

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMISSION

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON MONDAY, 26 NOVEMBER 2012

These Minutes have been amended. Please see Minutes of 11 December 2012 for amendments.

Councillors Present: Jeff Beck (Substitute) (In place of David Holtby), Brian Bedwell (Chairman), Dominic Boeck, Jeff Brooks (Vice-Chairman), David Rendel, Andrew Rowles (Substitute) (In place of Dave Goff), Tony Vickers, Virginia von Celsing, Quentin Webb and Emma Webster

Also Present: Mel Brain (Service Manager - Housing Strategy and Operations), Cathy Dodson (Housing Options Team Leader) and June Graves (Head of Care Commissioning, Housing & Safeguarding), Susan Capner (Citizen's Advice Bureau), Meriel Colbert-Own (Two Saints), Richard Collins (NACRO), Councillor Roger Croft (Strategy, Council Plan, Housing, ICT, Corporate Services), Matthew Hensby (Sovereign Housing Association), Maja Howgate (Loose Ends), Judy Kelley (Citizen's Advice Bureau), David Lowe (Scrutiny & Partnerships Manager), Chloe Lyons (Two Saints), Kelly McArthur (Sovereign Housing Association), Ms Gabrielle McGarvey (Newbury Town Council), James Merritt (Shelter), Supt Robin Rickard (Thames Valley Police), Martha Vickers (Newbury Town Council) and Elaine Walker (Principal Policy Officer)

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Ann Cox, Councillor Marcus Franks, Councillor Dave Goff, Councillor David Holtby and Councillor Mike Johnston

PART I

70. Declarations of Interest

In advance of the meeting, Councillor Marcus Franks declared an interest in Agenda Item 3, and reported that, as his interest was personal and prejudicial, he would not take part in the meeting or vote on the matter.

Councillors Emma Webster, Tony Vickers, David Rendel, Jeff Brooks and Jeff Beck declared an interest in Agenda Item 3, but reported that, as their interests were personal and not prejudicial, they determined to remain to take part in the debate and vote on the matter.

71. Homelessness in West Berkshire

(In advance of the meeting, Councillor Franks declared a personal and prejudicial interest in Agenda item 3 by virtue of the fact that he was employed by Sovereign Housing Association. As his interest was personal and prejudicial he advised that he would not attend the meeting or vote on the matter).

(Councillor Webster declared a personal interest in Agenda item 3 by virtue of the fact that her company worked with developers across the UK. As her interest was personal and not prejudicial she determined to take part in the debate and vote on the matter).

(Councillor Vickers declared a personal interest in Agenda item 3 by virtue of the fact that the Liberal Democrats were landlords of a property in West Berkshire, he volunteered at Loose Ends, and his wife was Martha Vickers of Newbury Town Council. As his interest was personal and not prejudicial he determined to take part in the debate and vote on the matter).

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(Councillors Rendel and Brooks declared a personal interest in Agenda item 3 by virtue of the fact that the Liberal Democrats were landlords of a property in West Berkshire. As their interests were personal and not prejudicial they determined to take part in the debate and vote on the matter).

(Councillor Beck declared a personal interest in Agenda item 3 by virtue of the fact that he was a member of the Newbury Conservative Club who were landlords of a property in West Berkshire. As his interest was personal and not prejudicial he determined to take part in the debate and vote on the matter).

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the scrutiny review, and set out the expectations of the day. He reminded all those present that the review was intended to clarify the current approach to homelessness in West Berkshire provided by a number of agencies, and consider what improvements might be possible.

Scene Setting

June Graves and Mel Brain provided an introduction to the role of the Council's Housing Service and raised the following points:

- There had been an increase in demand for homelessness services, however it appeared that this had now plateaued. It was expected that all agencies would have experienced a similar increase in demand. In addition the forthcoming Welfare Benefit reforms were expected to increase homeless numbers with the introduction of universal credits and the 'bedroom tax'; There were also a number of factors including the Localism Act, a new Tenancy Strategy, new powers for discharging duties and new flexibilities for determining allocation policies that would impact on housing and homelessness in the future;
- West Berkshire Housing Service closely monitored activity across a number of different factors;
- Partnership working and support across all agencies was essential;
- Approximately 20% of homeless people presenting to the Council came from rural areas where homelessness was linked to the loss of employment (where accommodation was provided whilst employed). This presented a different set of issues as the person would likely want to remain in the area they had worked in;
- The Housing Team consisted of 14.5 FTE (full time equivalent) posts currently filled by a relatively new team. The change of personnel provided an opportunity to challenge the processes in place. However June Graves advised that the work was skilled and based in law and required a high level of training to allow a full understanding of the implications of the decisions being made;
- The Council held 24 units of accommodation which were used to assist those the Council had a legal duty to provide for, and the Council was therefore reliant on partners such as Sovereign Housing Association for additional accommodation. The size of the units and the facilities in each one varied, so a suitable unit was not always available for the person or family presenting. Bed and breakfast accommodation would be used if no alternative accommodation was available;
- The availability of private rental accommodation had reduced due to the slow down in the housing market and the introduction of welfare reforms. People were less able to afford to own their own home and were remaining in rented accommodation for longer;
- A combination of revenue, capital and rental income paid for Council staff salaries and the development and upkeep of the temporary accommodation. Government funding, for example the Homeless Prevention Grant, was used to fund the threshold

