

HOMELESSNESS IN SUNDERLAND

Report of Executive Director of Health, Housing and Adult Services

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES: SP2: Healthy City; SP3: Safe City; P5: Attractive and Inclusive City

CORPORATE PRIORITIES: CIO1: Delivering Customer Focused Services: CIO4 Attractive and Inclusive City.

1 WHY HAS THIS REPORT COME TO THE COMMITTEE?

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide members with an update on homelessness issues as requested at the scrutiny committee meeting held on 22 September 2009. These relate to the following:

- Definition of homelessness
- Homelessness process
- Reducing / Preventing homelessness
- Hostel Accommodation (particularly Camrex House and Barclay Lodge)

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 Health, Housing and Adult Services has always fully embraced the national agenda of trying to prevent people from becoming homeless through a variety of innovative methods. Over the last 4 years this agenda has become fully embedded within the service to dramatically increase the number of cases prevented in 2008/09 and reduce the number of people accepted as homeless (as per the committee report of 22 September 2009).

2.2 The obligation on Local Authorities to prevent as well as respond to homelessness is engrained, both in law and in good practice advice. Since the implementation of the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977, authorities have been legally required to assist people under imminent threat of homelessness (and classed as 'in priority need') by taking reasonable steps to prevent them from losing existing accommodation.

2.3 Since 1997, however, central government has increasingly encouraged local authorities to adopt a more pro-active stance in tackling homelessness. The Homelessness Act 2002 and its requirement for local authorities to review the existing homelessness services in the city and create a homelessness strategy to move this agenda forward were central to this new emphasis.

3 HOMELESSNESS DEFINITION

- 3.1 Nationally the number of households reported as homeless (technically “homeless acceptances” ie those owed the main homelessness duty) in England between April and June 2009 was 32 per cent lower than for the same period in 2008. Homelessness acceptances peaked in 2003/04, and since then have dropped by 69 per cent, with year on year reductions. In 2003/2004 the number of homelessness acceptances in Sunderland was 894 and has subsequently fallen to 217 by 2008/2009. The number of prevention cases in 2005/2006 (when the contract returned to the Council) was 431 and in 2008/2009 this had improved significantly to 673 cases reflecting the move to the prevention agenda locally.
- 3.2 The term “homeless” is often broadly used to refer to people who are owed a duty by local authorities because they are “homeless or threatened with homelessness within 28 days, in priority need and not intentionally homeless”. National statistics are often reported using the term “Homeless” for this group. However that group includes people who are not yet homeless, but are “threatened with homelessness within 28 days”; while it also excludes people who are homeless but not in priority need, and those who are intentionally homeless, or who are not eligible for assistance (eg due to nationality). The term “Homeless Acceptance” is a more appropriate name for this group.
- 3.3 Homelessness is defined in Section 175(1) – (3) of the Housing Act 1996, which states that a person is homeless if he or she “has no accommodation in the UK or elsewhere which is available for his [or her] occupation” or no accommodation which they have a legal right to occupy. A person is also homeless if he or she has accommodation but cannot use it or secure entry to it or because it would not be reasonable for them to continue to occupy it. Note that this definition does not include:
- people who are threatened with homelessness
 - those in temporary or short term accommodation or living with family or friends
- 3.4 The Government has recently focussed more attention on rough sleepers – people who are literally homeless. They produced a cross government strategy “No one left out: Communities ending rough sleeping” in November 2008 targeting a renewed drive to reduce rough sleeping towards zero.
- 3.5 A rough sleeper’s survey in Sunderland carried out in November 2008 found three rough sleepers. However other research suggests that many people sleep rough intermittently, so the estimated number of rough sleepers over the course of a year is around 100 (Source: Homeless Review 2008).

