

RESPONSIVE SERVICES AND CUSTOMER CARE SCRUTINY PANEL

Notes of Meeting held on: Thursday 20th September 2012, 5.30pm.

Present: Cllrs Errington, Thompson, Scott, Gibson and Wiper.

Also Present: Cllr Tate

Helen Lancaster, Susan Kellie, Alan Caddick, Peter J Smith, Sarah Abernethy (Sunderland City Council), Tyler Moore, Michelle Meldrum (Gentoo), Maureen Plunkett (Home Group), Maureen McKenna (Approved Premises - Northumbria Probation), Andrea Kent (BASS – Stonham Housing), Tracy Guy (Shelter North East), Nikki Wheeler (Norcare), Helen Aitchison, Lisa Boyak (Cyrenians)

Apologies: Cllrs Curran, Kay, Lawson and Heron.

	Action
<p>1. Welcome and Introductions</p> <p>Cllr Errington welcomed everyone to the meeting.</p>	
<p>2. Declarations of Interest</p> <p>None received.</p>	
<p>3. Notes of the Meeting held on 10 September 2012</p> <p>Notes were agreed as a true and accurate record.</p> <p>Alan Caddick (AC) reported that since the previous meeting he has met with Graham Hall from the Armed Forces Network and a further meeting will be arranged with key stakeholders such as Veterans in Custody and the Royal British Legion to address the issue of housing offenders who are ex-military personnel.</p>	
<p>4. Policy Review 2012/13: Reducing Re-offending – Accommodation Issues for Offenders – Round Table Discussion</p> <p>Each housing provider introduced themselves and gave a brief overview of the work of their organisations</p> <p>Cllr Thompson asked Gentoo about the changes in support to young people currently being rolled out by the organisation. Michelle Meldrum (MM) explained that the changes had come about as a result of some young</p>	

people falling into arrears early in the tenancy. Gentoo had recognised a need to support tenants in managing money and now offer support prior to the tenancy being taken in an attempt to prevent future problems.

Tyler Moore (TM) referred to Holmewood which provides supported accommodation to clients aged between 16 and 21 who are homeless. If a young person is successful in that project then the likelihood would be that they would be moved on to a Gentoo property.

Cllr Scott asked if any provider would decline to work with an ex-offender due to the severity of their offence, for example, are there any eligibility criteria in place. Maureen Plunkett (MP) stated that Home Group do operate within some parameters as it can't give the level of support required by some offenders. MM stated that there was nothing actively excluding offenders from accessing Gentoo properties, however as an organisation it needs to be sure that anybody given a tenancy has the ability or the support in place to manage that tenancy successfully.

AC stated that a significant issue was the readiness of the offender to commence and sustain a tenancy. It was considered crucial that those living in supported accommodation are provided with the skills to ensure they are ready for a tenancy.

Peter Smith (PS) mentioned the important links the council has through the Gateway with other agencies including Probation and whenever a case is presented need can be assessed and the most appropriate housing provider approached for that need.

Cllr Scott asked how providers would work in partnership to help ex-offenders, given the reductions in public funding.

PS indicated that the Gateway, which has been in existence for approximately 8 months, is making it easier to facilitate this joint working more than ever. In recognising the Council doesn't always have the answers a multi-agency panel of providers has been established to discuss those cases that are particularly difficult.

Nikki Wheeler (NK) informed members that Norcare had remodelled its services to enable continued high level support to its clients whilst working to smaller budgets. In Sunderland, despite a reduction in funding Norcare had been able to provide exactly the same service by looking at how elements could be delivered differently. NK also suggested that providers with limited capacity could share waiting lists with other providers to avoid delays in providing accommodation.

Tracy Guy (TG) highlighted the social housing allocations policy in Sunderland which made it almost impossible for Shelter to find offenders accommodation in social housing, therefore the reality of the situation was that the Private Rented Sector (PRS) were being utilised more, bringing its own set of issues. Floating support was therefore vital and this offer needs

to be embedded and improved. More often than not the crisis for offenders occurs one the short term provision has been removed and the support is no longer available.

Further cuts in public funding and changes to legislation could also cause a shift towards the increased use of the PRS. The PRS is invaluable in the city, without it there would certainly be a homelessness issue.

TM highlighted the social attitude toward offenders generally and the implications this has for all aspects of rehabilitation, not only in housing need but also employment. The offending behaviour is one part of a person and the whole range of other issues in the persons life need to be addressed, otherwise they are being set up to fail.

TM also felt that working in partnership was hugely important and helps in being more inclusive. Offending may only be one part of a person's barrier to accommodation and support from partners can help to offer the right package. One example of this would be utilising intelligence from other agencies to avoid offering accommodation for a person with substance misuse problems in an area with a high density of this problem.