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loan scheme, assisting in providing a deposit on a property, storage or removal of personal property when leaving accommodation, or to top up rental payments where they became unaffordable. Central Government funding for Discretionary Housing Payments had increased recently, however it was used with care to safeguard from potential future reductions;

- The Council currently provided funding to a number of local agencies including Two Saints, Safer Spaces, Nacro Bramlings House and A2Dominion and the Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA);
- A review into homelessness in 2012 had revealed five key themes around:
 - Preventing homelessness by raising awareness amongst school children of tenancies and taking on accommodation;
 - Working with identified groups of people to understand the effect of the upcoming welfare reforms;
 - Increasing housing stock in the district through working with private landlords and registered provider landlords;
 - Providing a better understanding of what it meant to be homeless;
 - Increasing the profile of agencies who provided a service;
- The Council's position was to always prevent homelessness wherever possible through a number of means including negotiation with landlords, mediation and financial advice, however these relied on the individual seeking assistance early.

Mel Brain presented to the Commission information relating to current legislation and the duties of the Council, and raised the following points:

- There were five tests to be applied when considering a homelessness application:
 - Whether the applicant was eligible;
 - Whether they were homeless;
 - Whether they had a priority need. In some cases this was straightforward, for example having dependent children, but in others, for example, vulnerability, the assessment was more complex. In terms of vulnerability, the Pereira Test was used to assess whether the person would be more vulnerable than an ordinary homeless person;

Following consideration of these tests and recent case law, if the Council had reason to believe that the applicant might be eligible, homeless and in priority need, they would have a duty to provide temporary accommodation whilst concluding the enquiries into their situation. The final tests were:

- Whether the person intentionally made themselves homeless, for example through lack of financial management;
- Whether the person had local connections to West Berkshire. If not, the person could be referred to another authority.
- The duty of homelessness extended to people who had left their home due to domestic abuse, and those who lived in mobile accommodation but had nowhere to locate it;
- Other authorities might refer homeless people to West Berkshire where they had a local connection here. Where a local connection could not be established to any authority area, West Berkshire would have a duty to them;

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- If at any point the person did not fulfil the test, the Council would have no duty to provide accommodation, however advice would be offered to assist in providing alternative accommodation;
- If the person did not fall within the Council's duty, they would be able to request a review of the decision, and thereafter refer the case to the County Court on a point of law;
- Where the Council did owe a full housing duty to the person, they would be placed in temporary accommodation until the duty was ended by the availability of an offer of appropriate private or social rented accommodation (whether accepted or refused), ceasing to occupy the temporary accommodation, or making themselves intentionally homeless;
- This financial year to date, 228 households had been prevented from becoming homeless by the Housing Service;
- The estimated annual count of rough sleepers in 2011/12 was seven;
- The biggest group of people to approach the Council as homeless were young people with families. This was significantly higher than national averages. It appeared that their families and friends were unable or unwilling to accommodate them. Other reasons for homelessness might be flooding or leaving an institution, for example the forces or prison;
- In order to address homelessness effectively, Mel Brain believed that the causes of homelessness needed to be understood and addressed.

Councillor Roger Croft explained that the scrutiny review had arisen from an increase in the number of homeless people being reported through the Council's performance monitoring framework. Councillor Croft believed that the increase was due to national housing issues around affordability of mortgages and rents and the reduction in the supply of new homes. This had been further exacerbated by relationship breakdowns within families. An increase in the numbers of affordable homes would be helpful in addressing the situation.

Councillor Croft thanked the Housing Team for their work to date, and advised that further pressures were expected as a result of the changes to welfare benefits but was confident that the team would continue to provide their service to anyone presenting to the Council as homeless.

Councillor Croft advised the Commission that the recommendations drawn from the scrutiny review would aid the completion of the review into homelessness currently being undertaken.

