

Scrutiny review : Homelessness

Improving Places Select Commission

August 2013 –January 2014

Scrutiny Review Group:

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Cllr Chris Read

Cllr John Swift

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CONTENTS

	Page No.
Executive Summary	3
1. Why Members wanted to undertake this review	5
2. Method	6
3. Background	6
4. Findings	8
5. Conclusions	14
6. Recommendations	14
7. Thanks	15
8. Background papers	16
9. Appendices	16

Executive summary

The need for this review was identified as part of the service review and improvement process by Neighbourhoods and Adult Services and was referred to the Improving Places Select Commission to be progressed.

Members of the Review Group:

Councillor Jacquie Falvey (Chair)

Councillor John Swift

Councillor Neil Hamilton

Councillor Alan Gosling

Councillor Chris Read

Ms Pauline Copnell (co-optee)

Members were concerned about the implementation of the new Welfare Reform policy. This Scrutiny Review has been carried out alongside the renewal of the Homelessness Strategy 2008 to 2013 with findings and recommendations being incorporated into the Homelessness Strategy 2014 to 2018. This strategy is still to be finalised and approved by Cabinet.

The review identified a wide variety of information, in different formats and locations to assist people who are homeless or who are potentially becoming homeless. There appeared to be a lack of understanding with clients and with Members regarding the 28 Day Rule.

Information was provided about the amount of rent arrears owing compared with previous year's figures. The figures are comparable and the conclusion reached is that it is too early to draw any conclusions about the impact of the introduction of the Welfare Reform measures around "Bedroom Tax".

The number of emergency bed spaces is low and there is no direct hostel provision in Rotherham. There is also a lack of support for women and young people with learning difficulties in finding accommodation and employment.

Feedback from tenants who have used the crash pads was positive. Suggestions were made on how to improve the experience.

Rough sleeping is not a major issue in Rotherham. There is a 24 hour telephone service available, however if the person is not in the priority need category, then no immediate help can be provided.

Plans to repopulate the town centre through redevelopment of properties or new build, has been halted due to the effects of the economic downturn in the country. Discussions identified the need for any initiative to tackle the issue of homelessness would be better received if ideas were included at the planning/development stage rather than added on at a later stage.

Currently no comprehensive empty properties strategy is in place which would address the issue of bringing private sector properties back into use. The Private Sector Housing Officer has limited resources and work consists of providing advice to private property owners. Loans to bring empty properties back into use are available to private owners from the national agency, Empty Homes, as well as grants made available to social housing providers by the Home & Communities Agency.

There is a Landlords Forum in operation; however the members are not usually the ones with empty properties. Other forms of communications used to contact private sector landlords have included the publication of a newsletter and the creation of web pages on the Council's website.

A partnership between the Council and Action Housing, providing opportunities to support apprenticeship places, has resulted in the refurbishment of 4 empty properties for habitation by the apprentices. The option to extend this scheme to other housing associations could be explored.

1. Why Members wanted to undertake this review

The need for this review was identified as part of the service review and improvement process by Neighbourhoods and Adult Services, and was therefore referred to the Improving Places Select Commission by the Cabinet Member for Safe and Attractive Neighbourhoods and an initial report was considered at the June 2013 meeting of the Select Commission.

In particular, members were concerned about the Implementation of the new Welfare Reform policy in particular Universal Credit and the “bedroom tax”. This Scrutiny Review was undertaken along side the renewal of the Homelessness Strategy 2008 to 2013, and findings or recommendations were incorporated into the Homelessness Strategy 2014 to 2018.

The scope of the Scrutiny Review was to determine which are the most successful prevention strategies to help people remain in their own homes and what methods are available to obtain alternative accommodation.

The scope of the review included:

Improving information – Short term focus

- What information is there for customers who are faced with homelessness (leaflets, website, self-help other agencies)
- Where can customers get advice and information to prevent homelessness
- Do customers understand the information provided – especially verbal when referring to being homeless earlier than the 28 day legislative rule on taking cases.

Sub Regional Collaboration – long term focus

- Bed spaces/direct hostels.
- Out of hours emergency phone

Temporary accommodation – short term focus

- Availability and quality of temporary accommodation/direct access hostels – how does a customer in Rotherham access a bed space and what is their experience when they get there
- Crash pads, locations, standards and information available to the customer when they arrive.

As the review progressed, the following issues were included.

To identify plans to re-populate the town centre(s) via empty properties, flats over the shops etc.

