

4. Address by Laura Coyle– As Ms Coyle is a county council candidate, this address and response will not be published/ broadcast until after the election

Item 14 petition on Lucy Faithful House (Minute 103)

Council, I am a housing solicitor at Turpin and Miller Solicitors in Cowley and I am here to speak to the petition before you on Lucy Faithful House and to add my voice to those you have already heard calling for this much needed facility to be reopened.

I have practised as a housing solicitor for nearly 10 years, 5 of those here in Oxford. Our work is predominantly for tenants facing eviction or are people who are already homeless. The majority of our clients are on a low income and receive legal aid. Clients come from all across Oxfordshire and we also have an office in Reading where I work once a week and I have therefore had the opportunity to see how different authorities deal with residents in their area who become homeless.

Between 2011 and 2016 there was an increase of more than 300% in the number of estimated rough sleepers in Oxford in the last five years – from nine in 2011 to 33 in 2016. 300% Council.

A perfect storm of issues has fuelled this rise with more and more people facing homelessness due to reasons entirely beyond their control. These include but are not limited to, the housing shortage in Oxford, rising rents and caps on housing benefit which have seen the vast majority of landlords refuse to take tenants reliant on housing benefit. (And it is worth noting here that this includes many working people who receive a low income and therefore depend on housing benefit as a top up in order to be able to pay the rent).

My experience as a housing solicitor here in the City has shown me that in the face of this appalling, and growing, housing need the approach of Oxford City Council has been to batten down the hatches. Would be homeless applicants are routinely encouraged against applying to the Council, sometimes unlawfully, and if a reason, any reason, can be found for denying assistance that reason is found, by hook or by crook and the Council washes its hand of the problem. Where there are children involved the buck is passed to the County Council and a game of ping pong between the two often ensues. Where there are no children the streets often present the only “housing” option.

Council, I recognise that Oxford faces problems in terms of a shortage of affordable accommodation which are as acute as anywhere in the country outside of London and that longer term solutions are needed. However, other Councils I have experience of working with (and against!) have shown far more innovation, and compassion, in trying to assist those in housing need rather than scrambling to shut the door as quickly as possible and wipe their hands of the problem.

Reopening Lucy Faithful House would send out a message of much needed cultural change at the Council – from a message of defensiveness and blame towards some of the most vulnerable in our society to one of constructiveness and compassion.

Council, I commend the petition to you and urge you to support the proposal to reopen Lucy Faithful House.