Following questioning from the Commission, June Graves and Mel Brain provided the following information:

- The Council held 24 temporary units of accommodation in addition to 13 units leased from Sovereign;
- People were classed as 'young' up to the age of 24;
- There was rarely a common reason for refusing a homelessness application as each situation was different. The decision would be reached following enquiries with a number of relevant parties including the applicant, and the reasons would be set out clearly to the applicant;
- Although West Berkshire accepted a lower proportion of applicants than nationally or in the South East, the numbers were consistent over time. No cases had been taken

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to court indicating that the decisions being made were correct and there was no reason for concern over the lower figures;

- The school awareness raising programme had not yet commenced but would be incorporated into the Homelessness Strategy, due to be consulted on shortly. Mel Brain explained that the scheme would be reliant on schools allowing the programme to go ahead;
- If the person presenting was owed a full housing duty by the Council, storage of their personal property might also be included in that duty. Consideration would first be given to leaving property with family or friends. The Council could arrange storage, but this would be recharged. The Council would not release their property whilst there was no safe place for it;
- Where the person was eligible but not considered a priority, the Council's duty would be to advise them and support them in seeking accommodation;
- A person who owned accommodation but could not access it, for example if they had tenants who had a legal right to live in the property, could be considered in relation to the homeless duty;
- The Threshold Loan Scheme criteria had been tightened to focus help on those most in need;
- Preventing homelessness was known to be cheaper than providing accommodation to those to whom the Council owed a duty;
- No property had been disposed of in recent years, however the accommodation portfolio was reviewed regularly for suitability and refurbishment needs. Bed and breakfast accommodation was used where available accommodation did not provide the correct facilities, but was not used for extended periods of time. There was no intention to increase the housing stock at present, but instead to make the most of current assets;
- A physical count of rough sleepers was not undertaken due to the size and rural nature of the district. Numbers were collated through the knowledge of agencies and spot checks were done in order to validate the information, and to talk with individuals in order to offer advice.

Councillor Brooks expressed his astonishment that over half of family and friends were unable or unwilling to provide temporary accommodation to those made homeless and asked whether a campaign was needed to highlight the issue. Cathy Dodson responded that this was actively addressed through communication and mediation with families to make clear the reality of homelessness, and to obtain a positive outcome. In addition the Council tried to manage a move to private rented accommodation. Councillor Brooks requested information to show how many activities would be undertaken over the course of a year, and how many had been successful.

Councillor Beck asked whether other authorities had been approached to discuss the causes of family relationship breakdowns. Mel Brain responded that the factor was unique to West Berkshire, and added that all the best practice tools were used to prevent homelessness from occurring.

Councillor Rendel asked what was being done to ensure that new developments included the required level of affordable housing as, at present he believed many did not provide sufficient numbers with the developers having put forward the argument that the development would not then be economically viable.

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Councillor Vickers requested information to illustrate the nature of the accommodation that had been left by homeless people, whether privately rented, owned, family, social rented, etc.

Councillor Vickers questioned the accuracy of the rough sleeper count, informing the Commission that rough sleepers were not visible, but preferred to hide for their security. Councillor Vickers further raised concern about the effect of the welfare reforms and in particular the 'bedroom tax' on the ability of family members being able to offer accommodation, and gave the example of a grandparent forced to downsize as a result of the reform, who would no longer have a spare room which they might have been willing to give to a grandchild who was no longer able to live with their parents.

Agency Involvement

The Chairman introduced the session by requesting each agency representative set out their role with regard to homelessness, and to then respond to questions put by the Commission.

Sovereign Housing Association

Matthew Hensby and Kelly McArthur provided the following information:

- Sovereign was the largest provider of housing stock in West Berkshire;
- A small number of tenants would become homeless through defaulting either on payment of their rent, or occasionally through breaking the terms of their tenancy. This equated to nine in the last year since April and this followed a downward trend in the number of evictions;
- Sovereign worked closely with the Council's Housing Team.

Following questioning from Members, Matthew Hensby and Kelly McArthur provided the following responses:

- The process for managing tenants who were at risk of being evicted began with a pre- eviction panel to discuss possible options. A high proportion of individuals who attended and engaged with the panel did not subsequently get evicted, however many did not wish to engage with Sovereign until late in the process when the options were more limited and were more likely therefore to be evicted;
- The Council were involved on a daily basis and invited to take part in the panel;
- The individual's circumstances relating to evictions would be considered when judging whether the person was intentionally homeless, this was not an automatic conclusion;
- Prior to taking a tenancy, the individual would be assessed for their ability to pay the rent and afford their living expenses. Where the individual fell into rent arrears, this would be reviewed on a weekly basis and the individual would be contacted with the aim of working with them to set up a payment plan and maximise the use of their benefits. The aim was always to keep the person in their home. Where this was not successful, eviction might result;
- Sovereign was currently recruiting for additional tenancy support advisors to assist with the expected issues caused by the welfare reforms. The advisors would work with tenants to maximise their income and ensure people were assessed correctly for benefits. Residents who would be affected by the 'bedroom tax' had been identified, and support would be provided to enable them to downsize their accommodation;
- Sovereign had an asset management plan through which their portfolio of housing stock was managed. Previously accommodation had been built on garage plots, and this continued as appropriate;

