

THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

23 MARCH 2015

OUTCOME AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE HOMELESSNESS INFORMAL  
SCRUTINY GROUP

REPORT OF ASSISTANT DIRECTOR (CHIEF HOUSING OFFICER)

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RECENT REFERENCES:

None

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee commissioned an Informal Scrutiny Group (ISG) to consider "How we respond as a City Council to homelessness".

This report provides an update on the work of the ISG and the key issues highlighted. These include the challenges posed by changes to funding of supported housing from Hampshire County Council, the need for effective communication and coordination of work between agencies working in the homelessness sector and the importance of retaining the existing front line housing provision.

The ISG have made a number of recommendations to improve outcomes for those facing homelessness in Winchester District, and these are presented for Committee to consider.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the Committee recommend to Cabinet that:

- a. The Council makes formal representations regarding County Council proposals for the redistribution of Supporting People funding for excluded groups, highlighting the likely impact on the district.
- b. A campaign be launched to raise awareness of rough sleepers in the parishes and rural areas
- c. Consideration be given to the re-launch/re-promotion of the 'alternative giving scheme' campaign within the town centre to reduce begging and street activity and raise awareness of actual rough sleeping
- d. A shared data base be established, funded from Homelessness Prevention Grant, to promote a 'no wrong door approach' , ensuring all agencies supporting single homeless households can share data and outcomes of individual cases and all agencies being aware of written advice given and supporting the approach
- e. That a report be brought to Cabinet (Housing) Committee as soon as possible reviewing options for addressing the gaps in stage 2 + 3 accommodation within the district.
- f. That the current level of front line resources in the Housing Options team be retained by making the fixed term Housing Options Officer post permanent.
- g. To continue to achieve the Gold Standard Local Challenges and to prepare a progress report for the Cabinet (Housing) Committee in October 2015.
- h. To develop/improve liaison and protocols with all statutory agencies and to establish a district Homelessness Forum to provide opportunities for effective collaboration.

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2. INTRODUCTION

- 2.1. This report provides details of the work of the Homelessness Informal Scrutiny Group (ISG), setting out the terms of reference, the issues considered by the group and its recommendations.
- 2.2. The Committee is asked to note the work undertaken by the group and is requested to consider the recommendations put forward to address the challenges facing the Council in dealing with homelessness in the District.

3. TERMS OF REFERENCE

- 3.1. The ISG agreed the following terms of reference:
  - a. To identify the major factors contributing to homelessness across Winchester
  - b. To summarise:
    - The Council's statutory duties
    - The Council's discretionary work funded through a central government grant (Prevention fund)
    - The Gold Standard Challenge Programme
  - c. To review our supported housing provision following budget cuts by Hampshire County Council
  - d. To assess whether current front line resources are adequate to meet local need
  - e. To explore what opportunities are available to support any future funding streams

#### 4. Issues Considered by the Group

- 4.1. The ISG has held four meetings, in addition to which Members have undertaken a series of site visits to Winchester Nightshelter, Westview House and the Council's own temporary accommodation.
- 4.2. Meeting 1: The initial meeting considered;
  - a. The outcome of the recent Diagnostic Peer Review of the Council's Housing Options Service and the progress already made by front line staff in meeting the recommendations
  - b. A brief overview of the proposed reductions in Supporting People funding by Hampshire County Council and local review outcomes
  - c. The Preventing Homelessness Strategy action plan priorities
- 4.3. Meeting 2: This meeting allowed officers to present;
  - a. The Gold Standard Programme – national overview and local outcomes to date
  - b. The frontline housing provision at Winchester City Council
  - c. The Community Safety Team - approach to reducing rough sleeping and street activity
  - d. The preventing homelessness budget
- 4.4. Meeting 3: The final meeting focused on;
  - a. A further update on Hampshire County Council Supporting People funding including the proposed redistribution between districts
  - b. The role of our voluntary sector partners in reducing single homelessness in Winchester
  - c. An update on the success of the rough sleeping task and targeting group
- 4.5. Meeting 4: This meeting reviewed the work of the group and agreed its findings and recommendations

