

Council

Monday 17 October 2022

Agenda Item 8 (a), Written Questions

Question From: Councillor Ian Middleton

Question To: Leader of the Council, Councillor Barry Wood

Topic: Lord Harrington visit to Cherwell District Council

Question

“At the last full council meeting I brought a motion highlighting concerns that this council may face an upsurge in people presenting as homeless as a result of refugees not being able to secure private accommodation due to unmanageable reference requirements of private landlords. This is likely to negatively impact on our already overstretched homelessness service.

My motion called on you to make a case to the government that we and other councils will need a system of guarantees to private landlords and other arrangements in order to help refugees secure accommodation after the Homes for Ukraine scheme ends.

Instead of accepting that reasonable request you and your colleagues amended away that requirement and replaced it with an invitation to refugees Minister Lord Harrington to come to Cherwell and speak to us.

I and the rest of my group accepted this amendment pragmatically and on the basis of your verbal assurances that any meeting with the Minister would include members of all the parties represented on the council, in recognition that this is a cross-party, non-political issue.

However you reneged on that promise by only including Conservative members in the meeting with the Minister, excluding other members, all of whom will have to deal with this issue in their wards, myself included. Instead of seeking to tackle what could become a serious operational issue for this council, you chose instead to make it an opportunity for political grandstanding. Not only was that disrespectful to other members of the council, it was also counterproductive as we all had different experiences we could have related to the Minister.

Since the meeting there has been no formal report about the outcome of the meeting, save for a press release with vague references to discussions and a brief mention of the meeting having taken place in an internal memo.

Since that meeting Lord Harrington has resigned from the post of Minister for Refugees citing discontent with the way the government was handling these issue. It's unclear if he made any recommendations to government to address the

concerns raised in my motion or if these were discussed with him during the meeting.

This problem has not gone away. Fresh reports of these concerns are still being published [1]. Charities who were involved with the rematching service have also scaled back their support citing problems with the Homes for Ukraine scheme [2]. This can only add to the burden on councils.

It seems clear that the government is not going to tackle this very serious issue and is going to leave local authorities like ours to deal with this problem. If recent events are anything to go by, there are probably not going to be any significant additional resources made available to the council to tackle any increases in homelessness as a result, in fact quite the reverse. We need to tackle this issue seriously before circumstances potentially overwhelm us.

So could you please provide a full written report to ALL members on what was discussed with the minister during his visit, what assurances were given and how these have been implemented since.”

[1] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-berkshire-63061116>

[2] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/02/charity-refugees-at-home-ukrainians-find-uk-hosts-scale-back-work?CMP=share_btn_tw