts to these services hurt, literally. Victims need to know that when they ask for help, that it will be there. Statistically 1 in 4 women will experience domestic violence over their lifetimes. 2 women are killed every week in England and Wales by a current or former partner (Office of National Statistics, 2015).

Austerity cuts impact the most vulnerable in our society. The victims of domestic abuse are traumatised. It is not easy for survivors to talk about or campaign against it. I appeal to your compassion and humanity to speak up for the voiceless and campaign for the vulnerable.

We are asking Reading Borough Council to not cut funding (a 22% reduction in spend) to Berkshire Women's Aid.

#### REPLY by Councillor Lovelock (Leader of the Council):

Firstly I would like to thank the petitioner and all of those who have responded to this consultation. There is a sentence in this petition which reads 'Austerity cuts impact the most vulnerable in our society.' I wholeheartedly agree. The Council's

grant from central government will have been reduced from £57million to under £2million by 2019. It is sadly inevitable that this will impact on all areas of the Council's services.

The Council take the concerns raised in the petition extremely seriously. I also fully support the petitioners' statement that funding for refuge provision is the responsibility of central government.

Because victims of domestic violence very often need to move out of area for their own safety, the system of providing refuge relies on reciprocal agreements between local Councils. In the face of funding cuts a number of authorities are ceasing to fund refuge entirely. In contrast, this Council is proposing to continue to fund 15 refuge places. This is still substantially above the regional average. In addition the Council is proposing to increase investment in non-accommodation based support and preventative activity to break the cycle of abuse, as these services are over-subscribed.

It is clear that a new and sustainable model of national funding for refuges is required which needs to reflect the scale of demand for this vital service. Reading's Community Safety Partnership has written to the Government asking that it recognises the specialist and unique nature of refuge provision and seeks to implement a sustainable national funding model to preserve this critical resource.

The proposal to reduce this Council's funding for these services was not made lightly. This is one of a series of difficult decisions we are facing as a result of the significant and sustained reduction in Government grant.

Despite these cuts, Reading Borough Council is proposing to continue to recognise the importance of funding for these life-changing services, with an annual budget of £345,000, we continue to fund a comprehensive package of domestic abuse services so that individuals and families get the support that they need to break the cycle of continued abuse.

If this proposal is implemented, a Council funded provision of 15 refuge places per 100,000 population would still be significantly higher than the Thames Valley local authority average (across the areas that provide refuge spaces this is 7.4 beds per 100,000 population, and across all areas it is only 4.8). We would also continue to support the area's only specialist refuge for women from the Asian community.

As set out in the report to Committee, this proposal would also result in the Council increasing our investment in preventative, outreach and breaking the cycle of abuse services by nearly £70,000. This includes educating young people about healthy relationships; supporting people who have experienced abuse, helping them to navigate the criminal justice system and to access legal advice; providing specialist support for children who have witnessed abuse and working to change the behaviour of perpetrators.

The Council is also offering support and working collaboratively with partner agencies in pursuing other avenues of funding. This is an approach that is already seeing significant results - most recently with our successful bid for specialist national funding that will strengthen the Thames Valley's refuge provision in the short term.

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#### COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 1

Councillor Ballsdon to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:

#### Contractors at Reading Station

The Council recently engaged contractors to carry out works in front of the North entrance of the railway station. This is a busy pedestrian thoroughfare. The Council's contractors did not use appropriate personal protective equipment when carrying out the works, which included drilling. They also did not take appropriate measures to protect the public, such as putting up barriers and signs. I do understand that the contractor has implemented training and procedures to avoid a repeat of this unacceptable incident.

The works were carried out in a highly sensitive area from a public safety perspective and were potentially hazardous to the workforce. It is clear that the well-established processes of risk assessment, method statement and supervision of works that should have been followed by the Council failed to safeguard the workforce or the public. This is particularly emphasised by the exemplary set up of the Network Rail works currently in progress in the same location, which puts the Council to shame.

I - and I am sure all of us - want to see everyone home safe every day and do not want to be embarrassed by this Council failing so publicly. So, what went wrong outside Reading station on 22 December 2016? How did this contractor even make it on to RBC's supplier list and why weren't the works supervised? What changes has the Council implemented that would give us confidence in the safety of the workforce and the public?

**REPLY** by Councillor Page (Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport):

I thank Cllr Ballsdon for her question.

Since completion of the new Interchange on the north side of the Station, the Access and Disabilities Working Group have made several requests to the Council for a new section of handrail to assist those pedestrians who are less able bodied when using the new steps near the new station entrance.