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- Rent charges were restricted by government to reflect a maximum affordable rent and a maximum social rent. In order to assist in providing affordable living, Sovereign operated an affordable warmth programme to provide more cost effective heating;
- A flexible tenancy could be offered for a fixed period, for example 5 years;

The Chairman asked what opportunities there were for the future and what Sovereign would like to see as a result of the review. Matthew Hensby responded that Sovereign would support the Council in raising awareness in schools. He added that the redevelopment of sites that were coming to the end of their life should be considered, and offered that the Welfare Reform Bill provided a good opportunity to ensure that people lived in homes that met their needs.

Newbury Town Council

Councillors Gabrielle McGarvey and Martha Vickers provided the following information:

- There was a perception that the number of people sleeping rough in Newbury had increased over the past year. It was felt that this was because services that would be of use to these people, for example the Citizens Advice Bureau, Loose Ends, Two Saints, etc, were based in Newbury and this encouraged people to stay in the area, either 'sofa surfing' or sleeping rough;
- Newbury Town Council had a role in contributing to civic pride and the appearance of Newbury town centre;
- Newbury Town Councillors and Officers had received comments and complaints about the use of benches by homeless people, the use of shrubberies and trees, finding human waste, finding drugs paraphernalia and evidence of alcohol consumption. It was recognised that this might not all be attributed to homeless people, but the perception was that there was a relationship. In turn, these issues had caused an increase in the cost of providing cleansing services which came from the public purse;
- Some people found the presence of homeless people threatening, but residents, visitors and the homeless had a right to feel safe. The streets of Newbury were not considered safe or appropriate to live on;
- In recent days, the Councillors had spoken with five people sleeping rough in Newbury, four of whom were originally from Newbury. Anecdotally they had reported that:
 - Some homeless people were being provided with tents as there was not enough accommodation available;
 - More than 10 people were sleeping rough in Newbury alone;
 - Three of the five people had become homeless due to relationship breakdowns, which bore out the earlier information;
 - The desire of these five people was to have a secure lock up facility in which to leave their possessions, and some basic bedsit accommodation;
 - The need to feel secure and protect their possessions led homeless people to have a dog. Additionally a dog would provide some warmth.
- Young women were particularly vulnerable, but would be more likely to be considered as a priority by the Housing Team. None of the young men spoken to were considered a priority;
- No one they spoke to had been employed, and as they were now homeless, they would not be employable;

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- Homelessness should be unacceptable in an affluent area such as Newbury.

Following questioning by Members, Councillors Gabrielle McGarvey and Martha Vickers provided the following information:

- The young homeless men spoken to would not welcome the involvement of social services, but would like easy access to an overnight bedsit;

Councillors Webster and Boeck requested more clarity to evidence the comments being made, for example in relation to numbers of complaints and increase in cleansing costs. Councillors Gabrielle McGarvey and Martha Vickers responded that the information had not been available, and stressed that the information was based on perception, conversations with five homeless people and a meeting with colleagues as had been noted. An offer was made to commence the collection of data if this would be helpful

Councillor Brooks was pleased that the anecdotal evidence had been provided and suggested that more evidence could be collected at a future District Parish Conference to create a picture across the district. Matthew Hensby advised that the Newbury Wardens collected data which may be of benefit.

June Graves thanked contributors for the information and advised the Commission that there was generally room for anyone requiring it at Two Saints, and that there was a cold weather process in place. June Graves was however concerned that the causes of homelessness needed to be addressed, and not just the result. Concern was also raised at drawing a link between finding human waste and drugs paraphernalia, and homelessness without direct evidence.

