

MINUTES OF HOMELESSNESS SCRUTINY SUB-GROUP

12 OCTOBER 2016

PRESENT

Members of the Group: Councillors Mrs Garcia, Claire Edwards, Mrs New, Roodhouse and Sandison

Officers: John Hier (Housing and Regeneration Manager) and Veronika Beckova (Democratic Services Officer)

1. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

RESOLVED THAT – Councillor Roodhouse be appointed Chair of the sub-group for the 2016/17 municipal year.

2. BRIEFING PAPER

The Housing and Regeneration Manager presented a briefing paper on the increase of homelessness in Rugby and how it can be addressed.

The following comments were made during the briefing:

- Homelessness figures for 2016/17 are estimated at 180 to 200.
- A six week analysis is underway to understand the increase in homelessness. The council is working with Warwickshire County Council's Housing Related Support Services Steering Group and other local authorities.
- Figures have gone up but there has also been an increase in preventions. The council is working with Citizens' Advice Bureau and together they have achieved 397 preventions last year.
- Preventing homelessness is key for the council and this is reflected in the Rugby Homelessness Strategy developed with the Homelessness Forum. Priorities are:
 - Understand housing need
 - Sustain tenancies and prevent homelessness
 - Provide more options in the private sector for people in housing need
- The Housing and Regeneration Manager is meeting with Coventry and Rugby Clinical Commission Group to discuss their priorities going forward, specifically in relation to mental health provision.
- The Housing Options Team is seeing more single people with multiple issues including mental health and substance misuse.
- One of the key projects carried out is the ASH (Access to Supporting Housing) Project which was funded by the DCLG from the West Midlands Prevention funding pot. This project provides a floating support for young people (under 25s) and people with low level mental health issues. There are a lot of vulnerable people that do not meet the criteria in terms of mental health services. The funding is for two years for four support workers across

Warwickshire and ends in June 2017. Officers are looking into ways of extending the funding or acquire new funding.

- A large number of households are losing private sector accommodation (served with Notice to Quit). The cost of private sector accommodation in Rugby has gone up significantly over the last four or five years. More landlords are also splitting their properties into HMOs which generates more income for them.
- The council has 15 units of accommodation in the Private Sector Leasing Scheme. 6 more units are due in October and another four in November.
- Incentives are key to attract private landlords. Under the Private Sector Leasing Scheme, the council guarantees the rent, provides the management of the property and takes all the hassle away from the landlord.
- Supply of affordable housing is limited. The council is looking at redesignations of properties as a third of housing stock is sheltered.
- The Homeless Reduction Bill may have a significant impact on local authorities. The council might have obligations to prevent homelessness in a lot more cases not only those in priority need.

During the briefing, the following questions were asked:

Is there more leniency towards people with mental health issues?

Decisions are made on their priority which is based on the legislation. The Housing Act 1997 Part 7 states that councils have a duty to provide suitable housing for priority need groups. The priority need groups include people with mental health problems.

When will the six week analysis be completed by? Once completed, will the data be available to the sub-group? Does the analysis take into account the waiting list?

The analysis is hoped to be completed by end of October and the data can be shared with the sub-group. The data will also be shared with the WCC Housing Related Support Services Steering Group. The analysis is a good starting point to understand why the council is getting more approaches which is a concern across Warwickshire.

At the moment, the analysis is only looking at single people. We can provide the breakdown of each housing band. It is important to understand the demographic picture.

Under the Homelessness Act 2002, staff is not qualified to make a diagnosis of an individual's needs.

Medical records would be requested from health organisations before a decision is made. Most people who are street homeless have some kind of contact with organisations. If they don't, we can assist them with accessing services.

Is the Landlords Forum still fully operational?

Yes, it is. Earlier this year, we have also introduced a Private Sector Leasing Scheme which includes Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs).

How does someone make themselves homeless?

There is a variety of reasons including not paying rent, anti-social behaviour, receiving a Notice to Quit, etc. The council would have to determine the duty to them under the Homelessness Regulations.

What happens to a family if they become homeless?

The council has a duty to advise Social Services and Children's Services when a family becomes homeless. If a family was to be evicted, we would let Children's Services know that we are going to evict a family on a particular date and we would involve them as soon as possible (usually, two months in advance).

We try to work with individuals and families, who have a history of struggling with paying rents or anti-social behaviour, early on. Evictions in our stock are relatively rare. We probably do 8 to 10 evictions a year from a stock of nearly 4,000 properties. We would look at affordability too.

