

Overview and Scrutiny Committee 25 January 2024 Advance Questions

Agenda Item 6 – People Portfolio Holders Update

Question 1

Housing and Support - Homelessness

- a) What has been the overall cost to the council in 23/24 of the funding of rent top ups and payment of arrears to prevent homelessness?
- b) When did the council start having to bridge the gap between Local Housing Allowance and monthly rents?

Written Answer

- a) To date, the housing team have spent around £285,000 on providing rent in advance, deposits, rent top ups and arrears. All of this has been funded by external grants. Separately the Council have spent £163,000 of the DWP's annual Discretionary Housing Payments fund some of which will have been spent on rent in advance, deposits and topping up rent shortfalls to prevent homelessness.
- b) It is only in the last couple of years that the Housing Team have provided a rent top up in certain cases to help prevent or relieve homelessness. This has been a short-term option historically as part of the DHP process.

Question 2

Housing and Support - Homelessness

Please explain more fully the increase in number of housing providers and organisations providing supported housing and why there is a shortfall in the DWP funding of these providers.

Written Answer

The demand for supported housing has been increasing as more vulnerable people needing care and support are moved out of accommodation such as that provided by children's services and NHS properties. Those people with the most severe housing needs include people with physical and learning disabilities, autistic people, victims of domestic violence, those leaving prison with nowhere to go and people with alcohol and addiction problems.

This increased demand has seen a rise in the number of organisations providing specialist accommodation where the vulnerable people will live. These organisations include registered housing providers, private companies and community benefit societies.

The Council has a statutory duty to apply the correct level of Housing Benefit for people living in supported accommodation and must adhere to the regulations. Generally, if the landlord is a registered housing provider, the rent will be fully covered by government subsidy, unless the rent is excessive compared to other properties.

Where the landlord is not a registered housing provider, the Council must obtain a valuation of the rent from the Valuation Office. This valuation will be in line with the Local Housing Allowance which will be lower than the rent being charged. The Housing Benefit paid above this valuation will either receive 60% funding by the Department for Work and Pensions, or not funded at all, depending on the tenant's circumstances.

For example –

Weekly Rent	£400	The rent will be net of ineligible service charges
Valuation Office Decision	£150	
Difference	£250	
RBBC Cost (a)	£250	If the tenant does not meet the criteria for subsidy
RBBC Cost (b)	£100	If the tenant meets the criteria for 60% subsidy

In this example, Housing Benefit would be £400 per week, and the Council would contribute to this for the portion above £150. Annually, this would be a cost to the Council of either £13,000 or £5,200.

In 2022/23 Housing Benefit payments for people in supported housing was £1.08m, and the Council received subsidy from the DWP of £0.5m towards this.

The DWP instructed local authorities to carry out a full case review of all Housing Benefit claims for supported housing, and this has been ongoing during 2023/24. Additionally, we have been liaising with colleagues at county level, to stress that rent levels are set at affordable rates and that registered housing providers are engaged to manage any new schemes.

Question 3

Housing and Support - Homelessness

What is this Council doing to increase the availability of 'move on' accommodation – both temporary and permanent – for applicants originating as 'Homeless Approaches'?

Written Answer

The slide on page 31 (private agenda pack) outlines the capital investment RBBC is making to purchase more emergency and temporary accommodation, these projects also utilise Homes England and other Government funding. The Council's new Downsizers pilot project is seeing success freeing up family social and affordable rented homes for homeless households. The Council's ability to fund rent in advance

and deposits to secure private rented homes also provides move on options. The Council is also taking stock of its land holdings and will look to bring forward more residential developments when viable. The Council also negotiate with developers through s106 agreements to obtain policy compliant affordable housing where possible on sites.

Question 4

Housing and Support - Homelessness

Please can you provide a case study – or something similar – where a private/social landlord or B & B owner has withdrawn accommodation here in Reigate and Banstead assigned for homeless applicants? It will be interesting to find out their reasons for doing this.

Written Answer

Social Landlords will generally only end temporary accommodation placements if the tenants accrue rent arrears or are guilty of anti-social behaviour, in both examples, if they are of such a significant nature that result in legal eviction through the courts.

B&B owners will generally only end emergency accommodation placements due to anti-social behaviour by the applicants.

Private landlords evict tenants for many reasons eg, rent arrears, anti-social behaviour, landlord requires property back for other use including sale etc.