Thames Valley Police

Superintendent Robin Rickard advised that the police did not have a specific role in dealing with homelessness, but had a duty to protect everyone equally and provided the following information:

- The perception of people who were homeless was generally negative;
- PCSOs (Police Community Support Officers) had a role in reducing anti social behaviour and crime and disorder. When they met homeless people they would be expected to advise them of where they could seek advice and assistance;
- No information was held by the police about homeless people unless it was in relation to a crime or because they were a victim of crime;

The Chairman asked how a homeless person would be dealt with by the police if a member of the public did not want them there. Robin Rickard responded that if a crime was being committed then it would be dealt with; if the Officer considered it a fear for welfare issue, then the appropriate agency would be contacted for support. Robin Rickard advised the Commission that being homeless and sleeping outside was not a crime and additionally, the homeless person would have chosen a location where they felt safe, so the police would not move them on and undermine their feeling of security if there was no good reason.

Councillor Beck asked whether the incidence of homeless people had increased people's perception that an area was unsafe. Robin Rickard responded that there was no clear answer to this as not all people feel intimidated by homeless people.

Robin Rickard advised that any relationship between homelessness and drug use should not be assumed.

Councillor Andrew Rowles asked whether Robin Rickard had ever experienced a homeless person deliberately committing a crime in order to spend a night in the police

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cells for shelter or safety. Robin Rickard responded that he was not aware of that ever happening.

Councillor Vickers asked if homeless people were either at more risk of being a victim of crime, or of being drawn into crime. Robin Rickard responded that he believed that as homeless people were generally less trusting of agencies, it was less likely that they would report a crime, and hence it was not possible to say whether they were more likely to be a victim; and in his experience, he believes that it would be unlikely for a homeless person to be drawn into crime, rather that crime might result in becoming homeless.

Councillor Webb asked if there were any issues in rural areas. Robin Rickard responded that there were some reports across the district but that they were not common, and were more likely in better weather.

(The Commission broke for lunch at 12:30 and recommenced at 13:15)

Loose Ends

Maja Howgate explained that Loose Ends was a Christian organisation that began 25 years ago, and was in the process of registering formally as a charity. There were approximately 50 volunteers providing a cooked meal four times a week to any homeless person that attended. In addition, three tins of food were provided to each person to sustain them for the day ahead. Volunteers also tried to provide other assistance necessary such as accompanying homeless people to appointments.

Maja Howgate advised that in the course of their work, the volunteers developed good relationships with homeless people and they would like to work more closely with the Council in order to capitalise on this. Maja Howgate reported that she knew of 30 people sleeping rough and knew that this could rise to 40 at times.

Following questioning from the Commission, Maja Howgate provided the following responses:

- There was a shower available for the homeless to use at Loose Ends, however this required an additional two volunteers per session, so it was not used;
- Loose Ends would benefit from having clothes washing and drying facilities which were not currently available;
- Loose Ends was not yet a formal charity although they had been advised that they would be considered a charity due to the nature of their work;
- Contributions of food were received from large organisations, such as supermarkets;
- Between 25 and 50 people were fed at each session, but numbers were rising and this meant that it might be necessary to look for new, larger accommodation in the future;
- The homeless people who attended generally located themselves close to the town centre in order to access services and to maintain contact with each other;
- If Loose Ends was able to have more funding, it would be used to provide more to the homeless people coming to them, such as sleeping bags, socks and toiletries.

Councillor Webster asked if officials looking to provide services and assistance to homeless people would be welcomed at Loose Ends as homeless people were not comfortable in approaching official organisations. Maja Howgate responded that they would not be welcome as Loose Ends was felt to be a safe environment, and informed the Commission that even Police Officers were asked to wait outside when they had reason to attend.

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The Chairman summarised that increased funding and assistance with obtaining more facilities would be of benefit to Loose Ends, and that Loose Ends might be able to assist with more accurate information regarding homeless people.

Councillor Brooks asked how Loose Ends would like to work more closely with the Council. Maja Howgate responded that she would like to consider this with the Loose Ends' committee.

Shelter

James Merritt introduced Shelter as a national organisation whose focus within the Thames Valley had been Slough and Oxford where the prevalence of homelessness was greater than within West Berkshire. James Merritt provided the following information:

