

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

Response From: Leader of the Council, Councillor Barry Wood

Councillor Middleton, thank you for your question which provides me with the opportunity to update the chamber on the considerable activity underway to support the different asylum and refugee schemes in operation.

I am very proud of the work officers and our communities are leading, to respond to and make a success of the many different humanitarian crises we are presented with. I hope all Councillors have taken the time to read the regular updates provided in the Chief Executive's weekly emails - with specific reference to the comprehensive newsletter circulated on the 8 October.

I am sure you will agree Cherwell is going the extra mile in partnership with our communities and key stakeholders. We have a dedicated full time Community Liaison Officer who is working with Ukrainian guests and hosts to support them in finding employment, ESOL classes, and signposting them successfully to community organisations and partnerships to enable these newest of Cherwell residents to feel settled. There is a regular Wednesday afternoon surgery for anyone to drop into at our Community Pop Up space in Castle Quay to discuss and concern and be signposted to necessary support. A number of standalone events and job fairs have also been organised.

We are also conscious of the immense generosity of our residents who have opened their homes and I would want to publicly thank them for the role they are fulfilling in being such a needed and necessary resource.

The visit by Lord Harrington was specifically planned to enable him and thus the Government to understand the situation on the ground – to go beyond the words

always heard from politicians and senior officers in the many District Councils' Network (DCN) / Local Government Association (LGA) national calls we attend.

The officer team arranged for Lord Harrington to meet Ukrainian families and sponsors and also families with us from Afghanistan. This was powerful – they did the talking and explained what the process 'felt' like to be part of and what were the challenges and extra help needed. We wanted to put the human element at the heart of the short time the minister had with us - he and his officials left with a better understanding of the human impact and the challenges we are facing.

I am a member of the DCN Councillor executive, and we are very active in lobbying central government – this visit was a way to bring our words to life. This was a visit for 'our guests' to speak for themselves and not for the politicians. This is why we limited the number of politicians in attendance. I'm aware you requested there was cross party representation, but this wasn't agreed to for the reasons I've just given, it was about our guests, not about us. I attended with the Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder in order that we also better understand the reality of the situation and thus as the administration support our officer team with the challenges ahead as well as feeding back to other elected members. These decisions were not based on politics but genuinely trying to maximise the value of the visit for our communities.

We fully recognise the significant challenges we are facing in supporting the many schemes - as in the motion to Full Council one of the concerns is the number of schemes and thus ensuring we have parity in the response provided to them all.

Key challenges are lack of a housing supply and competition for it, both from our own residents and the number of refugee schemes. Housing supply and its cost are a major challenge for Cherwell, and this is where we need to focus our efforts. There may well be an issue with private landlords requesting references, but it's not our guests or our major concern, the overall availability of housing is. We have been working as a system in Oxfordshire with partners across authorities to put processes in place to support all refugees moving on into independent accommodation. We also need to consider the impact of asylum requests (hotels) and dispersal accommodation – the latter played out in the media with small boat arrivals on our shores.

We champion the critical role played by District councils and seek to influence the decision makers on both process and funding.

I hope the chamber will join me in supporting our officer team with the work they are doing and also recognising these sad circumstances impact all our partners - local health services, schools and police. In Oxfordshire we have been recognised and commended for our joined-up approach to this agenda and I hope the chamber can put politics to one side so we can work together to support those who need us.