

Reigate and Banstead Borough Council

Meeting of Council 27 October 2022

Questions by Members

Verbal responses were given at the meeting			
	Question by	To be answered by	Subject
1.	Councillor Ritter	Councillor Brunt, Leader of the Council, on behalf of Councillor Ashford, the Executive Member for Community Partnerships	Charities and the cost-of-living crisis
2.	Councillor Essex	Councillor Neame, Executive Member for Housing & Support	Surrey County Council's county-wide strategy on housing, accommodation and homes
3.	Councillor McKenna	Councillor Neame, Executive Member for Housing & Support	Temporary mortgage support and evictions protection
4.	Councillor Chandler	Councillor Archer, Executive Member for Investment & Companies	Temperature control in Council buildings
5.	Councillor Sinden	Councillor Mrs Bramhall, Executive Member for Neighbourhood Services	More and reduced cost allotments

Councillor Ritter asked the **Executive Member for Community Partnerships, Councillor Ashford**, the following question:

Question 1: Charities and the cost-of-living crisis

We are in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis which is hitting our most vulnerable residents hardest.

Local charities such as food banks, Stripey Stork and Community Debt Advice, are experiencing a reduction in donations at the same time as experiencing a rise in referrals, many of which come from this Council's teams.

What is this Council doing to ensure that our local charities can continue to meet the increased demand for their services that will be needed this winter and beyond?

Response

Thank you Councillor Ritter for this important question.

The Council is continuing to work very closely with local voluntary sector organisations, our partners as well as Surrey County Council and health partners to prepare for growing demand. We think we are anticipating well this likely growth in demand.

We are currently providing funding and support for nine voluntary sector organisations which all play a role in supporting our most vulnerable residents. In 2022/23 this totalled £223,000. In addition, we provide in kind support, including access to premises and space. For example, we have provided Stripey Stork with premises and other administrative support such as printing services. Our Community Partnerships service works closely with a huge number of local charities to support them through networking and collaboration to meet local need, both at a community level through our community development team, Borough wide, and through our partners.

Through the second round of the *Household Support Fund* we have distributed around £21,000 of food and fuel vouchers via food banks and other local partners including charities, to help them to support local people. Once we have confirmation of our allocation from Surrey County Council from the third round of the *Household Support Fund*, we will once again work with our partners to agree how we can most effectively use that funding to meet local needs and rapidly distribute the funding where it is most needed in our communities.

Earlier this month we held a cost-of-living workshop with representatives of the local voluntary and community sectors to listen to their concerns and benefit from their experiences of what local people are telling them. The workshop raised a number of

issues and generated a number of ideas from partners in how we can work together to support local residents, particularly during this winter. Working together with local partners, we are now taking these forward, including a cost-of-living event held at Woodhatch Community Centre earlier this week to provide advice and support to local people. We are talking to partners about running a similar event in each of the north and the south of the Borough over the coming weeks.

We have also been working with Surrey County Council to identify and develop a number of warm places across the Borough where residents will be able to receive a warm welcome and be given the support and advice they need to stay warm and healthy. A lot of work is happening to identify and support volunteers to signpost and guide people. This is because in previous similar situations we tend to only find out when residents really are in trouble. We want to encourage people to take up the opportunities being provided by the Council. All Councillors have a role to play to help in championing the support that is available.

Supplementary question

Please would it be possible for Members and residents themselves to contribute to those listening events?

Supplementary response

I don't know the details of who was invited to the listening events, but I do know that it was a great opportunity over the two sessions to involve local partners. I will certainly pass on your request and find out how Members and residents can get involved. As we saw during Covid, the greatest response was provided by the community. There is a great opportunity to get the support of local residents in helping their neighbours through the cost-of-living crisis.

Councillor Essex asked the **Executive Member for Housing & Support, Councillor Neame**, the following question:

Question 2: Surrey County Council's county-wide strategy on housing, accommodation and homes

Surrey County Council is developing a county-wide strategy for housing, accommodation and homes and is proposing to host a Surrey Housing Summit on December 8th 2022.

What level of involvement does the Council have in the development of this strategy, and preparing this event, and how does this link to the Council's current study linking affordability of housing in the Borough to the number of people who are homeless?

Response

Thank you Councillor Essex.

Reigate & Banstead Borough Council is one of three Councils that have an officer on the strategy steering group. This also includes a Surrey County Council Officer as well as Raven Housing Trust which provides a Registered Provider overview.

Following the first stage of data analysis and stakeholder interviews carried out over the last few months by Inner Circle Consulting, I understand that there are eight key emerging themes that include:

- Partnership working
- Affordability
- Support for vulnerable residents
- Land supply
- Delivery capacity
- Climate response
- Under occupation
- Ageing population

I am sure you will not be surprised by these, and you will note that many of them cross with affordability of homes and homelessness. Officers from our Housing, Planning and Sustainability Team have had the opportunity to be involved in workshops and relevant Portfolio Holders have a separate opportunity to input.

I welcome any opportunity that enables solutions especially a piece of work that has such a wide-ranging membership of partners across the county. It is a positive step

forward to have the spotlight on these themes. I look forward to the planned summit in December and then building on this initial groundwork.

Supplementary question

How will this strategic work, bringing together the Council and Raven, feed into the study being conducted by this Council on housing in the Borough and the links to homelessness? Do you see those two pieces of work dovetailing together to maximise the benefits for our residents?