- Shelter provided an opportunity for homeless people to access good advice without needing to contact a local authority who might be mistrusted. Advice could be sought from their website, call centre or through Citizen's Advice Bureaux across the country;
- Shelter focused on rough sleepers and preventing homelessness;
- Rough sleeper counts were not considered to be accurate as there were too many uncertain factors;
- Shelter encountered a lot of young single men as they did not meet priority need and so were given advice as to how to find accommodation, but were left to find it on their own, often in the private sector where there was little single person affordable accommodation. This resulted in young men drifting into rough sleeping;
- There was an expectation that the upcoming benefit changes would result in a greater level of homelessness;
- If more hostel accommodation were to be provided this might attract a greater number of homeless people into the area as they would have a greater expectation of finding temporary accommodation. This had happened in Oxford, who had now developed a reconnection policy along with Shelter, to relocate people back to their own areas;
- Not all homeless people were on drugs or causing anti social behaviour and this connection should be viewed with great caution;
- Homeless families were often not able to afford private rented accommodation;
- Shelter had undertaken research which showed the ongoing effect of homelessness on children where 1 in 3 failed to attend school regularly and failed to achieve a basic education resulting in future difficulties in finding employment;
- Shelter was working to prevent homelessness by:
 - Working with schools;
 - Providing training and other services to local authorities;
 - Face to face services could be provided for homeless people, but this would be undertaken in conjunction with the Citizen's Advice Bureau who might feel able to provide this advice themselves;
 - Shelter would like to have housing specialist advisors situated in Citizen's advice Bureaus;
 - Providing training in financial confidence to enable people to prioritise their income;
- West Berkshire was noted as an area that provided good advice and accepted homeless applications appropriately;

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Following questioning by Members, James Merritt provided the following responses:

- There was currently no permanent representation by Shelter in West Berkshire. Legal Services contracts providing advice were based in Oxford and Slough, but would travel to West Berkshire should the need arise;
- The anticipated increase in homelessness was attributed to economic factors through rent or mortgage arrears. Shelter was able to assist but was most likely to be successful if intervention was early in the process, however Shelter mostly worked reactively when options were fewer;
- There was no seasonal element to the number of rough sleepers, but it was recognised that many of the hidden homeless were not included in the count, for example 'sofa surfers' and those sleeping in garden sheds and barns who were not visible;
- Young women tended to represent a much smaller group (estimated as 5%) of homeless people than men as they were more likely to be offered accommodation on the basis of vulnerability, especially if they had children or were fleeing domestic abuse. Additionally it appeared that women were more willing to approach agencies than men. However there would likely always remain a small number of men and women who made a lifestyle choice to sleep rough;
- A reconnection policy worked through local authorities working together with Shelter to interview homeless people, establish where they had connections and ensuring accommodation would be available for them on their return to their own area. Shelter would receive the person back to their area, and accompany them to the pre arranged accommodation, thereby monitoring who had been relocated;
- Confirmation was given that Shelter was able to provide a range of options to assist local authorities to improve their services from telephone contact to full mystery shopper exercises.

Councillor Rendel expressed the view that it would be helpful if government could legislate for a minimum number of units of accommodation to be provided in each area to avoid the attraction of areas with a greater number of places. The future cost of not providing a suitable number of units included healthcare as well as benefit costs for those who did not achieve a good education and were unable to find employment. James Merritt agreed that legislation of this nature would be positive but would be unlikely due to the cost.

Citizens Advice Bureau

Judy Kelley and Susan Capner informed the Commission that although the Citizens Advice Bureau was a generalist advice agency, homelessness was closely linked to the top three issues that were raised with them by clients: benefits, debt and employment. They provided the following additional information:

- Since 2010 housing enquiries had escalated, and homelessness enquiries were now following this trend;
- The Citizens Advice Bureau operated the Churches emergency fund which was able to be accessed to assist homeless people with necessities;
- Many people that came to the Citizens Advice Bureau were the same people who attended Loose Ends;
- The reduction in available rental accommodation, due to tenants not being able to afford to move on, and changes to welfare benefits were expected to result in increased demand for the services of the Citizens Advice Bureau;

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- There had been an increase in young women approaching the Citizens Advice Bureau for advice relating to homelessness;
- Of 617 rented accommodation adverts in the Newbury Weekly News between July and November 2012, there were only 30 within housing allowance levels. These statistics did not take into account the location of the accommodation or that some specifically state 'no DSS'. This raised concern that the Valuation Officer based in Reading was not using accurate or current data on which to base calculations relating to local housing allowance benefit levels;

Councillor Vickers expressed concern at the method of calculation of rent valuations believing it to be too opaque for effective challenge, and commented that it was not realistic to place people in private rented accommodation if it was not affordable and therefore was not a solution to homelessness in West Berkshire. Judy Kelley agreed but added that if private rents were lowered to an affordable level, then placements would be made from outside West Berkshire.