Housing providers share basic information about clients to ensure that the most appropriate provider is used for each individual case, however the Data Protection Act can limit the level of data that is shared. It was felt that The Gateway has been very successful in enabling information sharing and the beginnings of joint working.

Cllr Gibson asked if the shortfall in housing benefit created by the Shared Room Rate being introduced as part of Welfare Reform would be made up by any organisation. AC explained that this related to the private rented sector and that there is nothing in place for any shortfall to be made up. AC informed members that a tenancy strategy was under production and is due to be completed in 2013. Providers in the city will have to give due regard to the strategy which will **include all sections of the community**. Consultation events for Members and providers will be undertaken to explain more about the Tenancy Strategy.

Helen Aitchison (HA) had seen the impact of the changes to housing benefit to under 35s (the Shared Room Rate) and felt that this would lead to an increase in the use of Houses on Multiple Occupancy for offenders, in this instance increased floating support would be beneficial.

TM felt that housing providers tend to work reactively and that steps should be taken to work more proactively with the community, for example in schools teaching budgeting skills.

Cllr Errington felt that Youth Parliament may be a useful channel to kick start a preventative/proactive approach. They have links to other youth providers, excluded children etc. In addition, the Area Committees are currently looking at youth provision and wondered whether this kind of work

could be included in future work contracts.

AC felt that the merge of Health, Housing and Adult Services and Children's Services will help to join up services which would assist in providing a more proactive, coordinated approach to providing people with the necessary skills.

MP advised the Panel about 'The Foyer' project run by Stonham Housing in Newcastle which has proved effective in helping young people develop independent living skills. Individuals leave the programme with qualifications and are able to gain employment. There was some discussion as to whether this was the best approach or whether clients would learn more from mirroring real life situations whereby services are not all located together.

Cllr Gibson asked if female offenders were given any specialist treatment.

Lisa Boyack (LB) informed members about the Women Outside Walls project which provides an outreach service in three different pathways: domestic violence, prostitution and sexual abuse. The Cyrenians are currently carrying out a scoping exercise to identify the needs of its client group. It was thought there is often a hidden learning need which prevents women from accessing services.

Cllr Gibson asked if the Women Outside Walls project uses women's refuges as suitable accommodation. LB explained that the women the Cyrenians work with have the most complex needs and have significant associated risks and therefore refuge accommodation is not always appropriate.

PS stated that there was a lack of accommodation specifically for women offenders and that a review of this was currently being undertaken, the results of the review will be shared when available.

Cllr Errington queried the use of the Approved Premises in Sunderland. Maureen McKenna (MK) informed the Panel that offenders were placed according to risk and need. Whilst clients are living at the hostel they have access to Education, Training and Employment (ETE) courses which include work ethic and developing a CV. Lots of the clients who access the Approved Premises have been in custody for a long time and need to be taught basic skills such dealing with people on the phone. In answer to a supplementary question MK confirmed there are no Approved Premises for women in the city or the area.

TG highlighted that the big issue around offenders with short term sentences. The Panel was informed that offenders given a short term sentence are not given a probation officer. They tend to live in hostel accommodation on release from custody. It was felt there was 'revolving door syndrome' for this type of offender.

<p>Cllr Errington asked if landlords are proactive in raising alarm bells early should a tenant be causing problems. PS explained that this differed amongst landlords, those who we work with on a regular basis tend to report issues. It is important for the Council to be made aware so that they can address the problems early. In answering a supplementary question PS confirmed that landlords may not necessarily be part of the Accredited Landlords Scheme.</p> <p>AC informed members that a revised Accreditation Scheme would be considered by Cabinet in November. The revisions to the scheme consider the role of the private rental sector in meeting accommodation needs.</p> <p>Cllr Thompson queried information relating to risk and whether it was routinely shared among agencies and providers. Information Sharing Protocols are used as a mechanism to provide this. MK confirmed Probation have 100 different Information Sharing Protocols. At all times information sharing has to be necessary and appropriate. It was highlighted by providers that the Gateway has made information sharing easier, and that providers were keen to share where possible to improve the client experience, for example, sharing support plans so multiple assessments aren't undertaken.</p> <p>It was agreed sharing information is crucial and where at all possible this should be streamlined and easy for agencies and providers to do.</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>	HL
<p>8. AOB / Members Items</p> <p>Cllr Dennis Richardson has made a request to join the Responsive Services and Customer Care Scrutiny Panel. He will attend the next meeting where this will be formally ratified.</p>	
<p>9. Dates of Future Meetings</p> <p>A visit to the Integrated Offender Management Unit has been organised for 24th October. Details to follow.</p>	HL