Supplementary response

It is going to be really good because the whole county is looking at housing. We can all share the problems we have, we can put all our ideas together and will hopefully have a better idea of how we sit collectively on the issue of housing. With our neighbours involved in different initiatives, we might actually be able to come up with ideas that we haven't thought of previously. It is always better to get everybody's ideas together. We know housing and homelessness is a growing problem, and the more of us who are involved in this, the better it will be. Like all the other Portfolio Holders, I'm greatly looking forward to being involved because it will give us access to initiatives going on outside our Borough.

Councillor McKenna asked the **Executive Member for Housing & Support, Councillor Neame**, the following question:

Question 3: Temporary mortgage support and evictions protection

We know that as a result of the huge damage done by the Government's recent budget fiasco, millions of people are substantially worse off. For many households the increase in mortgage costs will have exceeded the benefits of the energy price cap brought in by the Government.

In our area, where house prices are notably higher than in other regions, the rise in interest rates will lead to an increase in mortgage defaults and repossessions, and potential increases in private rent costs. Will this Council commit to writing to the new Government urging temporary mortgage support measures to avoid repossessions and protection from evictions for those in private rent as during the Covid crisis, and expedite spending on increased new affordable housing provision locally?

Response

Thank you, Councillor McKenna.

In the last 18 months less than 13 households have approached the Council facing possible homelessness within 56 days due to difficulties in paying their mortgage. These approaches are referred to specialist mortgage advisors and, in some cases, they might also be eligible for the Department for Work and Pensions support for mortgage interest benefit payments.

More concerning are those households contacting us stating that affordability is an issue with their current rented housing. This has increased from last year.

We are supporting those families through casework by the Council's in-house money support team, providing financial assistance via the national *Household Support Funds*, *Discretionary Housing Payments* and other locally administered grants and loans.

We are doing everything possible to help local residents threatened with homelessness due to affordability, in order to keep their current homes or assist them in securing new homes.

We also expect the proposed *Renters Reform Bill* which includes plans to remove the 'no fault eviction' Section 21 notice and a raft of other measures will improve access and security in the private rented sector.

I am sure that the new Prime Minister and Cabinet will announce their future plans shortly. Taking all this into account, we are not calling for temporary mortgage support or an eviction ban on private housing at this current time.

However, as you know, this Council is constantly working to assist its residents and has recently built and delivered 25 homes in the north of the Borough, offering help-to-buy and open market sales. These are now all fully occupied. Additionally, the four self-contained bungalows in Horley for tenants with special needs are fully occupied and our 32 one and two-bedroom award-winning apartments at Wheatley Court, Redhill, are currently being offered to residents on our housing register as affordable rent properties. We also continue to invest and build for our residents with a ring-fenced investment fund.

Supplementary question

Will Councillor Neame, as part of her strategic approach, be able to learn through the county-wide approach to housing in Surrey, how other councils are addressing repossession and evictions as there maybe an opportunity to learn lessons?

Supplementary response

This approach is all about listening to each other and learning. I will be very pleased to return to Council to tell you what we have learnt.

Councillor Chandler asked the **Executive Member for Investment & Companies, Councillor Archer**, the following question:

Question 4: Temperature control in Council buildings

Does the Council have guidelines on the maximum temperature that Council buildings are heated to?

Response

Thank you, Councillor Chandler.

The Council's operational buildings are air temperature monitored meaning that during colder spells the heating systems react to heat them accordingly.

Temperatures are typically set at no higher than 21 degrees and we have rarely had call to override this. Clearly when it's warmer the heating will not come on.

There was no supplementary question forthcoming.

Councillor Sinden asked the **Executive Member for Neighbourhood Services, Councillor Mrs Bramhall**, the following question:

Question 5: More and reduced cost allotments

Thank you for the information you shared after my question to the last Council meeting. It is clear that there are waiting lists across all of Reigate and Banstead's 24 allotment sites, even though prices for having an allotment have gone up a lot in recent years.

However, with the increased cost-of-living this is a good time to provide more allotments, including community allotments, and to reduce prices to make allotments affordable to all. In light of this what plans are there for increasing the number of allotments by opening up new sites in the north, central and south parts of the Borough, and to reduce the price of allotments for those hit hardest by the cost-of-living crisis?

Response

Thank you, Councillor Sinden.

Our waiting list has reduced by 50% in the last two years. Just in the last week we have leased eight allotment plots to new tenants. Each month an average of 20 plots are re-let, and over the December/January period, when we issue invoices for the year, there tends to be around 100 given up that we are able to re-let.

I think this demonstrates that the service is very popular and the turnover of plots becoming available is good.

As stated in our previous response to Councillor Sinden, the waiting list is not indicative of the number of people waiting as most people have their names down on more than one allotment site waiting list. We do not feel adding new allotment sites at this time is required or demand-led and would not be cost effective for the Council.

Due to budget constraints, we are not considering reducing the cost of leasing an allotment in the coming financial year and there are no current plans to expand the allotments sites within the Borough. As the waiting lists show, the sites are still very popular at the current cost which is £95 for a full plot for one year. This equates to £7.91 per month. The cost of half a plot is £47.50 annually or £3.95 monthly.

We currently have six community allotments at various sites in the Borough. We are open to all new requests. There has been only one request in the past three years for a new community allotment and the Greenspaces team is working with this group presently.

Locations of community allotments are:

- Park Lane Allotment, Reigate
- The Ridings School Allotment, Woodhatch
- New Pond Farm Allotments, Woodhatch
- Princes Road Allotments, Earlswood
- Merstham Allotments, Merstham
- Gatton Park Road Allotments.

Supplementary questions

Are allotments that are not maintained given up to people who need them more?

Supplementary response

If a plot is not maintained but has been paid for until the end of the year, when the next annual invoice is issued, if it is not paid, the plot will be re-let.