

19. MOTIONS ON NOTICE

(1) **Expansion of powers of the Planning Inspectorate** – (Proposer Councillor Ed Turner)

Council opposes the proposal of September 2012 to remove from local authorities who fail to meet centrally set targets the ability to determine planning applications in their areas, and believes that such a move is an unwarranted assault on local democracy.

(2) **Practicality of monthly payments – The Universal Credit** – (Proposer Councillor Mike Rowley)

This Council notes the serious concerns that have been raised about monthly direct payments of "universal credit" by many charities and professional organisations, with Crisis warning the Government that the system of monthly payments "fails to recognise that many employees are paid on a weekly or fortnightly basis, especially in low paid work. People used to receiving more regular payments may struggle to manage their finances across a month long period".

This Council deplores the potentially seriously damaging effect on gender equality and child poverty, as the Women's Resource and Development Agency have pointed out: "It is estimated that in 80 per cent of cases Universal Credit will be paid to the male partner in the household. This is a hugely retrograde step in terms of progressing gender equality and, we would contend, tackling child poverty. We are very concerned about the transfer of resources from the purse to the wallet and the backward step in terms of enabling women's financial autonomy."

This Council, further notes that Citizens' Advice have calculated that 8.5 million people in Britain have never used the internet and a further 14.5 million people have limited computer skills. We are deeply concerned therefore that some 37% of the population, almost certainly including a disproportionate percentage of benefit claimants, will find it difficult to obtain what they are entitled to if they have to apply online, and help in person is not easily accessible.

This Council believes that, at the very least, the category of "vulnerable" claimants, to be awarded exceptions from this regime of payment, should be drawn broadly, and include residents with problematic credit and debt problems as well as those with health problems or a disability making money management difficult.

This Council urges the Government to think again about the practicality of monthly payments and of online benefit claims; and requests the Leader and the Chief Executive write to the Prime Minister making our views known.

(3) Local Housing Allowance rates in Oxford – (Proposer Councillor Mike Rowley)

Council notes that Oxford is in the centre of a “Broad Rental Market Area” including substantial parts of Oxfordshire for the purposes of calculating Local Housing Allowance rates, despite the fact that rent Oxford within the city boundaries one of the most expensive places to live in the Country, and income here is relatively low. Consequently, for those renting privately, rents take up 55% of average income in Oxford, and this has been predicted by the National Housing Federation to increase by as much as 55% by 2020.

Council further notes that the Local Housing Allowance, the rate at which this Council must pay Housing Benefit, is due to increase by only 1%, rather than CPI, for two years from 2014/15.

Council believes it is likely that the combination of both policies will render Oxford completely unaffordable for anyone needing to rent privately on a low income, and calls on the Chief Executive to lobby for the boundaries of the Broad Rental Market Area to be redrawn and a CPI increase in the LHA rate to be agreed for our city.

Council opposes in the strongest terms government policies which will have the effect of forcing people on low incomes out of Oxford.

(4) Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) as a consultee on pub-related planning applications – (Proposer Councillor Elise Benjamin)

CAMRA, (the Campaign for Real Ale) is an independent, voluntary organisation campaigning for real ale, community pubs and consumer rights. Formed in 1971, CAMRA has 144,878 members across the world, and has been described as the most successful consumer campaign in Europe. CAMRA has an active Oxford Group including a Planning Sub-Committee.

CAMRA supports well-run pubs as the centres of community life – whether in rural or urban areas – and believes their continued existence plays a critical social and economic role in UK culture.

Council acknowledges that CAMRA have valuable experience that should be given significant weight when determining planning applications with regard to public houses.

Council resolves:

- (1) to include the local CAMRA branch as a statutory consultee on pub-related planning applications.
- (2) that officers should use the Viability Test produced by CAMRA for use by Local Planning Authorities whenever the viability of a pub is questioned in relation to a planning application.

(5) EDF suing Oxford residents – (Proposer Councillor Craig Simmons)

This Council is committed to playing its part in delivering a low carbon future. It also recognises and respects the rights of its citizens to engage in peaceful protest.

