

**READING BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE**

**3 JULY 2019**

**QUESTION NO. 1**

Valerie Wyeth to ask the Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods and Communities:

**Illegal Camping in Christchurch Meadows**

Would you please address the problem of illegal camping in Christchurch Meadows once and for all as it seems to be an annual occurrence and costing us taxpayers time and money to get them removed. Once again a large tent has been erected beside the Millennium Bridge and near the playground, I did ask for signs to be put up in the meadows last year stating "Camping and rough sleeping is prohibited and offenders will be prosecuted " as a deterrent, however, this has not happened and now we start the long and expensive procedure to evict all over again. Such a waste of public funds, surely signs would be cheaper.

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

I invite Councillor James, the Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods and Communities to make the response on my behalf.

**REPLY by the Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods and Communities (Councillor James):**

The Council's Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) Team is responsible for dealing with all unauthorised camping on its land. When informed of any new tented encampment an officer will arrange to visit the site with St Mungo's who are commissioned by the Council to provide outreach support to anyone sleeping rough within the borough.

The officers will identify who is living in the tent, their reason for being there and whether they are homeless and require support from St Mungo's. Homelessness is often a complex situation requiring assertive outreach to encourage those experiencing it to engage with support services and to access supported accommodation.

The Council spends £1.25m per annum on commissioned Homelessness Support Services for rough sleepers and vulnerable single people and couples. This includes the St Mungo's Rough Sleeper Outreach Service; 10 emergency bed spaces and over 60 bed spaces for individuals requiring higher level support from the Salvation Army; and over 100 supported bed spaces provided by Launchpad Reading for individuals working towards independent living.

Given the chaotic life styles of those camping in tents on our land it is unlikely they would be deterred from camping because of a sign. Enforcement action against any restriction is likely to result in a fine that would bring additional hardship to those who are in most cases already in need of support.

Should those occupying the land fail to engage with support services the ASB officer will start legal proceedings to remove the trespassers from the site. Trespass is a civil offence and as such requires that the council obtain a possession order through the

courts to evict anyone from its land. Throughout the eviction process officers and services will continue to engage with those sleeping rough on the land to encourage access to services.

Often during this process tents will be abandoned and where this is the case officers will apply a notice at the site giving 24hrs to claim their possession before removal. If the tent is not claimed within this time it is removed and the area cleaned.

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**QUESTION NO. 2**

Jo Ramsay to ask the Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods and Communities:

**Wildflower Planting on Highways Verges**

Many residents are unhappy that grass verges appear neglected and overgrown due to insufficient cuts over the summer months. Would the Council consider sowing wild flowers in our verges and around trees which would have the benefits of saving money on maintenance, supporting pollinators, and also of being beautiful?

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

I invite Councillor James, the Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods and Communities to make the response on my behalf.

**REPLY by the Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods and Communities (Councillor James):**

The majority of highways verges are cut 8 times a year during the growing season. During the spring growth flush and particularly during periods of wet weather this can mean that the grass along the verges is long before it is cut.

In respect of alternative options, the Council is committed to maintaining and enhancing the bio-diversity of the Borough and is currently working to update the Biodiversity Action Plan and Climate Change Strategy. This work will consider how best to extend the current conservation grass management regime to roadside verges and how to manage this in a cost effective and affordable way.

In addition, the following actions have already been taken to progress this:

- The Parks Team currently manages approximately 36 hectares of conservation grassland across the parks estate. These areas are mown annually in late summer with arisings collected and removed from site. The Parks Team was awarded Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) funding in 2011, to support a 10 year scheme up to 2021.
- Parks have been working this year with a partner organisation which is in receipt of grant funding through the Climate Action Network. They have been engaging residents in planting wildflower plugs (supplied via Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxon Wildlife Trust's (BBOWT) growers from local seed) into roadside verges across the town to see how these respond to the Council's existing mowing regime. Early investigation has established that clovers and birds foot trefoil manage to flower profusely with regular mowing and attract insects, and other species such as ladies bedstraw and selfheal also flower with regular mowing.

These areas will be monitored over the summer of 2019 to assess the success of the planting and will be extending the project into 2020 for further planting and

monitoring. This will provide a subset of plants that are resistant to the regular mowing regime and are beneficial to insects. If successful, the Climate Action Network will seek further funding to expand the area planted.

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**QUESTION NO. 1**

Councillor McGonigle to ask the Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods and Communities:

**Vacant Council Properties**

The council property directly opposite my house has been empty for approximately 2 years, a property that could make a fine family home.

How many council owned properties have been empty in the borough for over one year?

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

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 Council has no residential properties in Cumberland Road that are currently vacant. There are no properties in the Council's housing stock that have been empty for over a year other than some at Dee Park that are awaiting demolition as part of phase 3 of the regeneration at Dee Park.