

Mayor reacts to rise in street homelessness

Andy Burnham remains determined to meet his 2020 deadline to eradicate rough sleeping in Greater Manchester despite being “terrified” of the effect of central government policies such as Universal Credit.

Burnham, who became Greater Manchester’s first elected mayor in May last year, referred to his pledge last week as government figures revealed a 15 per cent rise in rough sleeping across the country in a year.

‘Personal priority’

In Greater Manchester, the number of rough sleepers grew from 189 in 2016 to 268 in 2017 – a rise of 42 per cent – although many experts believe this is an under-estimate because of flaws in the method of counting.

Burnham has set up the Mayor’s Homelessness Fund, to which he has donated part of his own salary. Places for around 200 rough sleepers in Greater Manchester are to be made available in flats and shared and supported accommodation following a £1.8 million grant from an ethical investment fund.

But Burnham said he was planning for provision for 500 rough sleepers and was focused on encouraging Greater Manchester businesses to work with volunteer organisations to provide money, buildings and volunteers to tackle rough sleeping.

“We are intensifying our efforts to get on top of the growing problem of rough sleeping and homelessness,” he said.

“People know it’s a personal priority for me. I’m determined to ensure we reach our goal of ending rough sleeping by 2020. By that I mean having enough provisions in all communities so everyone has somewhere to go at night that’s safe and secure.

“And I’m confident, knowing what I know about the people of Greater

Burnham vow on rough sleeping



Andy Burnham said the impact of Universal Credit “terrified” him

Manchester, they will come behind this and we will rise up to this challenge.

“This is a humanitarian crisis unfolding before our eyes. It’s time the whole country woke up.”

‘Toxic combination’

Burnham acknowledged that the government’s Homelessness Reduction Act, due to come into force in April, would compel local authorities to do more to prevent and tackle homelessness, and would come with extra funding. But he warned that uncertain employment and benefit cuts were forcing people on to the streets.

“And then there’s Universal Credit,” he added. “I’m deeply worried about what this is going to do. I’m terrified.”

Universal Credit is a monthly payment that aims to simplify the welfare system, merging six benefits into one, but it has been condemned for causing people financial difficulties.

Burnham said: “They keep making changes to Universal Credit but there’s still the problem of leaving people

without money for four weeks. That’s plenty of time for someone to go on a downward spiral.

“It’s the toxic combination of insecure work and insecure housing that means we’re all just a few bits of bad luck from being on the streets.”

In other northern cities, rough sleeping rose too, but from a much lower base. In Liverpool the number grew from 21 in 2016 to 33; in Leeds it went from 20 to 28; and in Sheffield 2017’s figure was 20, up from 17.

Rick Henderson, chief executive of Homeless Link, an umbrella organisation for the sector, said: “This rise in rough sleeping is appalling, with a saddening growth in the number of people without a safe place to stay, and at risk of deteriorating mental and physical health.

“We have a long way to go if rough sleeping is to be eliminated altogether... A key part of this will involve guaranteeing that the future funding model for supported housing provides the necessary certainty.”

AMY BLYTH

NEWS IN BRIEF

CUMBRIAN TAKE-OFF

Commercial flights from Carlisle Airport will begin again in June, says owner Stobart Group – for the first time since 1993. Initial flights will be to Southend, another Stobart airport, as well as Dublin and Belfast. The project is backed with £4.95 million to improve the terminal and runway from the Cumbria Local Enterprise Partnership, which says it will aid the visitor economy.

BACK ON THE BUS

North Yorkshire County Council has arranged alternative bus services after Stephensons of Easingwold ceased trading. The company operated both school and local bus services under contract to the council as well as providing a commercial network that was not subsidised by the council. All home to school services and all county council-contracted services, bar one, are running.

MERSEY TUNNEL TOLL

Liverpool city-region mayor Steve Rotheram’s plans to cut off-peak tunnel tolls have angered rush-hour commuters. Rotheram promised to reduce tolls for “fast-tag” users to £1 when elected but his new proposal states the cut will only apply during evenings Monday to Saturday, and all day Sunday. He was accused of delivering a “watered-down” pledge.

FLOOD DEFENCE CUT

Residents of Radcliffe, Bury have complained of a £15 million shortfall in flood defence money after being allocated £30 million, mainly by central government. Nearly 700 homes in Radcliffe were flooded during storm Eva in 2015. One councillor said property prices are a factor when allocating flood defence money – meaning northern towns are at a disadvantage to those in the south.

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