The partnerships with private sector landlords to improve housing choices and the potential impact on the prevention of homelessness

An update on efforts to enforce and improve standards within the private rented sector

2. Method

The methodology used to undertake this review included the members of the panel meeting with and receiving evidence from the following officers:

- Jill Jones, Homelessness Manager, Neighbourhoods and Adults Social Services (NAS)
- Paul Benson Private Sector Housing Officer, (NAS)
- Tom Bell Strategic Housing Investment Manager (NAS)
- Uzma Sattar Programme Co-ordinator (NAS)

Consultations were carried out on both the housing strategy and the homelessness strategy, by the Housing Options Managers with customers, members and stakeholders.

Statistical information was provided by Housing Option Team in relation to homelessness statistics and the Income Team in relation to the effect of welfare reforms.

Members of the panel went on a site visit to two locations in the borough to examine the various kinds of crash pads available for use by Key Choices. One of these included meeting with some tenants, who shared their experiences with review group members.

The Review Group received a report on the achievements of the Homelessness Strategy 2008 – 2013 and proposed actions to be included in the renewed strategy for 2014 – 2018. The review group made detailed input to this stage of developing the new strategy. This report is the final stage of the review to outline the findings, conclusions and recommendations.

3. Background

Definition of homelessness

The term “homelessness” is often perceived as people who “sleep rough”. However most of our statistics on homelessness relate to the statutorily homeless i.e. those households which meet specific criteria of priority need set out in legislation and to whom a homelessness duty has been accepted by the local authority.

Such households are rarely homeless in the literal sense of being without a roof over their heads, but are more likely to be threatened with the loss of, or are unable to continue living in their current accommodation.

Statutory Homelessness

Each local housing authority is required to consider housing needs within its area, including the needs of the homeless households, to whom local authorities have a statutory duty to provide assistance.

The Housing Act 1977, Housing Act 1996 and the Homelessness Act 2002 place statutory duties on local housing authorities to ensure that advice and assistance to households who are homeless or threatened with homelessness are available free of charge.

A “main homelessness duty” is owed where the authority is satisfied that the applicant is eligible for assistance, unintentionally homeless and falls within a specified priority need group.

The “priority need groups” include households with dependent children or a pregnant woman and people who are vulnerable in some way e.g. because of mental illness or physical disability.

In 2002 an Order made under the 1996 Act extended the priority need categories to include applicants

- aged 16 or 17
- aged 18 to 20 who were previously in care
- vulnerable as a result of time spent in care, in custody or in HM Armed Forces
- vulnerable as a result of having to flee their home because of violence or the threat of violence.

Where a main duty is owed, the authority must ensure that suitable accommodation is available for the applicant and his or her household. The duty continues until a settled housing solution becomes available for them, or some other circumstance brings the duty to an end. Where households are found to be intentionally homeless, or not in priority need, the authority must make an assessment of their housing needs and provide advice and assistance to help them find accommodation for themselves.

Under the Homelessness Act 2002, the local authority must have in place a strategy for preventing homelessness. The strategy applies to those people who are at risk of becoming homeless in addition to the people in the priority categories listed above. Rotherham offers housing options and advice along with helping to relieve homelessness in cases where someone has been found to be homeless but is not owed a duty to secure accommodation under the homelessness legislation.

Homelessness prevention means providing people with the ways and means to address their housing and other needs to avoid homelessness.

Homelessness relief is where an authority has been unable to prevent homelessness but helps someone to secure accommodation, even though the authority is under no statutory obligation to do so.

Work on homelessness prevention forms part of the Council’s Housing Strategy and links closely with the Supporting People Strategy.

Source:- Draft Rotherham’s Homelessness Strategy 2014-2018

4. Findings

The findings are presented under the main objectives identified for this review.

Improving information – Short term focus

- What information is there for customers who are faced with homelessness (leaflets, website, self-help other agencies)
- Where can customers get advice and information to prevent homelessness

Members of the review group received information and evidence about how members of the public access information regarding homelessness and finding appropriate accommodation. This includes assistance via;

Website

Leaflets

Self help organisations

Face to face/ phone enquiries at the Property Shop

Website

Housing Solutions Team provide assistance with prevention of homelessness. They do this via access to private rented sector accommodation, assistance with loans for rent in advance, assistance with applications to Robond, referrals to money advice, referrals to medical priority, referrals to mediation, mortgage rescue scheme, Sanctuary Housing, assistance with Council Allocation Policy, assistance with loans to prevent eviction and repossession

Employment Solutions

This includes:

- Government Mortgage Rescue Scheme
- Home Owner Mortgage Support
- Liaising with landlords
- Employment – Access to training and Education
- Careers options
- Job search
- Volunteering opportunities

Leaflets

A wide selection of leaflets are available in the Property Shop and at libraries across the borough. Appendix 1 – Information leaflets

- Do customers understand the information provided – especially verbal when referring to being homeless earlier than the 28 day legislative rule on taking cases.

