

BRIGHTON & HOVE CITY COUNCIL
SCRUTINY PANEL ON HOMELESSNESS
2.00pm 7 FEBRUARY 2013
COMMITTEE ROOM 1, HOVE TOWN HALL

MINUTES

Present: Councillor Wealls (Chair)

Also in attendance: Councillor Sykes

Other Members present: Councillors

PART ONE

5. PROCEDURAL BUSINESS

5A Declarations of Interest

5.1 There were none.

5B Exclusion of Press and Public

5.2 In accordance with section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, it was considered whether the press and public should be excluded from the meeting during the consideration of any items contained in the agenda, having regard to the nature of the business to be transacted and the nature of the proceedings and the likelihood as to whether, if members of the press and public were present, there would be disclosure to them of confidential or exempt information as defined in section 100I (1) of the said Act.

5.3 RESOLVED –that the press and public be not excluded from the meeting.

6. MINUTES

6.1 RESOLVED – that the minutes of the scrutiny panel meeting on 25 January 2013 be approved.

7. CHAIR'S COMMUNICATIONS

2.1 The Chair welcomed witnesses to the panel meeting.

8. EVIDENCE FROM WITNESSES

8.1 The witnesses at this meeting were:

- **Bec Davison (BD)**, Deputy Director South, CRI
- **Ellie Reed (ER)**, Complex Needs Social Worker, CRI
CRI is a national organisation providing services around drugs, alcohol, antisocial behaviour, domestic violence and rough sleeping. CRI has been contracted to work with rough sleepers in Brighton & Hove for the past 12 years, and also provides non-clinical substance misuse services across the city.
- **John Child (JC)**, Deputy Service Director, Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust (SPFT)
SPFT provides statutory mental health and substance misuse services to people across Sussex.
- **Sara Emerson (SE)**, Off The Fence
Off The Fence is a small, local community organisation providing help and support to homeless people. Off The Fence also helps to house some people, including people with no local connection (in partnership with Emmaus).
- **David Richards (DR)**, service user
Mr Richards is a local homeless person.
- **John Routledge (JR)**, Project Co-ordinator, SURE
SURE seeks to bring together local authorities across Sussex to co-ordinate their approaches to dealing with single homeless people.
- **Sarah Gorton (SG)**, Homeless Link
Homeless Link is a national representative body for organisations involved in homelessness
- **Narinder Sundar (NS)**, Commissioning Manager, BHCC Housing
- **Richard Scott (RS)**, a local resident

8.2 Increasing numbers of rough sleepers. BD told members that CRI operates 'very assertive outreach' engaging with and supporting rough sleepers, but discouraging rough sleeping as an option. Historically CRI has been successful in maintaining a relatively low number of rough sleepers in the city, despite there being a very high throughput – i.e. there are lots of people rough sleeping, but most are quickly diverted into other services. However, the past two years have seen a significant increase in numbers; in large part this is clearly due to the economic situation, with many new rough sleepers part of an emerging demographic of low needs/work-ready homeless people who don't have the money for a deposit, and lack the social capital to avoid rough sleeping. In general, services targeted at this cohort are very effective – this group of people needs help with deposits etc. rather than traditional homeless support.

8.3 Social capital. BD noted that there seemed to be a general problem around social capital: where it had previously typically taken the average homeless person seven years to

exhaust their social capital and become a rough sleeper, this was currently taking more like a year. This is a national trend, but has impacted disproportionately in Brighton & Hove, due to high housing costs and other problems associated with gaining tenancies. Attention needs to be given to why social capital has diminished to such a degree, and what can be done to reverse the decline – e.g. identify good practice in local communities and promulgate it.

8.4 Local connection. BD noted that there have always been a proportion of homeless people with no local connection to Brighton & Hove, but that in recent times it has proven much harder than before to re-connect these clients with their localities, often because other local authorities are reluctant to accept their duties to house. This can create a back-log, as Brighton & Hove will not relocate homeless people until there is appropriate support in place for them.

8.5 High needs clients. BD told members that there was a small group of homeless people with very complex needs who had a disproportionate impact on the local area. This group requires very intensive professionally-led case coordination from expert social workers and other professionals. Case coordination is key because this client group typically needs support from many different services. As these users may be distrustful of statutory services, there may be a key role for the community sector in providing some of this co-ordination. The group also needs to be able to access secure, stable accommodation if the support services are to have a chance of working effectively, which is not always the case.

8.6 Hostels and clients with complex needs. NS added that many people in this client group struggled in a hostel environment: e.g. living closely with others and having to adhere to rules of behaviour - but there is often little alternative accommodation. ED gave an example of a client with 30+ hostel evictions; it was clear that this client could not live successfully in a hostel environment, but might, with appropriate levels of support, be able to manage to live in a flat, where he would be away from other drugs users and wouldn't have to comply with hostel rules etc. This client was currently being housed in a 'training flat' (used to facilitate people's transition from band 2 supported accommodation to more independent living), and this was working well, but arranging this had proved needlessly challenging. The pathway for progressing through the hostel system and accessing band 3 (unsupported) accommodation requires clients to have lived successfully in band 2 (hostel) accommodation – but whilst this might make sense for most clients, it clearly does not for those who are unable to cope with hostels but might be able to live successfully (with appropriate support) in other accommodation.

8.7 Alternatives to hostels. SG told members that some local authorities had actively explored this issue (e.g. Westminster and Oxford), placing complex clients directly into flats. These initiatives have had good results, although they are costly. BD noted that, although the costs here might be high, they were almost certainly much lower than the full costs associated with unsuccessfully housing clients with complex needs in hostels (i.e. including the costs of A&E attendances, contact with police and the criminal justice system etc). One problem here is that costs are not currently calculated in this way; if the true costs of failing to house this client group were calculated, then specialist interventions might appear to be a relative bargain. This is an area where city partnerships do not go nearly as far as they need to deliver effective results.

8.8 Stock availability. NS told the panel that, for such an initiative to be undertaken there needs to be appropriate housing stock available, and this may not always be the case, or it may be that there are competing demands for a limited supply of stock. SG noted that the housing stock for this need not necessarily be specialist stock: general needs housing could be used provided that the appropriate support services are in place.

8.9 Needs of other hostel clients. SE pointed out that housing people with very complex needs (who can be aggressive etc.) in hostels can deter other potential users; finding alternative accommodation may help both the group of people with complex needs and the much broader group of potential hostel users.

8.10 Targeted approach. BD suggested that it might be possible to target and prioritise the most complex homeless clients, designing services around them – in a similar way to the ‘troubled families’ work around families. Such work would need to be outcomes-focused (which current support generally isn’t). There wouldn’t necessarily be a need for additional funding to support this approach, but it would require partners to acknowledge their likely expenditure and contribute accordingly. However, this would be a very complex piece of work given the co-morbidities that may such people experience. BD suggested that it might be worthwhile to map the financial case for this type of targeted intervention in order to compare it to current models.

8.11 Silo working. SG pointed out that there were currently often issues with agencies working in ‘silos’. Organisations were sometimes reluctant to take on clients, particularly if they felt that there was a considerable financial risk involved (e.g. they might end up providing expensive long term support). JR noted that the police were sometimes obliged to arrest individuals in order to persuade statutory services to undertake mental health or learning disability assessments. JC noted that there could be an issue with clients who were eligible for some statutory services, but who failed to meet the criteria for others – such clients could miss out on receiving properly holistic care.

8.12 ‘Personal budgets’. JR argued that the solution to silo working was to encourage partners to recognise the high costs entailed in failing to support homeless people with complex needs, and the potential value for money gains to be made from co-ordinated investment in individuals. One model would be via a ‘personal budget’ for complex homeless clients, with an independent ‘broker’ coordinating their care.

8.13 Pan-Sussex working. JR noted that there was a risk in providing high quality homeless services in any one locality, as this might attract people from other, less generous areas. This risk can be mitigated by co-ordinating approaches across neighbouring areas – a project to do this across Sussex is currently being developed. BD noted that, in any case, Brighton & Hove would likely remain as an attractive destination for rough sleepers: it has a mild climate, is a relatively safe place, there are good non-statutory services and easily available drugs etc.

8.14 Pathways. BD argued that the current pathways to access homelessness services could be too restrictive – negotiating a way around them for clients who don’t readily fit into the pathway can be very time-consuming, and a more flexible approach would make more sense. JC agreed that pathway redesign was a priority. NS agreed that this was important, but pointed out that pathway re-design was much easier to achieve between organisations that had shared budgets or which had formally agreed to work together to deliver services.

Lacking this degree of integration and joint input, pathway design can be tricky, as providers may be understandably wary of re-designs that might potentially lead to the de-commissioning of their services.

- 8.15 Hostels.** ES told members that large hostels were no longer an appropriate of housing at risk homeless people: they were too big and rule-bound for the most complex clients; and the presence of people with substance problems or evincing anti-social behaviour discouraged low needs homeless people from using them. SG agreed that the demographics of homelessness had shifted radically in recent years, with big increases in both relatively low and in very high needs clients presenting for help. BD added that using much smaller units of housing might make more sense. Thought should also be given to whether these services actually needed to be based in the city.
- 8.16 Policing.** BD told members that the police had made great strides in recent years to understand and develop links with homeless people (e.g. the Street Community Policing Team). However, whilst this work was really valuable, there was a risk that there was too little enforcement directed at the homeless, with some very anti-social behaviour being ignored due to concerns about the vulnerabilities of homeless people. This lack of enforcement could have the perverse effect of encouraging anti-social behaviour. JC noted that there were parallel issues for SPFT in terms of the police's reluctance to use enforcement measures in dealing with some mental health service users.
- 8.17 Community Re-Integration.** BD stressed the importance of trying to re-integrate rough sleepers into the community rather than simply providing them with shelter, and pointed to the successful use of ex-rough sleeper mentors in this role. In general, services which aim to provide professional support to small networks of service users, rather than the traditional model of providing services from on-high, may be the best way forward.
- 8.18 People leaving custody.** SE told the panel that people just released from Lewes Prison could regularly be found rough sleeping in Brighton & Hove. This group, particularly if they have no local connection, can pose particular problems for services, and require specialist engagement – which may not be readily available. NS added that the Housing Options team does do in-reach work with Lewes Prison (funded by the probation service), offering advice to prisoners due be released. However, this service is targeted at those with a local connection. There is also a hostel for ex-offenders, but this has limited places.
- 8.19 Complexity of services.** JC commented that the complexity of the map of services for people requiring housing and housing support was a problem; often even professionals don't fully understand all the services available.
- 8.20 Scope of services (a).** SG told members that there was no obligation for local authorities to refuse to house people who are 'intentionally homeless', and that some councils (e.g. Hastings) have decided not to apply the intentionality criteria – arguing that few people actually deliberately choose to make themselves homeless, and that in any case people remain homeless and in need of support whether they are 'intentionally' homeless or not. However, there is uncertain value in relaxing eligibility criteria if, as is the case in Brighton & Hove, there is no accommodation available.

- 8.21 Scope of services (b).** BD remarked that lots of resources went into assessing and then rejecting applicants for homeless status, and that some of this money might be better spent actually housing people.
- 8.22 Scope of services (c).** DR told members that he had applied as homeless and been deemed not eligible due to insufficient local connection, despite having lived in the city for 5 years in the relatively recent past. DR argued that local connection should not be applied via blanket rules, but needed to be interpreted on a case by case basis to ensure fairness.
- 8.23 Making a homeless application.** DR told the panel that his experience of making a homeless application had been very poor – it had taken more than four months to receive a judgement, with the Housing service claiming that the application had been lost in the system (a claim that other applicants reported being made on numerous occasions – meaning either that the system for processing applications was inadequate, or that claims of losing applications were just a delaying tactic). DR read out a statement on others’ experience of homelessness services (this statement will be included as a written submission in the final scrutiny panel report).
- 8.24 Recording homelessness data.** DR argued that the real levels of homelessness in the city are hidden because the city council does not classify people whom it considers ineligible for homelessness services (e.g. under the grounds of intentionality or local connection) as nonetheless homeless. For example, this group is categorised on the housing register as “unsatisfactorily housed” rather than homeless. The scrutiny panel requested that BHCC Housing provide a response to this point.
- 8.25 Helpfulness.** DR made the point that help and advice for homeless people should actually be helpful, whether or not the local authority believes it has a duty to house. However, his experience, and that of other applicants, was that this was not necessarily the case at all – applicants were not even always told whether their homeless applications had actually been submitted. SG agreed that local homelessness services ought be supportive, recognising that no one made a frivolous homelessness application, even if they might not meet the statutory eligibility criteria for assistance.
- 8.26 Dual diagnosis.** JC told the panel that Dual Diagnosis services (i.e. support for people with mental health and substance misuse co-morbidities) were still a major issue, particularly in terms of finding suitable supported housing for this very vulnerable and challenging client group. Things had improved in the past few years, but there was still a good deal to be done. The panel Chair suggested that the panel should refer back to the BHCC scrutiny panel on Dual Diagnosis recommendations to inform its thinking on this matter.
- 8.27 Culture of dependency.** BD noted that it was important not to encourage a ‘culture of dependency’, where people had unrealistic expectations of being supported by statutory services. People needed to have a realistic understanding of the services available to them, particularly in somewhere like Brighton & Hove where there is so much demand for a limited supply of housing.
- 8.28 Working with landlords (a).** Witnesses discussed how best to work with private landlords to support them in managing problematic tenancies and thereby reduce the number of people made homeless in the first place. NS told members that a great deal was

already being done via the city Strategic Housing Partnership (SHP) which brought together the council, the city universities, landlords, developers and letting agents etc. However, demand for rental accommodation is growing in the city, particularly from professionals, and it is not an easy task to persuade landlords to engage with rather than simply evict problem tenants. NS added that the Housing Options team did offer support to private landlords and could try and negotiate/mediate in disputes about anti-social behaviour, rent arrears etc.

8.29 Working with landlords (b). RS suggested that the council might consider intervening in private landlord/tenant disputes – e.g. offering to guarantee the payment of a tenant’s debts if they were allowed to retain their tenancy and then working with the tenant to recover those debts gradually.

8.30 Homeless voices. DR pointed out that the views of homeless people are important, but seldom heard. He suggested that hostels be encouraged to use the ‘talking circle’ approach to engage with clients. BD agreed that homeless voice was very important and stressed the positive role that ex-homeless mentors could play here.

9. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

4.1 There was none

The meeting concluded at Time Not Specified

Signed

Chair

Dated this

day of