#### 5. Key Issues Highlighted Through the ISG

- 5.1. The Council's current "front line" Housing Options team has very limited resources and is supplemented by temporary staff funded through the Homelessness Prevention Grant. This has at least ensured there are 4

officers and has allowed the team to establish an effective “triage” service in reception to ensure anyone seeking housing advice has immediate access to an Options Officer. The team operate in accordance with a “tell us once” approach where the adviser who first sees a customer will manage the case through to its conclusion where ever possible. The limited resources make this challenging. The resilience of front line service would be severely compromised if reductions were to be made to the numbers of frontline staff.

- 5.2. Hampshire County Council currently commission services to support single homeless households within each district authority by providing supported accommodation and floating support, HCC have proposed a re-distribution of this funding, which will have a significant impact on the amount of accommodation and support available to single excluded residents in Winchester.
- 5.3. The official rough sleeper count last year recorded 14 rough sleepers in the district of Winchester. The local approach to addressing rough sleeping and supporting single homeless households is provided through statutory and voluntary agencies within the district. The services working with single homeless households have recognised the need to share intelligence and data to ensure a joined up approach to supporting rough sleepers.
- 5.4. To ensure rough sleepers are supported into accommodation and off the streets within a reasonable time frame (no second night out) the procedure and support available for reporting a rough sleeper needs to be fully communicated to all agencies, residents and Councillors.
- 5.5. The 14 rough sleepers found as part of the official count has been reduced (currently 2) as part of an agreed operational approach across all agencies working with rough sleepers. This has highlighted the need to formalise a robust strategic approach to reducing rough sleeping in Winchester
- 5.6. Winchester City Council officers have undertaken a review of the current supported accommodation for single excluded groups within the district and this has highlight the lack of stage 2 (high level supported accommodation) and stage 3 (low level supported accommodation) within the district. If the re-distribution of funding proposed HCC is implemented the supported accommodation within the district will reduce further resulting in additional homeless applications, potentially triggering the need to use high cost bed and breakfast accommodation.

- 5.7. The City Council hosts the National Gold Standard Programme and officers are very keen to ensure it benefits from achieving the ten local challenges. The first three Gold Standard local challenges have been applied for and officers are committed to applying for the remaining seven challenges to become a recognised Gold Standard service. That said, achieving this aim with the existing resources available to the team will take time and clearly a balance between operational demands and applying for national recognition has to be maintained. The real benefit from the application process however is in relation to identifying areas for service improvement.
- 5.8. Winchester has many agencies, both statutory and voluntary, working to prevent homelessness within the district, to ensure the district approach is joined up and there is not any duplication of services, the district would benefit from officers providing early communication, engagement and training through partnership working across all wider agencies.
- 5.9. The cost of affordable housing and the impact on affordability within the district is recognised as key to ensuring social and affordable housing are available to prevent homelessness and provide sustainable accommodation options.
- 5.10. Supported accommodation for single vulnerable households needs to be linked to education, employment and training options to increase the life chances of homeless households. Increasing the options and routes into education, employment and training options through partnership working and formal referral routes for supported projects.
- 5.11. The wider health and well-being of single vulnerable groups need to be addressed through improving the communication with mental health support providers and all statutory agencies.

## 6. Recommendations

- 6.1. In concluding its work, the ISG has proposed the following recommendations be made to Cabinet:
  - a. That the Council makes formal representations regarding County Council proposals for the redistribution of Supporting People funding for excluded groups, highlighting the likely impact on the district and that City Council representatives on the County Council be fully briefed on the issues.
  - b. That a campaign be launched to raise awareness of rough sleepers in the parishes and rural areas– including promoting

officers email to parish clerks and parishioners/constitutes and producing flyers/stickers advertising how to report a rough sleeper.