Members of the review group received an explanation of the definition of 28 day rule and recognised that early intervention is key to providing a solution.

They also noted that promoting an understanding of this to potentially homeless clients was important as anecdotal evidence suggested that people felt they could not seek support until this rule applied.

28 Day Rule.

Under s.184 of the 1996 Act, if a housing authority has reason to believe that a person applying to the authority for accommodation or assistance in obtaining accommodation may be homeless or threatened with homelessness, the authority must make such inquiries as are necessary to satisfy itself whether the applicant is eligible of assistance and if so, whether any duty, and if so what duty, is owed to that person under part 7 of the 1996 Act.

A homelessness case is taken if someone is homeless or threatened with homelessness with 28 days. Where possible, during this period, investigations are carried out to identify if the homelessness can be avoided, by, for example, negotiations with family or friends, or discussions with a landlord, to resolve, if possible why a person has to leave their accommodation.

If homelessness cannot be avoided, then the housing options team attempt to find suitable and affordable accommodation for the household.

Where someone is already homeless and our investigations find that someone has nowhere to stay that night, temporary accommodation will be found where a priority need exists for investigations to be continued

Where there is no priority need, advice is provided on all housing options available to the particular circumstances of that person, including assistance on hostel accommodation, shared accommodation and private rented accommodation.

Rent Arrears and Bedroom Tax Statistics and Information:

Source RMBC Income Team

Homelessness Scrutiny Review 2014		
Figures to be included in the final report to Cabinet 21 May 2014		
	2012/13	2013/14
Total amount of rent arrears at year end.	£1,340,810.00	£1,903,866.00
Bedroom Tax rent arrears	N/A	£305,568.51
Total number of tenants in arrears	N/A	1872
Total number of tenants in credit	N/A	950
Total number of tenants with a nil balance	N/A	385
Total number of tenants with Bedroom Tax to pay	N/A	2098
<i>of which are in arrears</i>	<i>N/A</i>	<i>1240</i>
Total number of tenants with BT and rent to pay	N/A	1089
<i>of which are in arrears</i>	<i>N/A</i>	<i>625</i>

The information noted above will act as a comparator figure and will be updated in April 2015 to provide useable data.

The following table shows the number of monthly face to face enquiries conducted by the Property Shop.

Action	Nov-13	Dec-13	Jan-14
Home visits to people threatened with homelessness(these visits are to people who may have been served with notice or are under threat of eviction)	48	48	48
Total number of customers interviewed in the property Shop	681	518	787
Number of those enquiries related to some aspect of homelessness	135	67	158
Figures shown as a percentage of the total	20.00%	13.00%	20.00%

Members noted therefore, that there is insufficient evidence at this stage to confirm an impact on homelessness statistics as a result of the welfare reform agenda. The concern was still significant enough to warrant the continued monitoring of these statistics and the identification of any emerging patterns.

Members also noted that there is a need to continue to raise awareness of homelessness as an issue for members of the public and for other elected members who may come across this increasingly in their wards.

Sub Regional Collaboration – longer term focus.

- Bed spaces/direct hostels

Members were made aware of the low number of bed spaces available in direct hostels. Rush House provides 3 emergency bed spaces for referrals by the homelessness team along with 9 bedsits. There are also 29 bed spaces in shared houses and 9 flats for single occupation which provides support for single people. There is no direct access accommodation dedicated to Rotherham. Members considered the potential for working in collaboration with sub regional partners with regard to available bed spaces. The review group attempted to facilitate discussions with colleagues in Sheffield as part of its remit but this proved unsuccessful therefore

they concluded that more sub regional work needs to be continued after this review to attempt to resolve some of these issues.

- Out of Hours Emergency Phone

This telephone service is available 24 hours a day. An initial assessment of the caller's situation is undertaken, however, if they are not deemed to be a priority need, then no immediate accommodation can be given. Advice and signposting information can be offered as to where to find help. Members of the review group discussed this service and their experiences of using the service. It was felt that there was some evidence that it was not working as well as it should be, but that this had not been tested thoroughly as part of the review, and noted that rough sleeping was not a big issue in Rotherham. Therefore the review group concluded that this should be reviewed further, with potential options for a sub regional joint service fully explored as part of this.

Temporary accommodation – short term focus

- Availability of temporary accommodation/direct access hostels in Rotherham.

See section on beds spaces and hostels.

