

RESPONSIVE SERVICES AND CUSTOMER CARE SCRUTINY PANEL

Notes of Meeting held on: Monday 10th September 2012, 5.30pm, Committee Room 4

Present: Cllrs Errington, Curran, Scott, Gibson, Wiper and Lawson

Helen Lancaster, Susan Kellie, Alan Caddick, Peter J Smith, David Smith, Marnie Burden, Sarah Abernethy.

Apologies: Cllrs Kay and Thompson

	Action
<p>1. Welcome and Introductions</p> <p>Cllr Errington welcomed everyone to the meeting.</p>	
<p>2. Declarations of Interest</p> <p>Cllr Lawson declared an interest as a member of Gentoo Living.</p>	
<p>3. Notes of the Meeting held on 5 July 2012</p> <p>Notes were agreed as a true and accurate record.</p>	
<p>4. Policy Review 2012/13: Reducing Re-offending – Accommodation Issues for Offenders</p> <p>Alan Caddick (AC) and officers presented a report on the accommodation available to offenders some of which is funded through the City Council and the role of housing related support Gateway.</p> <p>It was acknowledged that leaving custody with no accommodation plans can be very stressful and can lead to repeat offences. Housing is fundamental to reducing re-offending and giving the offender a new start in life.</p> <p>AC explained that there was an issue around finding suitable accommodation for the rising number of female offenders and ex-military offenders. AC explained that he is the Armed Forces 'champion' and that he and others have begun working closely with</p>	

the Armed Forces Network to address this issue.

It was asked why there is an issue with ex-military servicemen causing criminal offences. AC clarified that in the main it wasn't those that had just left service who were offending, but those who had left the armed forces some years ago. The trend shows that these people struggle to fit back in to society on their return, many suffering from post traumatic stress disorder.

The Armed Forces Network is looking at what it can do differently to engage with ex-military personnel as they tend to disengage for a variety of reasons. Norcare have been prominent in working with ex-military offenders to help them get back on track. They have established a "Veterans' Centre" in Newcastle and are looking at the possibility of establishing one in Sunderland, There is also support available from other armed services linked organisations such as the Royal British Legion.

The welfare reforms are expected to cause serious implications for access to accommodation. Those aged under 35 will receive less housing benefit and as part of phase 2 of the reforms those aged under 25 could receive no housing benefit. It was felt the reduction in benefits could lead to more criminal offences.

AC made members aware that Camrex House, a homeless hostel in the city centre, is due to close in 2014. Discussions will take place with the lease holder to agree a transition strategy and where to accommodate current hostel users. Many users suffer from poor mental health and this would need to be taken into consideration when considering their housing and support needs.

It was highlighted that the transition for an offender from the Youth Offending Service to Probation can be a rather difficult experience. Some offenders feel uncomfortable working with a new key worker for example.

It was felt that in some instances parents can become victims of their own children's behaviour and may be served with an eviction notice through no fault of their own.

Cllr Curran asked what the eviction rate is for families drawn in due to their children's poor behaviour.

AC explained that there were 58 eviction cases in the past year. Only a very small number of these were due to anti-social behaviour. The general approach from social landlords is not to evict as this just moves the problem elsewhere.

Cllr Wiper asked how many people in Sunderland are released from custody who have accommodation issues.

<p>Sue Kellie (SK) understood that HMP Northumberland and HMP Durham would have the most accurate information. However Marnie Burden (MB) clarified that the Gateway had referred 40 offenders to Norcare since April. Peter Smith (PS) also informed members that the Access to Housing Team usually manages around 10-20 cases per year.</p> <p>Cllr Curran felt that the welfare reforms relating to people aged under 35 could be challenged under the Age Discrimination Act.</p> <p>The Gateway acts as a central point for all agencies referring cases of those who may need supported accommodation, some of whom may be offenders. The Gateway decides on the best type of supported accommodation. The Gateway have been very successful in that it has been able to negotiate with providers to take 'risk' referrals so that accommodation can be provided in a timely manner.</p> <p>SK advised that this included complex client groups. These are usually hard to reach groups of people such as those with mental health issues, learning disabilities and those who misuse drugs and alcohol. These issues often make it difficult to find suitable accommodation however if this is managed properly everything else falls in to place.</p> <p>Cllr Gibson asked if it was still possible to track those offenders who do not access accommodation on release from custody. PS explained that it is possible however sometimes a person may become lost in the system. This would usually occur if a person is released from custody but then go back in because they have breached the conditions of their release.</p> <p>PS informed members about other support that is available to offenders leaving custody, such as helping them to manage money and be able to save for things that can help them in life such as furniture for their new homes, a laptop to help apply for jobs etc.</p> <p>It was reported that the North East have received £500m from central government to address homelessness and rough sleeping. A scheme named 'Through the Gate Plus' has been commissioned in conjunction with all regional prisons to support offenders leaving custody throughout their first six weeks. Middlesbrough Council is leading the procurement of the scheme.</p> <p>PS explained that Sunderland has a relatively low number of rough sleepers but this could increase as a result of the welfare reforms.</p> <p>AC raised the issue of people from outside of the city coming into Sunderland hostels. Ideally there would be fewer referrals from people outside of the city in the future.</p> <p>SK briefed members on the Integrated Offender Management (IOM) unit in the city. The IOM takes an overarching approach for prolific offenders. Individuals from multi-discipline organisations run the IOM as this helps</p>	SK
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<p>greatly in tackling offending.</p> <p>Cllr Scott felt that Area Committees may be able to assist through the influence of its people and place boards. AC felt that it was important that there was a city-wide approach to the issues raised and would be willing to attend Area Committees and People/Place Boards to discuss in more detail.</p> <p>Cllr Scott asked if there are measures in place to address the impending situation of the welfare reforms. AC explained that the Council had set up a Welfare Reform Board and was doing what it could to prepare the city for welfare reform.</p> <p>AC explained that the under 25 legislation is unlikely to be implemented until 2015. Plans are in place to work with those in this age group and help them to become more employable so that they do not have to rely on housing benefit.</p> <p>Cllr Errington felt the armed forces issue was a very interesting one. He felt they may be merit in inviting a representative from the Armed Forces Network to a future meeting to gather evidence.</p> <p>Cllr Errington suggested that the Area Committees may be able to assist in the review through looking at what services are currently available in each area and if there are any other services that there is a need for.</p>	<p>HL/SA</p>
<p>6. New Issues referred from Scrutiny Committee</p> <p>There were no issues to report.</p>	
<p>7. Issues to feedback to the next Scrutiny Committee</p> <p>HL agreed to compile an overview of discussions from this panel meeting and provide an update to the Scrutiny Committee in conjunction with Cllr Errington.</p>	<p>HL</p>
<p>8. AOB / Members Items</p> <p>None</p>	
<p>9. Dates of Future Meetings</p> <p>The next meeting will be held on Thursday 20th September, 5.30pm, Committee Room 1.</p>	