

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

COUNCIL MEETING

28 MARCH 2017

ITEM NO 12 - REFUGE PROVISION FOR WOMEN FLEEING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Councillor Eden to move:

This Council notes that:

1. There is no national system or funding of refuge provision for women fleeing domestic violence.
2. That beds, are made available by councils with the understanding that women and children from outside of the area will need to use them because of the need to be safe.
3. That while some local authorities have always relied on others to provide refuge places Reading has a long standing commitment to ensuring that refuge is available in our town to provide sanctuary for those fleeing domestic violence.
4. That the continuing squeeze in funding from national government is increasingly forcing councils into untenable choices and that refuge funding from local authorities and across the country is being affected.
5. A letter from Reading's Community Safety partnership signed by the Leader of the Council and Stan Gilmour Superintendent Police Commander has been sent to Government as follows:

National Funding for Refuge Provision

I am writing to you on behalf of Reading's Domestic Abuse Strategy Group, a delivery group of the Community Safety Partnership, to express our concern at the national loss of refuge spaces; the complete cessation of support in some LA areas; and the need for core national funding for refuge - not simply funding for additionality.

In Reading the local authority has a long-standing commitment to providing financial support to ensure the provision of refuge to meet both local and national need. This includes generic and specialist provision for Asian women. Reading currently has 25 refuge places in the town and around 80% of these refuge places are accessed by households from outside the Reading area. The nature of refuge provision is that to improve their safety, people experiencing abuse predominantly seek emergency accommodation a distance away from the perpetrator. Based on Reading's population size, to be in line with the average in the Thames Valley, Reading would be required to provide 7 refuge places per 100,000 population (if those LAs with no provision are included) or 12 if only those with some provision are included.

The Council is about to recommission domestic abuse services and intends to rebalance investment in domestic abuse services in line with the current domestic abuse strategy. The Council is proposing to fund 15 refuge places, which is still above the regional average, and to increase investment in non-accommodation based

support and preventative activity to break the cycle of abuse as these services are over-subscribed.

The Partnership welcomes the opportunity to look at the balance of the way services are delivered in the area. Our experience shows that outreach is a very effective way of supporting many service users.

We recognise, however, that for some victims a place of safety or a “refuge” is essential to prevent serious harm. For some it may be a short stay in a local refuge whilst other actions are taken to make them safe, for many others to be safe they need to move many miles away from their old home.

The system of refuge therefore relies on a principal of reciprocity of provision as many victims need to move out of area for their own safety (80% of placements in Reading’s refuges are from out of area but equally many referrals of local women are made out of area). The provision of refuge places can’t therefore simply be looked at from a purely local perspective. At a national level, since 2010, there has been a loss of 17% of specialist refuges in England and a third of all referrals to refuges are turned away, normally due to a lack of available space (<https://www.womensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/campaigning-and-influencing/campaign-with-us/sos/>).

In the face of funding cuts local authorities are facing significant financial pressures and are forced to make often unpalatable decisions. Alarming a number of authorities are ceasing to fund refuge at all. The Guardian reported last weekend that Sunderland is potentially set to become the only major city in the UK with no refuge provision - although a final decision has yet to be confirmed.

For authorities like Reading which are continuing to contribute to provision on the principle of reciprocity it feels deeply unjust that our local residents fleeing abuse and needing to move out of area to remain safe have fewer and fewer options. Our response as an LA is not to withdraw all refuge funding as other areas have done as councillors and partners wouldn’t see that as a responsible response.

This is a national problem and although the Government announced £20m new one-off funding for specialist accommodation last November, the application guidance stated that the funding was for additional services and not to fund services being cut (or where not supported) by local government. Reading Borough Council applied for this funding, working in partnership with our local provider, other local authorities and the Police and Crime Commissioner. We are delighted to have heard recently that our bid for £132,000 was successful and this included £56,000 funding for specialist refuge provision.

However, longer-term a new and sustainable model of funding is required that doesn’t simply fund the gaps (which is inequitable and does not reward those authorities who have protected refuges), provide short-term funding, or support ‘additionality’. We urge you to consider a system of national funding for refuges which reflects the scale of need presenting and this should include the provision of specialist refuges sensitive to cultural needs.

A refuge is a place where women and children escaping abuse can be sure they are safe, and where they can access emotional and practical support from staff who

understand what they have been through. It is a starting point for many to rebuild their lives. In breaking the cycle of abuse refuges help to change and save lives.

We would ask that Government recognises the specialist and unique nature of refuge provision and seeks to implement a sustainable national funding model to preserve this critical resource.

On behalf of the Reading Community Safety Partnership

This Council believes

1. That keeping women safe from domestic violence should be a national priority.
2. That there is a need for funding of preventative and outreach work to tackle the causes of domestic violence, refuge provision to protect women and a strong criminal justice response to violence and abuse.
3. That the complete ending of support in some local authorities may affect Reading women and that this is an untenable situation.

This Council therefore resolves:

1. That we endorse the letter from the Leader of the Council and the Local Police Area Commander (Superintendent Gilmour) and will publish it.
2. That we will write to the Reading MPs asking for their support in this campaign.
3. That as councillors we will continue to campaign for and support a national system of core funding not just additional support.
4. To offer to support Women's Aid and Refuge in launching a national petition on this.