Each situation is assessed on a cases by case basis to understand the circumstances under which an individual or a family has become homeless and if it was intentional (withheld rent payments or not responding to housing benefit information requests) or unintentional.

What happens if a family occupying an accommodation in the private sector is given a Notice to Quit? What is the council's responsibility? What if they have debts?

They will be put on the register or may even be accepted as homeless. We would need to look at the circumstances of their debts and what are they doing to clear these.

Considering that the numbers are now going up, are you insisting that tenants have a possession order against them before they are considered by the council?

We advise them on their legal rights. It's up to the tenant if they wish to seek independent legal advice.

Does Rugby have a night-time homeless shelter?

Rugby does not have a direct access emergency accommodation. There is a winter night shelter which is open from 1 December until 31 March and operated by Hope4. Churches are opened throughout this period. 15 spaces are available for each night and they are usually full.

Going forward, we would like to look at how we can work with Hope4. We have a drop-in with them every month as does P3.

Office for National Statistics (ONS) has quoted a figure of 44 homeless people in Rugby. Is the ONS measuring a different thing to the council?

I have not seen the ONS figures. The street homelessness figure of 19 people was a result of the council's one off count on a night in November 2015. The next count

will be carried out in November 2016 together with Hope4, P3, Town Rangers and the Police.

In terms of our own property, I was a bit surprised by the number of people being put into temporary accommodation at the council's multi-storey flats.

People that have been accepted as homeless are on non-secure tenancies because they have arrears. The Allocations Policy states that we can't offer a secure tenancy to people with arrears but under the homeless legislation we can't refuse them.

In terms of the under 35s, is information available on the number of people that are likely to be affected? Some housing benefits are also changing for the 16s to 25s. How can private landlords accept these people if they cannot pay their rent?

Yes, information is available. As far as landlords are concerned, they are a high risk. Reality is that they are approaching the council and we have to find accommodation for them.

The numbers in Band 1 (highest priority for housing) has increased to around 100 from around 30 a couple of years ago. This has implications for everyone else. Non-priority cases are now waiting a lot longer.

During an end to end review, which was carried out a few years back, a decision has been made where people with no housing need were cut from the register. This brought the numbers down from around 1,500 to around 800.

Is the tenancy support service extended to the private sector?

It's only for people in council housing. We recognise that people do need additional support. One of the schemes in place is the Tenancy Ready training which teaches people how to budget, write a CV, etc.

The Tenancy Ready training is available to anyone who approaches the council. This scheme is funded from the West Midlands Prevention funding pot via the DCLG. It's a short term scheme and time restricted for two years. We have trained 22 people so far in 2016.

Around 220 empty homes have been identified in Rugby. Have these been looked at as an option for additional housing?

We certainly can look at the empty houses but it is important to be mindful of the fact that some of these properties have been empty for a very long time and the council will have to spend a substantial amount of money to bring them up to standards.

As the number of Right to Buys has gone up to around 13 a year, will there be more money to use?

The more Right to Buys, the more money the council will get but obviously we are losing our own stock.

How do you know whether the ASH Project has been successful?

We have monitoring forms which are looking at the number of people sustaining their tenancies for six months and longer, the number of people that have been prevented from accessing secondary mental health services, etc.

With regards to the Severe Weather Protocol, would any properties that have been acquired via the Private Sector Leasing Scheme be used?

No because it's housing for a very short term.

Is Private Sector Leasing Scheme guidance available?

Yes, it is and can be shared with the group.

Is the council still working with crisis support?

Yes, we make referrals. We are currently working with Stoneham. In terms of domestic abuse, the contract is going out for tender.

3. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The sub-group agreed the following programme of work:

Visits to Hope4, Home Group and P3 will be arranged via email.

Shadowing sessions in the Housing Options Team and at Hope4 will be arranged via email.

The next meeting of the sub-group will be held at 5.30pm on Wednesday 23 November where the sub-group will invite representatives from the Citizens' Advice Bureau, Hope4, St Basils and P3 to the meeting to discuss what solutions and support can be provided and how partnerships can be developed.

An invitation will be extended to the Private Sector Accommodation Officer and a Private Landlord (if available) to attend the meeting.

Further supporting information as requested during the briefing and detail on funding will be circulated by the Housing and Regeneration Manager prior to the meeting.

A further meeting of the sub-group will be held at 5.30pm on Thursday 12 January 2017.

CHAIR