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Guildford seeks Sanctuary status

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A Surrey borough council leader has warned of an “increase in propaganda” from people seeking to “spread hatred” in the community.

Guildford Borough Council’s leader Julia McShane (Liberal Democrats: Westborough) praised the authority’s “strong record” of supporting vulnerable people and groups during a council debate this week.

It came as councillors considered a motion to apply to be a recognised Council of Sanctuary – a network of local authorities that are committed to supporting asylum seekers and vulnerable migrants.

Councillor McShane hailed Guildford’s aid for Ukrainian, Afghan and Syrian refugees, and thanked members of the community for their “kindness and support”.

However, she added: “Sadly, we have seen an increase in propaganda from those whose sole interest is to spread hatred and disharmony amongst our communities.

“We cannot stand by and let this go unchallenged, and we cannot turn a blind eye to the suffering of those who are victims of racism, discrimination or intimidation.”

The motion, tabled by Councillor Carla Morson (Liberal Democrats: Ash Vale), called on Guildford to seek Council of Sanctuary status and promote the inclusion of vulnerable people in society.

It also recommended the council leader ask the incoming West Surrey Council to consider taking on this status too.

Councillor Morson said: “Although the initiative has a particular focus on refugees and people seeking asylum, I think it’s important to recognise that its principles go much wider than that. It’s about the sort of borough we want Guildford to be.”

While the motion was resoundingly adopted by the council, some members attempted to pass an amendment that would have seen the proposals go through public approval before adoption.

Proposed by Councillor Philip Brooker (Conservative: Worplesdon), the amendment asked for a four-week public consultation on whether to proceed, that would have a majority of at least 2,000 respondents to get the green light.

Councillor Brooker said he has “absolutely no problem” with the wording of the motion, but wanted it to be “put to the residents first”.

However, other members of the council pushed back at the need for a survey to reach this decision, with Councillor Joanne Shaw (Liberal Democrats: Merrow) saying “I think it’s ridiculous to ask for a consultation when we’ve been elected to represent our residents on something like this.”

And Councillor Maddy Redpath (Residents for Guildford and Villages: Castle) added: “My concern about going to 2,000 residents and getting them to reply is it would get hijacked.

“It would become a political statement, and it wouldn’t be representative of the Guildford borough of 150,000 people.”

The motion as originally presented was adopted by councillors following the debate, while Councillor Brooker’s amendment was defeated when put to a vote.

James Moules Local Democracy Reporter

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