Two Saints

Chloe Lyons introduced Two Saints and provided the following information:

- Two Saints operated a range of accommodation allowing increasing levels of independence at each stage. Available accommodation comprises:

55 bed direct access hostel

- Homeless people may be referred or approach the hostel directly;
- The hostel operated a tick system whereby each day an enquiry was made to the hostel for a place, a tick was given to that person. When a space becomes available, the person with the most ticks was offered the place;
- An individual's risks were assessed prior to offering a place in order to ensure the safety of other residents and staff. However in eight years, only four people had been refused accommodation on this basis. These people were still offered advice;
- Residents had their own room, but shared facilities. They were provided with all their meals and washing facilities were available to them;
- Each resident had a key worker with whom they developed a support plan to enable them to progress to managing their own finances and accommodation;
- Other facilities available were IT, an Education Officer, dog rooms, and a small amount of financial assistance, for example to pay for travel to a job interview;
- In order for the service to be successful, the person had to engage fully with the support being offered;
- Every person had a licence agreement for the accommodation requiring them to pay some rent and a contribution for the facilities. Rent arrears were managed and payment plans were used;
- Individuals were able to stay in this accommodation for up to two years.

16 bed hostel

- This was self catering with partial management and was intended to encourage a greater level of independence and self management.

5 bed shared house

- There were no staff on site, but on call assistance was available;

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6 individual flats at Greenham

- These were available for up to two years and the tenant would live independently as though it was their own accommodation.

By the end of these stages, the individual was expected to be in a position to bid for their own tenancy. The intention was for all residents to leave with the skills to take their own tenancy, and to achieve this support would be provided at any stage as required.

- Not all people needed to work through all of the stages offered by Two Saints. Some people had the necessary skills to take up a tenancy, but needed temporary accommodation for a short period. However the majority of people accessing the service appreciated the support offered as it provided support when mistakes were made;
- Two Saints also operated Floating Support Workers who provided advice and support to 'sofa surfers' and travellers amongst others. The advice might be around money management or finding accommodation. As long as the individual was willing to engage, Two Saints were able to offer assistance to anyone in need.

Following questioning by the Commission, Chloe Lyons and Meriel Colbert-Owen provided the following responses:

- There were currently approximately 30 people waiting for a space at Two Saints;
- The reduction in accommodation units at each stage of the process did cause a bottleneck for people to work through the system;
- As individuals progress through the stages, they became more ready for their own accommodation, however their points, which are required for assessing housing need, reduce;
- Two Saints acted as mediators and were not considered an authority organisation, and were therefore able to build trust quickly;
- Two Saints had daily contact with the Council to discuss individual cases as required;
- There was some concern over continued funding by the Council but this was allayed by regular discussions with the Council;
- Two Saints were able to obtain more properties by working with private landlords to guarantee rent and maintenance on a rental property for a period of five years. However as only the local housing allowance would be paid, this was not attractive to private landlords who could obtain more on the open market.

Richard Collins of Nacro Bramlings House informed the Commission that Two Saints also provided Wayfaring, overnight accommodation.

The Chairman asked what would be of assistance to Two Saints. Meriel Colbert-Owen responded that the service was stretched to capacity, but the most successful element was the floating support which had prevented 35 evictions so far, and an increase in this service would be expected to see clear results. Meriel Colbert-Owen would like to see an increase in staff numbers, which would allow a greater service to be provided, and might assist in identifying people at risk of homelessness at an earlier stage allowing intervention support to be provided to reduce the likelihood of them actually becoming homeless.

Nacro Bramlings House

Richard Collins introduced the service he managed at Bramlings House for 16 to 24 year olds, and provided the following information:

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- Bramlings House was rebuilt in 2010 and had 25 beds;
- The service was almost exclusively accessed by 16 and 17 year olds who were, or were at risk of becoming, homeless;
- Accommodation comprised shared 'cluster' accommodation such as you might find in University Halls, and 13 self contained units. These were situated in different areas of the same building;
- The 'Outcome Star' diagnostic support tool was used to support and measure change in individuals;
- All residents were required to commit to making meaningful use of their time whilst at Bramlings House. This generally took the form of education or training, or working towards this goal if it was not currently achievable, for example if they were too chaotic;
- Residents did experience difficulty in moving away from Bramlings House as landlords were not always willing to take them when other potential tenants were available;
- Bramlings House only accepted individuals who had been referred by relevant agencies through the Housing Service. A Young Persons Panel considered the referrals and allocated vacancies to the most appropriate young person;
- There was a waiting list of two or three people as the population eligible to find accommodation at Bramlings House was much smaller than other accommodation providers;
- There were approximately equal numbers of male and female residents, and there were currently also four asylum seekers in residence.

The Chairman asked what changes Richard Collins would like to see. Richard Collins responded that he would like to alter the expectation of some young people that they would be offered a one bedroom flat by the Housing Service. He would like shared accommodation to be seen as a normal stepping stone for young people looking or having to move away from home.

Richard Collins suggested that the Council could act as a guarantor for larger houses of four or five bedrooms that could be managed by Nacro Bramlings House and used as additional shared accommodation.

