

Question to the Leader of the Council

By Councillor John Coyne

Question

Can the Leader confirm that the City Council has a statutory duty to be able to provide a warm shelter for rough sleepers when extreme cold weather is forecast?

The Leader may be aware that the use of the community centre at St Michaels and Lark Lane Community Association for that purpose depends not only on planning permission, but also on the confidence by the Association that the contract can be terminated forthwith in the event of any disturbance.

Will the Leader undertake, personally, to provide one or more council buildings in the event that no other planned provision can be reliably procured, in order to secure overspill and fall-back accommodation?

Will he ensure that any necessary planning permission for such buildings - for example the Town Hall - is sought as a matter of urgency?

Is he aware that failure to guarantee overspill and fall-back provision is likely to lead to the community and thence the Association wishing to withdraw its building altogether?

If he fails to identify a suitable council building, what plan would he have to prevent avoidable deaths of rough sleepers in extreme cold weather?

Answer

The City Council has a responsibility in advance of any severe weather each winter to have plans in place to ensure that there is cold weather provision for any rough sleepers in the area so that they can be brought in from the street. Guidance from the Communities and Local Government department states that "usually practice dictates that the trigger for severe weather provision will be a weather forecast predicting three consecutive nights, or more, of a minimum temperature of zero degrees Celsius or lower." We will be putting significant additional investment into these services this winter both to provide an immediate emergency response and make the most of this as an opportunity to get rough sleepers into permanent housing.

Our homelessness service has been trying to identify premises for this since the previous winter's service ended at the end of March this year. A wide range of partners, both internally and externally, were contacted to try and locate an appropriate building base. In the first instance, only two premises were identified, one of which was discounted immediately as unsuitable as it didn't meet our specification. The second building was the St Michaels and Lark Lane Community Association centre, which did meet the

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specification and a planning application was submitted to vary planning conditions which were attached to the centre.

Since the planning process has begun, several further options have been offered to the homelessness service, two of which are council buildings. The homelessness service is now investigating the suitability of all these options with the planning department and the local police. Depending on the outcome of these enquiries, if it is necessary to seek planning permission, it will be progressed as a matter of urgency.

In relation to overspill facilities there is no reasonable prospect that this will be necessary. This is based on previous year's service usage figures and the fact that for the first time this year there will be an additional second tier service that will operate from November through to March which will be going out to proactively identify rough sleepers through outreach work and supporting them into hostel beds. Furthermore, we are in the process of finalising an agreement with specific hostel providers to have dedicated bed spaces available into which rough sleepers can be immediately 'fast tracked', which the Council will fund.

Given the more comprehensive approach to the service and the significant amount of additional funding being invested, we expect to see fewer people than previous years accessing the emergency overnight provision. However, the homelessness service will be investigating all the available building base options and will have a contingency plan should further building capacity be necessary.

The emergency cold weather service is only one of a number of initiatives aimed at reducing rough sleeping and bringing people indoors that is funded by the city council. The City Council also works in partnership with a wide range of voluntary sector, charitable and faith based resources available to help people who are rough sleeping all year round.

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