

***** EMBARGOED UNTIL 00:01 TUESDAY, 7 February 2016 *****

Large Increase in City's Rough Sleepers

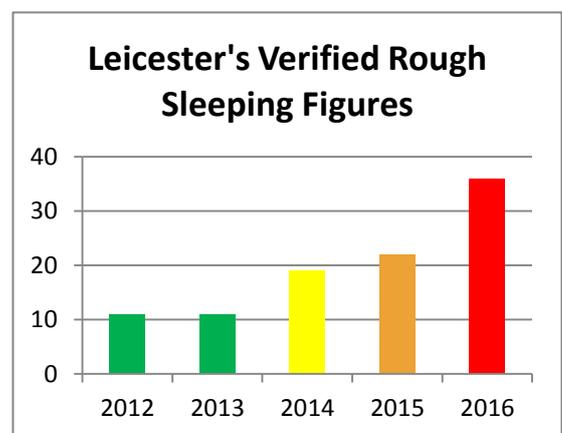
This year there has been a 64% rise in people sleeping rough in Leicester, say statistics released by the government. A local interfaith winter night shelter, running since December, has taken over a quarter of the officially counted 36 people off the streets each night. Guests receive a warm bed, meals and company. 250 volunteers drawn from people of different faiths and none have volunteered at the shelter because they are deeply concerned by the growing numbers sleeping out in the freezing weather.

Speaking about rough sleeping at the City Mayor's Question Time in December, Sir Peter Soulsby stated the City Council's official rough sleeping figure as 16 and said,

"numbers who are rough sleeping are actually quite small."

When challenged with the Department for Communities and Local Government figures of 22 rough sleepers last year and 36 this year, Sir Peter stuck by the council's lower figure of 16 saying,

"I tell you, the people that count this, work with those charities and are able to put their professional reputations on the line to back those figures. They are accurate."



In July 2013 Assistant Mayor, Andy Connelly, set out the new arrangements to tackle homelessness in a 5 year strategy that was centred on prevention. Since this strategy has been in place the government figures show that rough sleeping has risen by 227% in Leicester.

"Clearly the current homelessness strategy is not working. Behind these shocking statistics are desperate people; sleeping in doorways, bin shelters, bus stations and parks - anywhere they can find to stay safe and escape the elements", said Karen Rooms, Canon Missioner of Leicester Cathedral. "Shelter for the night shouldn't be arbitrary, dependent on a postcode, temperature trigger or how the council chooses to interpret the law. It should be a basic human right."

Karen and members of other faith groups in Leicester have come together to set up the Leicester Winter Night Shelter, which provides overnight bed, board and support for 10 homeless people, who are treated as guests. It has already provided over 500 nights of accommodation and over 1300 meals. The shelter is run by volunteers who have given over 2550 hours so far this winter. It is managed by One Roof Leicester, a local charity which focuses on homelessness, and is funded by the Muslim charity Human Appeal, and Near Neighbours (a Christian fund), as well as generous donations from people in Leicester.

The night shelter moves between Anglican and Catholic churches, the City Retreat (a Muslim community centre), the Progressive Synagogue and the Jalaram Bapa Mandir, and is the first multifaith venture of its kind in the UK.

For most of the faith venues, this is the first time they have provided a night shelter for rough sleepers. The venues are made available from 6pm until 9am, with volunteers setting up beds, serving meals and socialising with the guests.

“The response from people across Leicester wanting to volunteer for the winter night shelter has been overwhelming,” said Salma Ravat from One Roof Leicester. “The Night Shelter gives people of different backgrounds and faiths an opportunity to work alongside each other. We’re encouraging volunteers to help at venues that aren’t necessarily familiar to them, for example Sikhs in Churches, or Muslims in the Synagogue. This project brings everyone together in a shared desire to make a real difference to homeless people’s lives and it’s really humbling to see how friendships have developed over this time and the positive impact the project has had on Leicester.”

Sunil Budhdeo from the Jalaram Mandir Leicester, that hosts the shelter on Wednesday nights, said,

“Rough sleeping ruins lives, leaving people vulnerable to violence and abuse, and taking a dreadful toll on their mental and physical health. We have had guests who have been victims of torture, who had their legs gnawed on by rats, referred from the crisis mental health team. We have had those who have been beaten up just trying to find somewhere safe to sleep. This project has given us the opportunity to follow Bapa’s ethos of helping those who need it and make a little difference to their lives.”

In addition to running the shelter, from December to February One Roof put people up in hotels as there have not been enough beds in the city for rough sleepers. “Over Christmas & New Year we had members of the public who were helping rough sleepers ring us and say they had spoken to the Dawn Centre and Mayfield House and were told there were no beds available in the city”, explained Salma. “It is frustrating because the City Council policy is not to refer to voluntary, faith and community projects, only to their commissioned providers. This means homeless people are waiting until the end of the working day to find out if they have a space on a commissioned bed or whether they will have to sleep on the streets”.

One Roof Leicester and their volunteers are asking the City mayor to meet with them to discuss their concerns.

Notes for Editors:

1. For further information about One Roof Leicester or to arrange interviews, photography or filming of activities, please contact Salma Ravat on: **mobile: 07989 698483, email: salma@oneroof.org.uk.**
2. The Department for Communities and Local Government statistics in this article are available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/rough-sleeping-in-england-autumn-2016>
3. Leicester City Mayor’s Question Time 14 December 2016 is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eoz1Qbel1uc>