

TACKLING HOMELESSNESS

Richard Benyon MP

Although most acute in winter, homelessness is a problem year-round for those on the streets or under threat of losing their home. There is real political will to tackle this very complex issue and the aim of this leaflet is to set out what is being done at local and national level to help reduce homelessness and put an end to rough sleeping

Any threat of homelessness is a desperate situation for the family or individual involved and has a huge knock-on effect for society and the economy as a whole. The number of rough sleepers, particularly in an prosperous area like West Berkshire, has long been one of my concerns and it is good to see a real determination to tackle this both locally and nationally.

Homelessness is a hugely complex issue and ranges from the huddled figure in the doorway and the tents along the canal right through to a family being given notice by their landlord and unable to find alternative accommodation. There is no one-size-fits-all solution and we are fortunate to have a really broad range of provision in West Berkshire from the services commissioned by the Council through to the support given by the voluntary sector.

There is a bold ambition from Government and other agencies to end rough sleeping. The Prime Minister has stated that she wants to halve the numbers by 2022 and eradicate it altogether by 2027. Estimates for numbers sleeping out in this area range between 20 and 37; nationally the figure submitted by local authorities in England for autumn 2017 was 4,751.

My aim in this leaflet is to detail the initiatives that are going on both locally and nationally which all have this same important - and achievable - aim. There are challenges, as highlighted by the recent report by Healthwatch West Berkshire, but there is much being done not least by the Council which works with over 20 partnership groups to try and address this issue. I hope you find this informative and I welcome your views. Please contact me by email at richard@richardbenyon.com.



“When employment is at the highest level ever and we have a relatively low level of unemployment, having one single person sleeping rough on our streets is a national disgrace that we must combat.

- Bob Blackman MP



- The Council: taking the MEAM approach
- Housing Options
- Two Saints
- National initiatives
- Funding
- My role as MP
- Voluntary support

LOCAL PROVISION



Meeting MEAM coordinator, Andrew Granata, soon after he started work last December.

The Council: taking the MEAM approach

In November last year, West Berkshire was accepted into the new cohort of local authorities working with MEAM or Making Every Adult Matter. This is an approach to homelessness which aims to identify those very vulnerable individuals with complex multiple needs who fall through the net. These people might have mental health issues, addictions, a history of life on the streets and for whatever reason they find it impossible to engage with the system. They tend to lurch from crisis to crisis at great cost to themselves and to the agencies which respond to each emergency as it arises.

The MEAM approach is collaborative and will hopefully provide answers to some of the questions raised in the Healthwatch report. In West Berkshire it brings together the Council, the Police, Social Services, Two Saints, the Probation Service, the CCG and Berkshire NHS Trust, Fire and Rescue, the DWP, the ambulance service, Sovereign Housing and all the various voluntary agencies.

Andrew Granata is the new coordinator. He is excited about his role, seeing it as all about access. 'I don't have to say to anyone "that is not my department" - I can get alongside someone and work through all their issues, whatever they may be. This is a flexible, integrated approach which allows me to open doors which might otherwise seem firmly shut for these clients.' The Council's Deputy Leader, Hilary Cole said, 'This is part of our commitment to end rough sleeping in West Berkshire.'

www.meam.org.uk

Housing Options

Based in Market Street in Newbury, this is the Council department at the front line of dealing with homelessness and threatened homelessness in West Berkshire. As the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act draws closer, it is being expanded and its staff trained to take on the additional duties required.

Its priority is prevention, working across the whole range from people who are sleeping rough right through to those who might have been given notice by their landlord and are having trouble finding alternative accommodation. Staff can arrange mediation, advise on benefits, refer to tenancy support, negotiate with a landlord or mortgage advisor and, in certain cases, offer temporary emergency accommodation.