Question 5

Housing Delivery Strategy 2020-25 December 2023 Update (2D)

Please provide a list of the estimated number of empty homes by type and location around the Borough, to give us an understanding of the likely scope of this programme.

Written Answer

The Council Tax records hold information about domestic properties that are empty. These are broken down into those which are empty and unfurnished and second homes. Currently, a property which is empty and unfurnished receives a full discount on Council Tax for 28 days, and after that 100% is charged. After two years, a premium of 100% is added, after 5 years a 200% premium is added and 300% is added when empty for 10 years.

Second homes are furnished properties and are only liable for full Council Tax, with no discount.

Proposals are in the budget report to remove the 28-day discount, apply the 100% premium after 12 months and charge a premium on second homes. These changes are subject to approval by The Executive and Full Council.

We have analysed properties which are empty and unfurnished for two years or more, and broken them down into area and Band –

Banstead/Chipstead/Kingswood/Tadworth									
Band	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	Total
Empty less than 2 years	8	14	38	31	48	39	49	19	246
Empty for 2-5 Years	6	3	7	6	2	2	3	1	30
Empty 5-10 years	0	11	0	0	0	0	0	0	11
Empty 10+ Years	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
									287
Reigate									
Band	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	Total
Empty less than 2 years	1	12	71	31	24	11	10	4	164
Empty for 2-5 Years	0	0	6	12	8	4	0	0	30
Empty 5-10 years	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Empty 10+ Years	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
									195
Redhill									
Band	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	Total
Empty less than 2 years	14	36	100	101	26	8	5	0	290
Empty for 2-5 Years	0	2	3	9	0	0	0	0	14
Empty 5-10 years	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Empty 10+ Years	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
									308
Horley									
Band	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	Total
Empty less than 2 years	4	51	41	33	26	13	6	0	174
Empty for 2-5 Years	1	10	1	3	2	0	1	0	18
Empty 5-10 years	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Empty 10+ Years	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
									192

Question 6

Intervention: Family Support Programme

- What are the main reasons for the increase in referrals to the Family Support Programme?
- It is great to see that 97% of families note a change in wellbeing due to this programme. What is being done to prevent families reaching crisis point?

Written Answer

- a) A large number of referrals relate to poor Mental Health of both adults and young people. This year has also seen an increase due to referrals following police call outs – the main reasons for which are Domestic Abuse and Anti-social behaviour from a Young Person.

- b) In order to be referred to the Family Support Team, families need to be experiencing multiple and complex needs. There are other services which exist – including led by this Council – which act as preventative services and seek to intervene to prevent future crises. Working in the way that we do - addressing all the issues and needs of every family member – does succeed in preventing additional, and future crisis or breakdown. Working with families on all the issues they are experiencing rather than working on individual concerns, along with co-ordinating professional interventions and referring to specialist professionals and local services, allows our team to support families to bring about positive change and sustain that change.

Question 7

Community Partnerships – Cost of Living

Very positive to see the Banstead Pantry being supported by RBBC. Please can the pantry model be explained more fully to members as this is different from a food club.

Written Answer

In Reigate and Banstead, we already have a number of responses to food poverty experienced by our residents including foodbanks, food clubs and free or low-cost hot meal provision from commercial and charitable organisations.

The Banstead Food Pantry will follow a model of support built around a community hub in a retail unit in the centre of Banstead. It will offer access to affordable and healthy food as well as information and support. This model stresses autonomy and dignity for the beneficiaries. It is aimed at helping them discover long term solutions to the issues that led to them being in food poverty, helping them to move away from charity and dependency.

A key difference between a food pantry and a food club is that a pantry is located in a dedicated premises, enabling pantry members to access affordable food on a range of days and times each week. At other times this dedicated space will be used by pantry staff, volunteers, and partner organisations to deliver other support to pantry members, including help with learning how to cook healthily on a budget alongside support with individuals' emotional wellbeing. The aim of a pantry is to provide holistic support which helps an individual to transition away from food poverty.

By being in a dedicated physical premises, the pantry provides greater opportunities for regular food donations from the public, including fresh produce. For example, pantries often receive surplus harvest from local allotment holders.

The 5 food clubs operating in Reigate & Banstead will continue to play an important role in supporting local residents. We will work closely with the Good Company who will be running the Banstead Pantry, and with St Mark's Church who run the Preston Food Club, to ensure the two services complement and do not duplicate available local support options.