

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE 21 FEBRUARY 2024

QUESTION NO. 1

Councillor Cresswell to ask the Chair of the Housing, Neighbourhoods & Leisure Committee:

Housing for Refugees and Asylum Seekers

We are all proud of Reading as a City of Sanctuary. Can the Committee be updated on the challenges faced in housing asylum seekers and refugees? Green Councillors are concerned by reports suggesting that it is not uncommon to be granted refugee status and face immediate homelessness, with asylum protection measures falling away quicker than the welfare system steps up. While we still have a national government floating extreme right wing policies such as “British Homes for British People”, what can Reading Borough Council do to ensure that the needs of asylum seekers and refugees are met?

REPLY by Councillor Dennis:

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

REPLY by the Lead Councillor for Housing:

Thank you for your question.

As a Council we work closely with asylum seekers and refugees to support them in finding accommodation and to settle within our town. The team has a current caseload of 172 households.

A very small proportion of these are what is called ‘no recourse’, i.e. those who have not formally applied for asylum or who have had their applications refused. The majority are accommodated by the Home Office in hotels until their applications are determined – if they receive a positive decision the team works with them to find suitable and affordable accommodation. As a large number of the cohort are single and under 35, this is very challenging as they are priced out of many housing options and have no priority need for social housing.

The specific issue you mention has had a definite impact in recent months. As the number of asylum claims being agreed has increased since last summer as part of the government’s backlog exercise, many asylum seekers are now being given one week’s notice to leave their hotel accommodation after a positive decision. This is shorter than the previous period of 28 days, and is not sufficient time for many to claim Universal Credit or find employment. As a result they are increasingly at risk of homelessness as a result of being accepted to reside long-term in the UK.

Our statistics show that in the first six months of 2023 the average number of approaches from this group was 8. In the second half of the year this rose to 29 per month. There was a far higher increase in the number within this group being placed in

emergency accommodation – only two such placements were made between January and June, but a total of 44 were necessary between July and December.

A similar impact is seen in the figures for verified rough sleepers in the borough. The snapshot counts for the first six months of 2023 did not identify any individuals in this situation of losing Home Office accommodation after a positive decision. Over the following six months 29 people were found to be ‘street homeless’ for this reason.

In this context of increased demand and uncertainty the housing service works with each presenting family. Every applicant receives a Personal Housing Plan and financial statement. Referrals are made based on their personal circumstances to charities and agencies that provide support with language, job searches, mental health problems, substance abuse issues, and more. For those not entitled to accommodation from the Council the service seeks to link them to suitable accommodation.

The service is also currently working with DWP and Launchpad, a local charity, to provide workshops and drop-in sessions on employment, training and other pathways to full participation in society.

Most recently, a ‘Marketplace Information Event’ on 8 February 2024 in the Civic Centre attracted 230 visitors, giving an opportunity for further links to be forged and for asylum seekers and refugees to be given information on health and wellbeing, befriending and education as well as housing and employment. This is the highest attendance so far at one of these quarterly events, and demonstrates our commitment to helping this group deal with the challenges they face.

It should be noted finally that the team applies the relevant criteria to ensure those receiving assistance have a connection to Reading, and those who have accommodation and support networks in place elsewhere will not be supported if they can return to another area. It goes without saying however that the housing service and its staff are always compassionate and will often liaise with the appropriate local authority.

With regard to the government’s proposed changes to social housing allocations, we have been notified of these like all local authorities and will be submitting a response to the consultation before the deadline date of 26 March 2024. I can share a copy of said response should you so wish.

As the Lead Councillor I shall say, I do not support the right-wing rhetoric on housing and Councillor Creswell will recall the comments I made at the last Committee meeting on the awful comments made by Suella Braverman on those sleeping in tents being a lifestyle choice. I thank you for your interest in housing for refugees and asylum seekers.