In December 2016, the Council engaged a contractor to fabricate and install a new handrail. The handrail was installed during the afternoon of 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2016. Regrettably, the contractor did not follow the expected level of Health and Safety procedures to protect their own workforce and the general public while the handrail was installed.

All works on the Highway must be conducted in compliance with the Safety at Street Works and Road Works Code of Practice. This document includes requirements for risk

assessments and safety provisions to protect the workforce, and those outside of the works area alike, and confirms the operative and supervisory requirements of the contractor.

In this case, the Council expected, not unreasonably, that the installation of the handrail would be safely completed with both the general public and the contractor's own workforce fully protected throughout.

The Council has made it clear to the contractor that Health and Safety failures such as this example are not acceptable. The contractor has demonstrated that they have learnt from the error and new working practises have been introduced as a result.

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### COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 2

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Children's Services:

#### Children's Centre stay and play activities

With the ongoing consultation on cutting the number of Children's Centres in Reading from 13 to 9 there is a lot of concern from parents about what will happen to stay and play activities at Children's Centres. These are drop-in sessions, open to everyone where a parent turns up with their toddler and takes part in an activity such as making a birdfeeder.

Many parents feel that these sessions are vital for both children and parents because they help parents to meet other people, tackling isolation. There is very little detail on what will happen to the stay and play activities in future in the consultation documentation.

I would like to know how much budget there currently is for these activities and the approximate level this will be reduced to? I would also like to know about the Council's ideas for different ways in which this money could be spent to ensure that stay and play activities continue?

REPLY by Councillor Gavin (Lead Councillor for Children's Services):

We acknowledge the value parents particularly those with their first child find in the opportunity to attend free Play and Stay activities currently provided both directly by us and by our partners in our Children's Centres. The parents who attended the public consultation sessions told us that they find the opportunity to meet other parents, encourage their children to socialise with others and learn new skills important to them as new parents.

Sadly, and directly as a result of the ongoing cuts to the Local Authority grants from national Government, the Children's Centre budget has been cut by £400k, the budget was £1.2m and will from October 2017 be £800k. I hope that Cllr White will agree with me and this administration that the remaining budget must be focussed on the vital targeted and 1:1 family support work which we offer to vulnerable families, especially in areas of high deprivation, poor attainment and high referrals into Children's Social Care.

In terms of the budget there are currently 12.5 FTE Activity workers, with a budget of £304k, employed across our centres. They have combined roles providing both universal and targeted services - Stay and Play, parenting support groups, new parent groups, crèche and so on. This is supported by an activity budget of £78k covering the cost of resources. It is difficult to unpick the detail of these budget lines further due to the current mixed delivery model. The contribution of this area in the proposed new model for our Children's Centres to some of the required savings will mainly be realised by reducing the universal programme while conserving the targeted services to our most vulnerable families in Reading.

As Cllr White is aware, we are still in the consultation phase of this proposal, we have repeatedly made it clear that we want to work with our statutory partners and the voluntary sector to be able to offer universal 'stay and play' activities. Officers are currently meeting with the voluntary sector to gather suggestions which will feed in to the final Children's Centres proposal. There are already voluntary sector organisations working in our Children's Centres, providing 'play and stay' activities and targeted support. We will work with these organisations to ensure they can continue to offer these services.

The detail of specific groups is not known at this stage, as we are in the middle of a consultation period and any final decisions will be based on all the feedback received.

It should be noted that there are over 60 groups across Reading providing stay and play type activities for families with young children, and we will be working with as many of those as possible to ensure a co-ordinated universal programme is available for our families in the future.

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 3

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Health:

Autism strategy

Reading's Autism Strategy notes that autistic people are central to service development, and their involvement is key in shaping and delivering services such as peer support. Can the Lead Councillor detail what user-led peer support currently exists for our autistic adults in Reading?

REPLY by Councillor Hoskin (Lead Councillor for Health):

Reading Borough Council has commissioned Autism Berkshire to provide a peer support service for adults with autism. The agreement runs from June 2016 to May 2018.

Under the terms of its Narrowing the Gap agreement, Autism Berkshire now facilitates peer support through a post-diagnosis social skills course, a fortnightly support group (the 197 Club), and a monthly women's group. There is also a Young Adults Group and Level Up.

It is a requirement of this funding agreement that Autism Berkshire reports to the Council quarterly on the self-determined outcomes achieved by service users, and also how the organisation has captured feedback from people using the service and how its service is being developed in response to such feedback.