The Council is on its way to meeting its ambitious manifesto commitment to build an additional 1,000 affordable homes in the area. Around 700 are in the pipeline so far (over 250 built, the rest forecast by 2019/20). It is continually looking at options to increase the affordable housing supply, including more options within the private rented sector.

housing@westberks.gov.uk (01635 519530 /out of hours 01344 786543)

TWO SAINTS

West Berkshire is fortunate to have a well established hostel for people who are homeless. Accessed via the Council's Housing Options team, it offers beds at Two Saints in Newtown Road, some available for 'wayfarers' (those who need a bed that night), some for longer stays, plus two other properties in Newbury offering 'move-on' accommodation. Over the past 12 months, Two Saints has accommodated 82 rough sleepers and supported 50 people to move into independent accommodation. Manager Sam Headland says, 'We provide accommodation that is accessible to all, including those rough sleepers who have dogs, and we provide spaces within the hostel for people who are abstaining from drugs and alcohol...We are delighted that the Council has funded increased outreach support for rough sleepers to March 2018 and we continue to offer rough sleepers access to showers and laundry facilities. At present we believe that there are 26 rough sleepers including those who are accessing the night shelter.' Two Saints provides Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) accommodation when, as recently, the temperature is forecast to fall below zero for 3 nights and ensures 'no second night out' for anyone in these circumstances. It also convenes regular Homelessness Forums to bring together all the statutory and voluntary agencies involved.

www.twosaints.org.uk/newbury-and-west-berkshire/

NATIONAL INITIATIVES

The Homelessness Reduction Act

This was piloted through Parliament last year by Bob Blackman MP with cross-Government and cross-party support. I was one of the initial supporters of this Private Member's Bill and I am delighted that it made it on to the statute book. It comes into force in April this year and will transform the culture of homelessness service delivery ensuring that all English local authorities, public services and the third sector work together actively to **prevent** homelessness for people at risk, irrespective of whether they are a family or a single person, what has put them at risk or if they have a local connection. **Acting earlier and for a broader range of people means more people will get the help they need before they face a homeless crisis.**

Housing First

Housing First, an initiative I helped work up with the Centre for Social Justice, is to be piloted in three regions thanks to a £28 million commitment in the Autumn Budget. This is a new way of tackling rough sleeping and aims to support some of the most entrenched rough sleepers. Individuals will be provided with stable, affordable accommodation and intensive wrap-around support to help them resolve their issues - very often complex health problems or addictions. Evidence from countries as diverse as Finland, the US and Canada shows that this is an effective way to end long-term homelessness. I look forward to it being rolled out more widely across the country.

Private renting

A significant challenge for those who are homeless is accessing and maintaining tenancies in the private rented sector. That is why in the Autumn Budget, £20 million of funding was announced for schemes that will enable better access to new private rented sector tenancies, and for support in sustaining tenancies for those who are, or are at risk of becoming, homeless or rough sleeping. This will include schemes focused on specific vulnerable groups, including prison leavers.

HOW WILL THIS BE FUNDED?

Government is putting money into all aspects of homelessness - significant sums which demonstrate a real and determined commitment.

Over £1 billion has been allocated through to 2020 to reduce and prevent homelessness. This includes

- **£315 million** of funding to local authorities and £197 million of central government funding for homelessness programmes
- **£100 million** to deliver low-cost move-on accommodation for people leaving hostels and refuges
- **£402 million** in Flexible Homelessness Support Grant funding over the next two years which local authorities can use more strategically to prevent and tackle homelessness in their areas

As part of this £1 billion package, **£50 million is being provided** to homelessness prevention programmes which include: **£20 million** for a network of Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer areas, **£20 million** for a rough sleeping grant fund for targeted prevention and early intervention for those at imminent risk or new to the streets; and **£10 million** of Social Impact Bond funding to provide personalized support for long-term rough sleepers. With increased upfront funding, it is hoped that local authorities will be able to tackle homelessness more pro-actively, pushing the balance of the investment away from crisis intervention and towards prevention - a sensible strategy by any measure for all involved.

A cross-government taskforce

As is all too apparent, homelessness and rough sleeping are often the result of a variety of complex issues and people may require support from many areas such as employment, education, benefits and mental health services. To try and deal with this, the Government has launched a Rough Sleeping and Homelessness Reduction Taskforce with the aim of bringing together Ministers from all the key departments.