- 3.6 Sunderland's response to rough sleeping includes introducing a specialist post to target help at people who are rough sleeping and have substance misuse issues, which many rough sleepers do. (See Housing Options Advisor - Substance Misuse as detailed below). A new monitoring system to get better ongoing information on the level of rough sleeping and the needs of that group is being developed as part of this approach.
- 3.7 Previously research has identified a need for some additional specialist supported housing – eg for people who misuse alcohol. The lack of suitable provision has been reported by Housing Options Advisers as a key barrier to resolving rough sleeping.

4 HOMELESSNESS PROCESS

- 4.1 The 'Statutory Homeless Assessment' is still a key tool used to decide service provision. However in recent years the move in focus to the prevention of homelessness has meant that every client seen receives an initial assessment to establish if their potentially homeless situation can be prevented either by advice or a more case specific intervention.
- 4.2 To allow a more prevention focused approach the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) have in recent years provided a grant to Sunderland City Council that has enabled the Housing Service to establish associated spending plans and activities to target the prevention of homelessness.

5 REDUCING / PREVENTION OF HOMELESSNESS

- 5.1 Sunderland City Council has embraced the prevention agenda and has developed various innovative responses in line with Government guidance. These are described below.
- 5.2 **Homeless Prevention Fund** – The fund has impacted positively on targets by increasing the number of prevented cases. The funds support prevention activities including assistance to enable a household to remain in their current home, where appropriate, or to enable a planned and timely move and therefore maintain independent living. Some examples of prevention activities that have been able to occur due to the fund are:
 - Rent deposits, bonds or registration fees to assist homeless people to secure accommodation in the Private Rented Sector.
 - Assistance to pay off rent arrears to secure an offer of accommodation.
 - Temporary heating to allow a customer to remain in their current home and therefore avoid the use of temporary accommodation.
 - Transport out of the area. This occurs when it has been established that the customer still has access to accommodation out side of the area but does not have the funds to get there.
 - County Court housing advice or representation.

- Top ups to pay part of private rents that are not covered by Housing Benefit or Discretionary Housing Payments.

5.3 **Private Sector Homelessness Support Project** – The project is an initiative aimed towards providing accommodation to people who have been evicted from their previous tenancy due to anti-social behaviour and / or rent arrears.

- The project manages private sector accommodation from landlords, until such time that the tenant no longer requires support to maintain the tenancy. Once this has been achieved the requirement of support as a condition of living in the property will be withdrawn.
- The aim of the project is to modify behaviour and assist households to maintain their tenancy and to mainstream tenants to become accepted members of their local community.
- The support is provided to the household as a condition of occupying the property and a further condition is the acknowledgement from tenants that their behaviour or the behaviour of their children or visitors to the property has contributed to the loss of their home. There also has to be a willingness to engage with the support provided.
- Ultimately the project prevents repeat homelessness for vulnerable households and assists both Adult and Children's Services in their duty to help certain intentionally homeless households. Currently the service works with, on average, 18 households at any one time, however, in the short term this will increase with the recruitment of a further two posts (1 year contracts) being funded by the CLG grant.

5.4 **Family Liaison Officer** – This post fulfils a similar support role to the Private Sector Support Project but to those people who are placed in temporary accommodation.

5.5 **Home Visitor posts** – two people have been recruited to visit clients who are homeless or threatened with homelessness, to assess their housing needs and where possible prevent them from becoming homeless. They are on 1 year contracts, funded again by the CLG homelessness grant.

5.6 **Mortgage Rescue Scheme** – This scheme was launched in January 2009 and the scheme is aimed at those who would be eligible for homelessness assistance and is subject to a range of eligibility criteria. Mortgage Rescue operates by bringing together local authorities, Registered Social Landlords (RSL), lenders and debt advice agencies to try and prevent people from losing their own home if they are having mortgage payment difficulties and are at risk of repossession.

5.7 **Housing Options Advisor (Substance Misuse)** – This officer was appointed in May 2009 with a remit to open up pathways and develop suitable housing provision to meet the accommodation needs of people with substance misuse problems who are at risk of disengaging from treatment. The officer also works with the Safer Sunderland Partnership and accommodation providers in order to reduce the risk of re-offending, facilitate

engagement with treatment services and support people into independent living.