- c. That consideration be given to the re-launch/re-promotion of the 'alternative giving scheme' campaign within the town centre to reduce begging and street activity and raise awareness of actual rough sleeping
  - d. That a shared data base be established, funded from Homelessness Prevention Grant, to promote a 'no wrong door approach', ensuring all agencies supporting single homeless households can share data and outcomes of individual cases and all agencies being aware of written advice given and supporting the approach
  - e. That a report be brought to Cabinet (Housing) Committee as soon as possible reviewing options for addressing the gaps in stage 2 + 3 accommodation within the district.
  - f. That the need to retain the current level of front line resources by making the fixed term Housing Options Officer post permanent be confirmed, to ensure early intervention remains at the forefront of Winchester City Council housing services.
  - g. To continue to achieve the Gold Standard Local Challenges and to prepare a progress report for the Cabinet (Housing) Committee in October 2015.
  - h. To develop/improve liaison and protocols with all statutory agencies and to establish a district Homelessness Forum to provide opportunities for effective collaboration.
- 6.2. In addition to the above recommendations to Cabinet, the ISG also suggested that:
- a. Officers provide Members with briefing/training updates on current issues and that this training be an annual update event
  - b. Consideration be given to publishing good news stories on the success's of the service.
  - c. Officers continue to make best use

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

### 7. COMMUNITY STRATEGY AND PORTFOLIO PLANS (RELEVANCE TO):

- 7.1. The Community Strategy Active Communities outcome contains a commitment to ‘support local people in accessing high quality and affordable housing which meets their needs’.
- 7.2. The Community Strategy also contains a number of aims which can be supported through an effective homelessness prevention service. Most relevant are:
- ‘Providing support when and where it is most effective to our vulnerable and disadvantaged residents’
  - Ensuring housing is available to meet the diverse needs of our communities, including an adequate provision of affordable housing’
  - ‘Helping people to make positive changes to their lifestyles for better physical and mental health’

### 8. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

- 8.1. The cost of funding a “shared database” for use by all relevant agencies is projected at between £2-3,000 and can be funded from the Council’s Homelessness Prevention Grant. A detailed report on this grant is planned for Cabinet (Housing) Committee this month.
- 8.2. The Prevention Grant is also used currently to fund a front line Housing Options Officer at a cost of £30,000. However, with the Grant not being ring fenced or guaranteed for future years, this cost will impact on the General Fund should the grant no longer be available.
- 8.3. Potential losses of supported accommodation as a result of HCC cuts and redistribution of funding will reduce the amount of supported accommodation units available to Winchester residents and thus increase the amount of homelessness applications received by the authority and the statutory duty to provide alternative temporary accommodation, potentially triggering the need to use high cost bed and breakfast accommodation.
- 8.4. Providing early and intervention support when and where it is most effective to our most vulnerable and disadvantaged households ensures that the statutory duty implications on the authority are reduced and the overall cost of support is reduced and the impact on the applicants health and well being is kept to a minimum.



## 9. RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1. The Council needs to find suitable solutions for those facing homelessness within the District, including vulnerable single homeless people, families, and those sleeping rough. Failure to address these needs not only represents a failure to support the individuals affected, but also would place the Council in breach of its statutory duties.
- 9.2. As well as the personal cost of homelessness for individuals, the provision of safe and secure housing (with appropriate support where needed) prevents a revolving door approach to addressing homelessness and helps to reduce the burden on other statutory services including Health and Social Care provision.
- 9.3. As the host authority for the DCLG-sponsored National Practitioner Support Service and Gold Standard Programme, the Council's own performance in tackling homelessness can be subject to particular scrutiny from other local authorities and media organisations. The Council needs therefore to be proactive in addressing these challenges as effectively as it can within its available resources.

### BACKGROUND PAPERS:

Winchester City Council Diagnostic Peer Review Feedback Presentation  
and Continuous Improvement Plan  
Preventing Homelessness Strategy & Action Plan

### APPENDICES

None