Its initial focus will be on rough sleeping and it will be supported by an advisory panel drawn from local government, central government and the charity sector. This panel met for the first time on February 1st. Chaired by Homelessness Minister, Heather Wheeler, it includes people who really know what they are talking about when it comes to homelessness: the CEOs from Crisis, Shelter, St Mungo's, St Basil's, Thames Reach and Homeless Link, together with city mayors Andy Street (West Midlands), and Andy Burnham (Greater Manchester), and Lord Bird (founder of the Big Issue). Heather Wheeler said, 'The new panel is clear we need to act swiftly to realise our shared determination to help the most vulnerable in society and eliminate rough sleeping for good.'



WORKING IN WEST BERKSHIRE



My role as MP

A local MP can be most effective as a facilitator and the round table last March on homelessness was one of those moments when all the agencies involved came together in the Council offices to share ideas about rough sleeping and to hear about the MEAM approach. I am excited to see how quickly this has taken off and I salute the commitment of the steering group ably chaired by Chief Inspector Lindsay Finch.

I try to get a firsthand look at the problems and have visited Loose Ends many times over the years, and now the night shelter and soup kitchen as well, to hear from the homeless and those who support them about what they think needs to be done. I raised the issue of access to primary care with the CCG and got the assurance that local surgeries will not turn anyone away because they have no address. I continue to work closely with West Berkshire Council, taking the issues faced here on the ground through to the relevant debates in Parliament and to Ministers in Whitehall.

I work closely with organisations looking at homeless solutions such as Crisis and the Centre for Social Justice. I was able to put the case for reform in the private rented sector in a Westminster Hall debate last year, with proposals for help-to-rent and national rent guarantee schemes which would help open up this sector for homeless and vulnerable people.

There is also the underlying issue that homeless people and those at risk of homelessness need houses. Official figures released in November showed that housing supply increased by 217,000 last year taking the total increase since 2010 to over 1.1 million. This is significant progress but I know that there is a lot more to do. In the Autumn Budget, the Chancellor stated the Government's ambition to increase housing supply to its highest level since 1970 by the end of this Parliament and put us on track to deliver 300,000 homes a year by the mid 2020s. £15.3 billion of new financial support has been committed over the next five years taking total support for housing to at least £44 billion to 2022/23. This fund will provide support to SMEs, unlock sites, fund much-needed infrastructure and transform run-down estates. **West Berkshire Council has recently been successful in its bid for £1.5 million to redevelop the Sterling Cables site on Kings Road in Newbury**, which will make this site viable despite the high cost of decontamination and provide a further boost to housing supply in this area.

I support proposals to give Councils the power to charge 100% Council Tax premium on empty homes to encourage owners to bring properties back into use, as well as further planning reforms which will ensure that more land becomes available for housing.

LOOSE ENDS



Loose Ends at Newbury Baptist Church, a drop-in centre serving food to the homeless and vulnerable, plus groceries, tins, toiletries and clean clothes, time to chat and to signpost people to other agencies.

www.looseendsnewbury.org

SALVATION ARMY

The Salvation Army hall in Northcroft Lane, the base for the **NEWBURY FOODBANK** - with outlets in Thatcham, Hungerford and Lambourn - and for the soup kitchen and the night shelter. Also 'Employment Plus' sessions every Thursday, helping people with the computer skills needed to access benefits and job applications.

www.salvationarmy.org.uk/newbury



WEST BERKSHIRE HOMELESS

Opened for the first time this winter, the night shelter has offered beds in the Salvation Army hall to 13 people every night during the winter months, along with hot drinks and food. West Berkshire Homeless also works to help get people back into employment and accommodation.

www.westberkshirehomeless.co.uk



NEWBURY SOUP KITCHEN

Open every Thursday, 6pm to 8pm, in the Salvation Army hall, offering hot food, drinks, help and support.

www.newburysoupkitchen.org.uk



CITIZENS ADVICE WEST BERKSHIRE

For face-to-face or telephone advice on housing, debt, benefits, employment, relationships and other issues.

www.citizensadvicewestberkshire.org.uk



EIGHT BELLS FOR MENTAL HEALTH

A member-led support group for people with mental health issues, offering twice weekly drop-in sessions and activities.

www.eightbellsnewbury.co.uk



SWANSWELL NEWBURY

Specialist support and services for those wishing to change their drug and/or alcohol use, in Newbury and across West Berkshire.

www.swanswell.org