- Crash pads, locations, standards and information available.

Members heard about Rotherham's crash pads –There are 25 crash pads available throughout the borough at various locations.

Members visited two of these as part of the review and overall were impressed with the facilities and received very positive feedback about how they have helped families or individuals in crisis. They did, however, note some issues which could be resolved to further enhance this provision including; provision for young children and babies, being escorted to the property, lack of key facilities such as washing machine, assistance with travel costs when being re-located some distance from home community (including schools).

Under this heading, discussions took place about the lack of provision and assistance for young people aged 16 – 25 who may have learning difficulties or mental health problems, who need additional support with finding a home and employment. It was noted that the Scrutiny Review on DWP Benefits Sanctions had identified this as an issue also and had received positive evidence of how a placement in Rush House had helped such a young person putting their life back together and recover from sanctions that had been imposed.

Members also noted a gap in provision of female only accommodation.

- To identify plans to re-populate the town centre(s) via empty properties, flats over the shops etc.

Members received evidence regarding plans to regenerate and populate the town centre. Their concern regarding this was around what plans there are or could be to convert empty properties to accommodate people facing homelessness. The

economic climate has resulted in a slowing/halting of development taking place in the Town Centre. Its full redevelopment has therefore not been completed. Market forces have therefore resulted in developers such as Iliad, renting accommodation instead of selling. The main problem with redevelopment is the lack of gap funding which was used to enable the development of schemes that would be too risky otherwise. The review group were also informed that renovation of vacant properties is very often more costly than new build. The group therefore concluded that any initiatives to tackle homelessness as part of the town centre strategy would need to be built in at an early stage and would need to be developed with partners. They discussed the merits of working with housing associations and other partners such as Groundwork Creswell, to develop a larger version of the HOPE project (referred to elsewhere in this report).

- *The partnerships with private sector landlords to improve housing choices and the potential impact on the prevention of homelessness*

Background.

Members received information from the Private Sector Housing Officer who outlined that within the Council it is his role, without a budget and limited resources, to bring back into use empty properties within the borough. The service mostly consists of providing advice to private property owners.

There is no up to date Empty Property Strategy to deal with managing empty properties, but actions relating to the area of work are included in the Housing Strategy under Commitment 2.

There is evidence that in the current market, owners of empty properties are choosing to keep them empty. Evidence from Council Tax records show that there has been a reduction of 112 properties (28%) from 1st April 2013 to 1st April 2014. It is believed that the majority of these figures are as a direct result of the increase in Council Tax charges of 150% for properties empty for over 2 years.

There are a higher number of empty properties in the more deprived areas in the borough e.g. Maltby and Dinnington.

Initiatives available to help reduce homelessness

- *An update on efforts to enforce and improve standards within the private rented sector.*

Homes & Communities Agency grants are available to assist with refurbishing empty properties, but funding is not available to private sector landlords only to social housing providers, with which to create affordable housing improved to the Governments decency standard. Action Housing have been successful with a bid for £180K over a 3 year period (2013-2015) to bring 18 long term empty properties back into use. Private loans, to refurbish long-term (over 6 months) empty properties are offered to private owners by the national agency, Empty Homes. However, due to the high interest charges and detailed criteria, those owners who have been told of the scheme, have not forwarded an application.

The Council has statutory powers under the Housing Act 2004 to either;

- enforce the sale of an empty property; or
- enable the property to be managed by a social housing provider or private letting agent.

This action can only be taken if there is a charge over the property of £500 or more

The sale of a property can also be forced if the empty property owner has Council Tax arrears.

Rent in Advance (RIA) schemes are available via Key Choices and this scheme enables homelessness clients access alternative private rented accommodation through the provision of the first month's rent and/or bond payment at as an affordable loan. It is anticipated that there will be an increase in homelessness and therefore the demand for such a scheme will also increase when the effects of the welfare reform become apparent.

There is currently a partnership between the Council and Action Housing, the HOPE Project. Action Housing identifies, with the assistance of the Private Sector Housing Officer, long-term and often problematic empty properties which are suitable for large scale refurbishment. Action Housing's apprenticeship programme offers vulnerable clients the opportunity to access skills and education, whilst improving the properties, with the opportunity of residing in the properties when they are complete. This scheme has resulted in 4 empty properties being brought back into use in Maltby. This initiative could be replicated with other private sector owners who would be willing to sell or lease their property to Action Housing. The potential for the Council to lease properties was discussed – this would require a scheme, potentially for Key Choices to administer, and a scheme of this nature would require Cabinet approval. Currently the Council utilises opportunities available through Action Housing for these arrangements

Landlord Forum.