Richard Collins and Meriel Colbert-Owen clarified that the cost of education and training was managed either through the age of the individual (most of those at Bramlings House would be young enough not to have a requirement to pay), or through support funding at Two Saints if the training was a positive step towards the individual's future. Both advised that there could be some issues related to the individual's age and benefit entitlement.

View from the Homeless

Two residents from Two Saints main hostel spoke to the Commission of their experiences.

First Speaker

He related that he became homeless following a divorce after which he suffered depression which led to him losing his job. The benefits he and his new partner were entitled to claim became complicated due to part time working and eventually he was evicted by Sovereign.

He advised the Commission that one consequence of his depression had been to avoid the issue, but also stated that it was not made clear where he could access advice or

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support once eviction became inevitable. He also advised that this was some time ago and he wasn't aware of what assistance was offered now.

He spent some time 'sofa surfing' whilst trying to gain accommodation at Two Saints, but also spent some time sleeping rough in a barn. He reported that he felt completely disempowered whilst he was homeless, and that filling the days became more important than dealing with being homeless. Following a night outdoors, he used to go to the library to warm up and have a coffee.

He advised that although it was possible to eat as a homeless person, it was not possible to find hot food, he therefore went to Loose Ends four times a week for this purpose. He mentioned that there was great camaraderie between homeless people who would look out for each other and help each other out. He related an incident when he had not been able to get to Loose Ends, and found that some other homeless people instantly offered him tins of food in order that he did not go hungry. He had kept in contact with these people and hopes to help them out in return.

When he was offered a place at Two Saints it was initially as a Wayfarer, which provided him a bed but he was not able to stay during the day.

Since going to Two Saints, he had made his way through three stages of support but had then failed and started again. He spoke highly of the support provided and added that without Two Saints he would not have the confidence to attend this meeting to speak.

He now saw a positive future for himself, and could see how he could manage his depression.

He commented that he found the advice offered by the benefits office confusing which had not helped his original situation.

When asked what would have made things easier, he responded that he would have like to have somewhere safe to go to warm up and have a hot drink.

Following questioning from the Commission, he provided the following additional information:

- There had been no information, such as leaflets, apparent in the places that he frequented when he was sleeping rough to inform him of where to find advice and support. Councillor Rendel enquired whether he would be willing to contribute to such a leaflet and he agreed;
- He was aware of 40 people sleeping rough every night, but that most did not want to be counted;
- In his experience, most people would like to have their own accommodation, but were lacking the skills to manage it. Two Saints had provided the skills and support to him;
- His GP did not consider issues around homelessness when he approached him in relation to his depression;
- He would like to see more affordable housing, possibly bedsits.

Second Speaker

She related that she became homeless in 2009 after her last child left home and she could no longer afford the rent. She lived with family and friends for some time, but eventually had to leave and contacted the Council who advised she approach Two Saints. After a couple of nights she was offered overnight accommodation in their hostel. On arriving she felt so warmly welcomed that she was immediately put at ease. After three weeks she was offered temporary accommodation and had been living there since. She spoke highly of the staff and support on offer stating that she was being helped with

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her budgeting skills and could see herself moving on to her own flat in time which she had not been able to do previously.

Following questioning by the Commission, she advised that she had not sought support once she realised she could no longer afford her rent as she did not want to face the issue. She also did not tell her family until after she was evicted as she felt it would be letting them down.

Both speakers advised others in their situation not to ignore it, but to seek advice, and recommended approaching the Citizen's Advice Bureau.

Meriel Colbert-Owen advised the Commission that Sovereign Housing had recently included a leaflet about Two Saints in a letter to their residents and some contact had been made following this.

When asked if an approach by Sovereign Housing would have been helpful when it was apparent that they had gone into arrears with their rent, both speakers indicated that they had wanted to ignore the issue so they did not believe this approach would have been helpful.

The Chairman thanked everyone for their contributions to the review.

The Chairman suggested to the Commission that it would be beneficial to delay the formulation of recommendations to allow time for the information to be considered fully. The Commission agreed to draft recommendations being submitted at the next Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission meeting for discussion and agreement.

Councillor Croft advised the Commission that the Homelessness Review 2012 would be consulted upon prior to the finalisation of recommendations from this review, however any recommendations would be incorporated into the review at a later date.

Councillor Vickers requested that the final report from the mystery shopper exercise carried out by Shelter be circulated prior to the next Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission meeting. David Lowe advised that if it was available for circulation then this could be achieved.

Resolved that the Chairman and Vice Chairman propose draft recommendations for submission to the next Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission.

(The meeting commenced at 9.40 am and closed at 3.45 pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature