

Norwich City Council
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
ITEM 4

REPORT for meeting to be held on 15 January 2014

Review of challenges and responses to rough sleeping and homelessness in Norwich

- Summary:** The report summarises the background to this topic and the themes that came out of the programme of engagement and learning that members of the committee carried out.
- Conclusions:** The report should enable the scrutiny committee to determine any recommendations they would wish to make on the council's or other organisations approaches to rough sleeping and homelessness.
- Recommendation:** To agree any recommendations.
- Contact Officer:** Russell O'Keefe, Executive head of strategy, people and neighbourhoods
Phone: 01603 212908
Email: russello'keefe@norwich.gov.uk

Report

Background

1. Nationally rough sleeping has been on the increase. Since 2010, counts and estimates have taken place in each local authority in England. At the last Norwich count conducted on the 12 November 2014, 13 individuals were found bedded down and rough sleeping in Norwich. In 2013 we saw 5 people.
2. Over the last three years, the council commissioned CAPS outreach team, provided by the charity St Martins Housing Trust, has carried out over 1,500 assessments of individuals either threatened with, or who are homeless.
3. Norwich is the centre of a wide rural area and people from outlying districts who are threatened with homelessness will come into Norwich to access a wide variety of services that provide help for people who are sleeping rough. These services include hostels, day centres, free food provision, substance misuse services, other accommodation, statutory services such as mental health, general health services and emergency health care. Unlike some other areas, there is no local connection criteria placed on services. Of 13 rough sleepers seen on the recent rough sleeper count, 10 were new to Norwich.
4. There are a large range of possible reasons that can lead to rough sleeping and homelessness. Also, single homeless people do not enjoy the same level of protection, under the law, from homelessness that other households do, specifically those with young families and dependent children and/ or households with a vulnerable member. Single homeless people who do not have the support networks due to relationship breakdown or personal crisis can lead to a person ending up sleeping rough on the streets, squatting or living in supported accommodation.
5. The council takes a pro-active approach to dealing with rough-sleeping through the employment of a specialist rough-sleeper co-ordinator who seeks to actively manage/co-ordinate rough sleeping and homeless services. This is an approach designed to minimize rough sleeping through intensive management of rough sleeping and of hostel bed spaces.
6. The rough-sleeper co-ordinator works closely with agencies to fulfil both a strategic and operational role, ensuring a locally co-ordinated approach to the issues. This includes managing the MARS (multi agency rough sleeper) group, which ensures a person based approach to resolving each individual rough-sleeper's situation.
7. The rough-sleeper co-ordinator has introduced innovations such as a hostels eviction protocol, reconnections approach and homeless services maps.
8. While the assistance that the council can provide will depend on each individual's circumstances and needs, a range of help is available including hostel referral, reconnection, specialist housing advice, statutory homeless application, rent deposits, the housing register and hostel move-on, signposting to other services (health, social care), the LEAP project, food vouchers, rough

sleeping kits, homeless services maps and SWEP (severe weather emergency provision).

9. There are 260 hostel beds in Norwich, by far the greatest number in the region. The hostel system in Norwich provides a key service in finding temporary housing for the majority of people who find themselves homeless in the area (including those who are street homeless).
10. Once a client has accessed the hostel system, usually through the direct access hostel at Bishopbridge House, support packages can be put in place and clients can move through the hostel system. This system is managed through a weekly accommodation meeting chaired by the council's rough sleeper co-ordinator, to ensure that occupation of hostel beds is maximized.
11. This council's Home Options housing allocations policy contains a 'move-on' agreement enabling hostel clients that are deemed ready to maintain a tenancy to be awarded gold banding to ensure a managed transition into social housing and a through-flow within the hostel system.

Programme of learning and engagement

12. To inform scrutiny committee members understanding of this topic a programme of learning and engagement was developed with input from service users, wherever possible. This was then carried out in November and December 2014.
13. The first of these sessions was organised by a local big issue seller and involved an informal focus group with a number of people he knew who had experience of rough sleeping and/ or homelessness. Key themes that were raised as part of this session included:
 - Situations of individuals are often very complex.
 - People have a range of different needs.
 - It would be better if there were more options available.
 - People felt hostels could take a more individualised approach.
 - Hostels can be difficult for some people trying not to use alcohol or substances.
 - There are often financial problems e.g benefit sanctions from the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP).
 - People need social networks and people they can trust.
 - People aren't always sure what information they need.
14. The second of these sessions involved a visit to City Reach who provide gp services to rough sleepers and people who are homeless, amongst others. A meeting was held with the service manager, a gp and a couple of former service users with representatives of two other charities in attendance. Key themes that were raised as part of this session included:
 - The service is highly thought of by service users and very well used.
 - The service now works well with the council and other local organisations and communication and join up was generally good.

- Historically there had been problems with hospital discharge but these had improved.
- People don't always understand / agree with the local connection and priority need requirements under homelessness law and therefore why the council does not have a statutory duty to them.
- Leaflets and information have improved but people don't always access them.
- A peer support scheme could work well in Norwich with Groundswell providing a good example from elsewhere. This is being explored by City reach.
- There would be benefits of an accreditation scheme for all organisations and community groups working with rough sleepers and homeless people in Norwich, with service user involvement, to ensure they are all acting appropriately and giving good advice to people etc.

15. The third of these sessions involved a visit to Bishopbridge House which is 32 bed direct access hostel in Norwich run by the charity St Martins Housing Trust. This included a tour, discussion with the hostel manager and a service user and a meeting with the CAPs Team (also run by St Martins) who the council funds to provide outreach services to rough sleepers in Norwich. Key themes that were raised as part of this session included:

- Welfare reform particularly DWP sanctions have had a very negative effect on people.
- Access to drug and alcohol services can now be difficult with funding reductions.
- Access to mental health support is becoming very difficult with removal of the homelessness mental health social workers and wider service reductions.
- Generally social care support has reduced with the amount of time being allocated to people less than before.
- Increasing number of people coming through the system multiple times because of the service reductions referred to in the bullet points above.
- St Martins are piloting a housing first scheme, where certain people with the right support packages put in place, don't go into a hostel first but straight into move on accommodation.
- Overall, the move on system generally works well with priority given as part of the council's housing allocations scheme once people are ready for independent living.
- A lot of people continue to move on successfully through the hostel system and then into move on accommodation and finally then into independent accommodation that they successfully sustain.
- People have to be ready to access help and live in a hostel environment.
- The hostel and the caring approach of staff is highly thought of and appreciated.
- Hostel rules are not too restrictive with people able to come and go as they please.
- People with a history of arson are particularly difficult to accommodate.
- The perceptions of people and services in the media are often wrong.
- Improvements in mental health services would make a huge difference.

- Large numbers of homeless people travel to Norwich because of the services and accommodation that is here.
- Often other councils direct people to come to Norwich because of the services and amount of social housing that is in the City. There was discussion about whether there would be ways to get other councils to contribute directly to the costs of housing in Norwich.
- Relationships and communication between St Martins and the council are generally very good with the council's rough sleeper coordinator playing a key role in joining things up.
- There will always be a need for more social housing as demand significantly outstrips supply in Norwich.

16. The fourth of these sessions involved a visit to YMCA Norwich, a 34 bed direct access hostel for young people in Norwich. This included a discussion with their chief executive and hostel manager and service users. Key themes that were raised as part of this session included:

- Family breakdown is one of the key reasons people access the hostel.
- Welfare reform has caused problems e.g DWP sanctions and there are concerns over future changes and their effect on the hostel and client group e.g benefit arrangements for those in hostels and for those under 25 years old.
- Relationship with the council and communication generally good with some very good examples of partnership working e.g leasing of properties for move on accommodation etc.
- Overall system and move on arrangement generally works well but they could always use more accommodation options.
- It was felt that named housing benefit staff who would deal with hostel matters could improve resolving any housing benefits issues with the council.
- Hostel valued by service users with staff considered caring and approachable.
- Some issues raised by service users over whether the council refers young people effectively to the hostel.

17. The fifth session in the programme involved a briefing and discussion on the council's approach to rough sleeping and homelessness. A copy of the slides from that session can be found at Annex A.

Development of a joint greater Norwich rough sleeping and supported accommodation strategy 2015-2020

18. For the first time a joint greater Norwich rough sleeping and supported accommodation strategy is being developed. The strategy will be a sub-strategy to the greater Norwich homelessness strategy 2015-2020. The strategy will cover the district council areas of Broadland, Norwich and South Norfolk councils. Although rough sleeping is mainly seen in the main City centre of Norwich, as stated earlier, we know that people from outlying districts will come into the City to access a wide variety of services that provide help for people who are sleeping rough.

19. The aim of this strategy is to prevent rough sleeping taking place and where it does happen to ensure it is for the shortest possible time.

20. There are a range of significant challenges that most areas face in regards to preventing and addressing rough sleeping. We will be looking to try and further tackle these as part of the new strategy working with other organisations across the area. These include:

- **Recent increase in rough sleeping levels**
- **Entrenched rough sleepers**
- **Increase in number of 'new' rough sleepers who are not known to services (50 in the last quarter)** – This may be because other areas provision is being stretched or they are applying local connection rules to accessing services
- **Rough sleepers who do not meet the increased thresholds of mental health services/ adult social care /learning disabilities team** meaning that people with lower level but significant needs can't access them.
- **Limited access to suitable move on accommodation with the necessary supporting services for people with multiple or very complex needs** – We have clients who sometimes can have dual or triple diagnosis problems such as mental health, physical health, and alcohol and substance misuse issues. There are not always the necessary services and support available for this client group.
- **People with low support needs using provision they do not need** – we need to consider other forms of housing such as lodging schemes to help this client group. Another consideration could be to look at flat share schemes.
- **Reconnections to other areas**
- **Rough sleepers with no recourse to public funds or access to housing benefit**
- **Improved partnership working with our mental health/criminal justice system/probation.**
- **Aftercare element (floating support) once someone comes off the street and pathway into housing** – There aren't always enough specialist services that provide this help. St Martins Housing Trust does have an intensive resettlement team but this can only support 16 clients. The current floating support contract with Stonham, commissioned by Norfolk County Council, does not always provide the level of cover needed.
- **Increase in youth homelessness especially in services where young people are not normally seen**

- **Public perceptions of rough sleeping**

21. The strategy will be going out for consultation during Spring 2015 and there will be a series of consultation meetings with service users and partner organisations to get their first-hand experience so that this can inform the action plan of the strategy. Recommendations made by scrutiny committee as part of this review, will be used to inform the draft strategy.