- 5.8 **Housing Options Team** – The current service delivery model for the Housing Options Team (HOT) is described as having 5 key activities (see Appendix 1). The service currently employs 26 Full Time Equivalents (FTE) split across two teams, namely Housing Options and Allocations.
- 5.9 At the moment the HOT service area is being subjected to the Business Improvement Programme (BIP), and is currently developing a new way of working based upon the BIP analysis work. This 'Enhanced Housing Option' approach will be reported back to members once complete.

6 HOSTEL ACCOMMODATION

- 6.1 Sunderland as a city has a high concentration of 'hostel' type of accommodation located predominantly in the Sunnyside regeneration area although there are others located in neighbouring areas. The possible reason why the Sunnyside area has a high concentration of 'hostels' is probably in response to the lack of demand for more normal tenures of renting or ownership and that some larger buildings have not found a viable alternative use. Over the years the development of the hostels has also created a demand for support services, which have based themselves in Sunnyside.
- 6.2 Of obvious concern is the vulnerability of the people residing in these establishments. This concern is one that Health, Housing and Adult Services is attempting to address in partnership with a wide range of agencies to establish the support and accommodation needs of the existing residents.
- 6.3 Scrutiny Committee requested information on the following hostels;
- **Camrex House** – This accommodation is located within the Sunnyside regeneration area. It provides accommodation to clients on a private basis. Sunderland City Council does not refer anybody into Camrex House, and the only contact the City Council has with Camrex comes from the Housing and Neighbourhood Renewal Team which regularly inspects the premises to ensure that they comply with legal requirements for this type of accommodation in respect to fitness for human habitation and repair, facilities, licensing, management, means of escape and other necessary fire precautions and behaviour of the residents. Currently the Housing Options Advisor (Substance Misuse) (mentioned at 5.7) is visiting the residents in Camrex House and other 'hostels' within the Sunnyside area to help understand the housing needs and aspirations of the clients. This work will hopefully inform future commissioning of services but also will work with the existing clients and help them to gain more suitable long term accommodation meeting their needs.

- **Barclay Lodge** – This is a long established Bed and Breakfast accommodation within the Monkwearmouth area of the City. The City Council uses this facility if and when necessary. The Housing and Neighbourhood Renewal Team ensure that such establishments comply with legal requirements for this type of accommodation in respect to fitness for human habitation and repair, facilities, licensing, management, means of escape and other necessary fire precautions and behaviour of the residents.

7 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 7.1 Scrutiny Committee is invited to consider this report and provide views on the Homeless service.

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Appendix 1

Service Activity	Detail
Request for Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customers can view the website and contact the Housing Options Team on a free phone number (Contact Centre out of hours), the majority however are encouraged to make an appointment for a face – to – face discussion. • Majority of customers present at the Civic Centre with take up at the outreach surgeries (Houghton and Washington) very low. • Analysis was undertaken to map where customers accessing the service lived prior to any intervention. It highlighted that there are certain areas within the City that have a higher number of customers accessing the service. Main areas being – Washington North, Castletown, Southwick, Pallion, Hendon and St Chad / Sandhill area. • Repeat presentations to the service are an area of frustration for the Housing Options Staff. This is due to 2 elements – 1. Frustration that they are unable to address all of a customer’s needs (can only provide housing assistance) and 2. Customers will often call in for a progress report on their case, or to speak to an officer who may have sent hem a letter requesting further information. However often there is no data readily available as the officer may not be available or the IT system may not be fully updated. • Other avoidable contacts can occur when customers return with documents requested by the Housing Options Team, such as Doctor’s note, proof of income etc which can confirm someone’s priority status. It has been suggested that on occasion these documents have been known to be lost. Additionally there is repeat contact with the customer as they may have already provided the same information to another part of the Council (e.g. Housing Benefit).
Providing Advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Even though appointments are pre-arranged, interview rooms are not. In reality to locate a vacant room a Housing Options Advisor (and in some cases the customer) may have to take a 2 – minute walk to find a suitable venue. • From the outset the Housing Options Advisor will determine the reason for the customer’s housing issue and will inform the customer what is required from them to assist their situation (documentation, actions etc) and what the likely outcome of any application will be. • Not all customers are aware of what information is available to them to help themselves without the intervention of the Housing Options Team.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many present themselves because – <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. They are being asked to leave by parents or friends, yet are not aware that the Council has no social housing and their options are hostels, private lettings or a lengthy wait for accommodation on a waiting list. 2. They cannot afford to pay their rent, yet are not claiming the correct benefits or gaining financial advice. 3. They are not aware of the differences between the Council and Gentoo and as a result are incorrectly signposted to the Council by other agencies when they should be presenting to Gentoo. • The Housing Options Team will provide the relevant information to the customer and the case is closed as ‘providing advice’. This is therefore a pre – transactional service and could be significantly improved with the provision of better information, marketing and improving the referral processes, both within and between the public service.
Payments Out	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over a 12 month period forecasts indicate that of those presenting 163 will be supported by ‘payments out’ to secure a private rented property and support the prevention agenda. • The funds have usually been allocated to finding or securing customers accommodation, although others have been made to assist to relieve a customers personal debt which was preventing them gaining accommodation or threatening their existing accommodation. • The process for administering this varies from case to case and from Officer to Officer. Some will grant it before completing a homeless assessment as a means of prevention, while others will complete a statutory assessment establishing whether the customer is intentionally homeless before still providing financial support. • This process is very subjective, depending on the funds, Officer, individual circumstances, prevention and temporary accommodation figures. • The use of the prevention fund may well be necessary to prevent expenditure on temporary accommodation but at this moment there is not a process ‘for payments in’.
Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A large number of cases are assessed under the homelessness legislation to decide if a person is homeless in terms of the legal definition. To be accepted as homeless you have to meet 5 conditions (tests): <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. You must be eligible for assistance

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. You must be homeless or at risk of becoming homeless within 28 days 3. You must be in priority need (the act defines who is a priority need) 4. You must not have become homeless or at risk of becoming homeless intentionally 5. You have a local connection <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is usually repeat contact in the assessment process, with a customer being seen on at least one further occasion. • Any one interview can last up to 1 hour and beyond. • Information received anecdotally from staff suggested that in a number of cases the customer are not actually homeless and their parents/families/friends are more than willing to take them back. • Avoidable contact also exists because of a belief by customers that if they present as homeless they will gain accommodation immediately. • analysis of the reasons given by customers for their homeless situation and the top three reasons being: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Asked to leave by parents/family/friends 2. Domestic Violence 3. End of assured shorthold tenancy. • On completion of an interview there are two main outcomes: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The customer has somewhere to stay that evening (as a result of their own intervention or Housing Options mediation) or 2. They require temporary accommodation. • The output of the interview will be a completed Homelessness Application form. • The Housing Options Officer (holding the case) then has 33 working days (guidance from the Homelessness Code of Guidance) to gather all information and make a decision on a customer's homeless situation. • While awaiting this decision if someone requires temporary accommodation it is provided but much of it is outside of the Sunderland area.
Interventions	<p>Temporary Accommodation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Currently Bed and Breakfast accommodation is sought in a reactive manner. On a daily basis the Allocations Team contacts establishments for availability. It is possible that availability will change throughout the course of the day.

- While locating a place the customer will be left waiting where there interview has taken place and this can lead to a further delay.
- The Housing Options Officer once a suitable place has been located will provide the customer with a covering letter to give to the establishment and also arranges any travelling related expenses.
- In the past 4 years there have been 1614 invoices paid for Bed and Breakfast accommodation. 1358 of these were outside of Sunderland and as a result transport costs were also associated.
- Costs for the last 2 years for Bed and Breakfasts were £122,321 in 2007 and £117,042 in 2008 (this was reduced to £89,090 in 2008 due to £27,972 being claimed back from Housing Benefit).
- The Housing Options Team Leader allocates a considerable amount of time trying to move customers between temporary accommodation and Bed and Breakfast to assist with the achievement of targets.

Permanent Accommodation:

- Alongside a homeless application a Housing Register form is completed and input by the Allocations Team. Dual keying of customer details is evident and additional data regarding the previous 5 years housing history is recorded.
- The 5 year housing history is required by Housing Associations such as Gentoo to process any application.
- Due to this not being completed on the application form the Allocations Officers often have to contact the customer for this information. This is avoidable contact as this should have been collated previously.
- The information required by Housing Associations is not always consistent and can appear to alter on a case – by – case basis.
- The Allocations Team will at this point complete a support needs sheet identifying any support needs a customer may have that would preclude them from particular properties. This is not a robust support needs assessment and often the customer is not even contacted. The basis for this sheet is gathered from the statutory homeless assessment which is not a support needs assessment.
- Once all necessary information is collated and organised, the customer will be matched to any available properties that match their requirements. The type of accommodation can be Privately Rented, RSL or supported.
- If the solution is privately rented, the Allocations Team will search the internet for suitable properties, contact Landlords and if successful arrange property inspections by the Private Sector Team. The Private Sector will inspect any non-accredited

landlord property to ensure that it is of a good standard. However at this point the customer may have already viewed the property and will be intent on moving in to it regardless of what the inspection may show.

- In respect to Housing Associations properties, the Allocations Team receives notifications of nominations (a Housing Association requesting details of a customer to fill a vacant property) and once a relevant customer is found their details are forwarded electronically to the Housing Association.
- The team may receive these requests daily and they are all different depending on the Housing Associations. Once a Housing Association receives the information on the customer they will carry out their own checks and will inform the Allocations Team if the applicant has been accepted or excluded.
- Exclusions result in the Allocations Officers working with customers on a fortnightly basis to address their exclusion reasons and work together on action plans to improve their chances of being accepted by an Housing Association.
- There is a perception within the Service that the Council do not receive their 75% of nominations by Housing Associations. However, this may be due to properties going to other organisations or services within the Council competing for the same properties.
- What is unknown is the number of properties that are offered to other organisations. However it is likely that these other organisations will be performing a similar role to the Allocations Team.
- The Allocations Team does not only focus on the statutory homeless, they also maintain the housing register which considers anyone applying for accommodation.
- 61% of those being rehoused by the team are statutorily homeless, the other 39% are predominantly non – priority cases.
- A further initiative is the '450' points classification. This is an initiative aimed at helping to keep homeless acceptances to a minimum. With this initiative customers are asked if they can remain in their current accommodation until their application is processed. The benefit of this to the customer is that it will allow them to receive 3 offers of accommodation as opposed to 1 if they had been accepted as priority homeless.

Supported Accommodation:

- The Supporting People programme helps a wide range of people to live independently in the community by providing a range of support and assistance. The programme aims to provide a high quality of support that meets the individual's needs on both a long and a short-term basis.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The accommodation can be accessed directly or via the Housing Options Team. Conflicts of interest can occur when the service provides customers with supported accommodation when it is not needed and allocated without a needs assessment.• It could be argued that in essence the Supporting People programme is therefore just another source of temporary accommodation.• At any one time the sector can support 604 people. The provision has had a 25% growth in the number of units from 444 to 575 between 2003 and 2009 and in investment from £2.4m to £4.1m.• Key areas that have benefited are:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Drug and alcohol support services (8 units to 44 units)○ Domestic violence services saw the commissioning of a new 10 bed refuge○ Offenders have seen an increase in the number of available units from 27 to 44○ Procurement and opening of a Young Person's Immediate Access Project, another 15 units○ Floating support services expanded (additional units for young parents, single homeless and homeless families).
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