This Council is therefore deeply concerned at the attempt by energy giant EDF to sue 21 protesters, including three Oxford residents, for £5m following a peaceful action at an EDF power station to raise awareness of UK Government policy to build 40 new gas power stations. This is despite the fact that this could lead to carbon emissions in excess of those permitted under the Climate Change Act.

This Council believes that the normal process of law should be allowed to run its course and that this private action which is aimed at intimidating concerned citizens is both inappropriate and disproportionate.

This Council therefore agrees to raise the matter with our local MPs and write to EDF expressing its concern in relation to its own citizens.

(6) Mitigating the impact of the bedroom tax – (Proposer Councillor Sam Hollick)

This Council:

- (a) Notes that on 1 April 2013 new restrictions were introduced by the UK Government affecting working-age households occupying social housing such that reductions are to be applied to housing benefit payments where tenants are deemed to be under-occupying their homes. This has been called the “bedroom tax”
- (b) Notes that the restrictions are estimated to affect 980 households in council and registered social landlord tenancies.
- (c) Notes that there are currently around 2000 households in Housing Need Priority Bands 1-4 on the housing register, with turnover of available housing being severely limited at 550 for 2011/12 (1).
- (d) Therefore resolves that, in determining when and whether to initiate and pursue proceedings to recover a tenancy as a consequence of rent arrears, the council will:
 - (i) Calculate the sum by which the household’s housing benefit payment has been reduced by under-occupancy restrictions

- (ii) Disregard that sum in relation to action for recovery of the tenancy (eviction).
 - (e) Further resolves to consider all other actions open to this council - including use of discretionary housing payments, offers of alternative accommodation where appropriate, flexibility with rents and service charges, and other possible approaches - to avoid the adverse impact of occupancy restrictions upon the people of Oxford.
- (7) **Destitution and Asylum Seekers – (Proposer Councillor Alan Armitage)**

Council recognises the plight of asylum seekers forced to flee their home countries for expressing political or religious opinions which offend their governments, or after having suffered persecution because they belong to a targeted minority.

As a result of exercising their human right of free speech in their own countries, individuals may have received death threats, suffered beatings or torture and threats to their family members, and have been forced then to abandon their homes, their country and all their possessions. Here in Britain, if their asylum claims are refused by the Home Office, they lose financial support and right of access to accommodation. Current laws also prevent them from working. Adult asylum seekers can be left in a cycle of deprivation and poverty that is impossible to break out of. Many are forced into homelessness on the street, and become entirely dependent on the generosity of others.

Council further asks the City Executive Board and the Chief Executive to address this situation by taking the following actions:

1. Write on behalf of Council to the Minister of State for Immigration deploring Government policies that force “all rights expired” asylum seekers into destitution while they continue to fight for a safe haven from persecution; seeking a change of policy to allow local authorities to assist refused asylum seekers who are in danger of falling into destitution; asking that such asylum seekers should be able to work to support themselves; and demanding that local authorities should be permitted to provide emergency provision to refused asylum seekers as to other homeless people.
2. Ask Oxford's MPs to support the spirit of this motion, to raise the matter in the House of Commons, and to support a change in current laws regarding asylum applications by removing restrictions on local authorities in the support they can provide to destitute asylum seekers.
3. Council officers to produce a report summarising existing support for asylum seekers available in Oxford including housing, training, education, and legal advice open to

vulnerable asylum applicants.

4. The council should work closely with the voluntary sector through a designated officer to provide help, support and advice to asylum seekers and enable a coordinated response to be easily available to those in need at this vulnerable time of their lives.
5. Council to join the national campaign "Still Human, Still Here" (a coalition of 29 organisations, including the Church of England and Catholic Archbishop Conferences, Amnesty International and the Red Cross, who are proposing practical solutions to ending the destitution of refused asylum seekers in the UK.)
6. Council to seek further support for this motion and action via the Local Government Association and by encouraging other Councils in the UK to join us on this issue.

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