The members of this forum are usually not the ones with long term empty properties. Advice is provided to landlords by the Community Protection Unit on assisting landlord with business plans and phasing refurbishment work to bring properties back into use.

Other forms of communications with private sector landlords were discussed to improve the links with the homelessness team. The publication of a newsletter to over 800 private sector landlords, who house tenants who are benefits claimants, has been used in the past, but lack of resources prevents this from continuing. Potential sponsorship for the newsletter has also been discussed with the Communications Team of the Council who have suggested that sponsorship of the newsletter is viable with the support of the Legal Team and to ensure that those contributing towards the publications are bona fide.

Members considered whether the website was being used enough to improve communications. This would need improving but could be a more cost effective method.

In areas with large numbers of empty properties the opportunity for removing the properties or bringing them back into use is tackled as part of an area based regeneration programme e.g. Canklow. Other than that there is not much to be gained from having a dedicated empty property team and members accepted that lack of

resources made this highly unlikely anyway. They did feel, however that existing resources and teams across the Council could be used in a more co-ordinated and targeted approach to tackle empty properties as an issue across the borough. They also noted with concern that lack of availability of tenancy support for those with private sector tenancies. This role is fulfilled by the Housing Champions for local authority tenants.

5 Conclusions

The conclusions drawn from this review include;

- The Council through various initiatives is working to prevent people becoming homeless. Information, advice and guidance is available through a variety of sources and formats. Continued efforts to raise awareness are required.
- There is no hostel style emergency accommodation available in particular for young people with learning difficulties who may need additional support in other areas of their life. Also there is no 'female only' accommodation.
- Emergency accommodation is available throughout the borough and positive feedback and suggestions for improvements from families who have had need to use it would be beneficial.
- The current slump in the economy has slowed the development of and take up of empty private sector accommodation in the town centre.
- The lack of finances and resources available to the Council to tackle homelessness has led to a different approach towards tackling the issue, that is, mainly working with private sector landlords and social housing providers. There is a need to focus on what incentives are available to the private sector and how to enable them to work in partnership with the Council.
- The Welfare Reform agenda has the potential in the near future to have a significant impact on homelessness and services working towards preventing homelessness. Therefore, the potential impact needs to be monitored and services must be able to cope with a potential upturn in numbers.

6 Recommendations.

1. That the Homelessness Section should undertake work to raise public awareness of the '28 day rule'. Specific awareness raising/training should be undertaken with elected members to increase understanding of the implications of these changes.
2. Information and trends regarding rent arrears in relation to Welfare Reform "bedroom tax" should be monitored and reported to members at the Improving Places Select Commission meeting on a half yearly basis by the Homelessness Manager.
3. The Private Sector Housing Officer to explore the option of issuing a newsletter to private sector landlords to promote the benefits of the private rented sector and how they can contribute to reducing homelessness.

4. Improve communications between the Homelessness Team and private sector landlords via the Private Sector Housing Officer, holding regular meetings and being proactive in reducing the number of empty properties.
5. The Homelessness Section continue to explore potential partnership options to address the lack of bedspace provision, particularly for women and young people who need additional support.
6. Explore the above and other potential opportunities for joint service provision sub regionally via the South Yorkshire Leader's meeting.
7. Develop a coherent, cross service approach to tackling empty properties within the Rotherham Borough utilising existing resources
8. Consider ways to provide tenancy support to private sector tenants within the Rotherham Borough.
9. The Homelessness Manager to arrange implementing the suggested improvements to the crash pad provision
10. The Neighbourhood Investment Team to look at building provision to both prevent and tackle homelessness in future regeneration schemes at the planning stages and consider ways that this could incorporate an extension to the HOPE project or other similar projects.
11. For the Council to explore how it invests in property and assets with the aim of reducing homelessness and out of authority placements.

7. Thanks

Our thanks go to the tenants who allowed the Review Group into their home and gave us their honest opinion and suggestions.

Thank you also to the officers from RMBC

- **Jill Jones**, Homelessness Manager, Neighbourhoods and Adults Social Services (NAS)
- **Paul Benson** Private Sector Housing Officer, (NAS)
- **Tom Bell** Strategic Housing Investment Manager (NAS)
- **Uzma Sattar** Programme Co-ordinator (NAS)

Along with members of the Housing Options Team and the Income Team whom have taken part in this review by contributing their time, efforts, expertise and information.

8. Background papers

Initial report identifying the need for this piece of work

Rotherham Homelessness Strategy 2008 – 2013

9 Appendices

Appendix 1- List of leaflets available in Key Choices