

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

MINUTES OF SCRUTINY PANEL 1 - HOMELESSNESS AND ROUGH SLEEPERS

Thursday, 8 November 2018

COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillor Cathrine Russell (Chair), Councillor Zoe Smith (Deputy Chair); Councillors Beardsworth, Jane Birch and Gareth Eales

CO-OPTED MEMBER: Ian Bates

Councillor Jonathan Nunn – Leader of the Council (observing)
Councillor Phil Larratt – Deputy Leader of the Council (observing)

Witnesses Rich Tompkins, Detective Chief Inspector, within Public Protection, Northants Police

Officers Phil Harris, Head of Housing and Wellbeing
Tracy Tiff, Scrutiny Officer
Kallie Jones, Senior Homelessness Advisor (observing)

Members of the Public Tara Scarth, Client Services Manager, Hope Centre
Morcea Walker

Press James Averill, Democracy Reporter

1. APOLOGIES

There were none.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Gareth Eales declared an interest as supporting a campaign to keep the Hope Centre in Oasis House.

3. DEPUTATIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESSES

Tara Scarth, Client Services Manager, Hope Centre addressed the Scrutiny Panel.

4. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 6 September were signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record.

Tara Scarth addressed the Scrutiny Panel explaining her role in detail. She expressed concern about the contents of the report of the Housing Options & Advice Manager that had been submitted to the September meeting of this Panel. She said that parts of the report gave a misleading impression of some local services, including the Hope Centre.

Tara concluded her address by advising that the Hope Centre's CEO would attend the January meeting to provide a comprehensive response to the core questions of the Panel.

Ms Scarth was thanked for her address.

Phil Harris, Head of Housing and Wellbeing, advised that NBC's Chief Executive had received a letter from the Hope Centre's CEO raising the same concerns and, after looking into the situation, NBC's Chief Executive was satisfied that the tone and content of the Housing Options & Advice Manager's report were appropriate and accurate.

At this point, Phil Harris circulated a short written briefing note on recent developments affecting Oasis House, the contents of which were noted.

5. WITNESS EVIDENCE

(A) DETECTIVE CHIEF INSPECTOR, WITHIN PUBLIC PROTECTION, NORTHANTS POLICE

Rich Tompkins, Detective Chief Inspector, within Public Protection, Northants Police, addressed the Scrutiny Panel.

Rich Tompkins advised that Neighbourhood Police Officers engage with rough sleepers and homeless people. Rich Tompkins does patrol every few months basis on a Friday and Saturday night as part of the 'nightsafe' plan. He has observed lots of homeless people, who are at increased risk from drunk and rowdy members of the public. He has seen how vulnerable homeless people can be in such situations. Homeless people are more likely to be both victims and perpetrators of crime. It is common that they have mental health issues, drug and alcohol abuse. A number of homeless people have been released from prison. Rich Tompkins confirmed that Housing and Wellbeing, NBC, have senior staff sitting on Groups such the Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) and that the work of the Housing Manager is exceptional. The MAPPA strategic board Panel recently commended the work of the NBC Housing and Money Advice Manager.

He went on to comment that homeless individuals need stability and that prevention measures, including support with drug, alcohol and mental health issues would minimise the chances of them being homeless and help prevent re-offending.

The Scrutiny Panel asked questions, made comment and heard:

- In response to a query regarding housing someone released from prison that had previously committed a serious crime such as sex offending, Rich Tompkins advised it is better for them to be appropriately housed with support and scrutiny in place rather than to be on the streets with no control measures and their whereabouts unknown in the UK.
- The Police do see a number of people living on the streets and are aware of a number of individuals that 'sofa surf'.
- Homelessness features on the agenda of a number of Groups such as the Suicide Prevention Group and Arms Forces Covenant.
- The Police operate the Coroner's Office but data regarding housing status of deceased persons is not routinely collected. However, for the past two months such data has begun to be collected.
- Rich Tompkins commended the work of the Street Pastors at the weekend and said that Police Officers will signpost rough sleepers to both the Night Shelter and the Street Pastors for support and advice.
- Every time an individual is taken into custody in the county their physical and mental health needs are subject to an assessment and they have an opportunity to be seen by a health care professional. . They are also given warm food and drinks and basic clothing if required. They are signposted to relevant Agencies for assistance.
- On occasions a rough sleeper has been known to offend so that they can get a bed and food for the night. This probably happens handful of times in a month
- Hate crime against homeless people is currently not specifically recorded (as for example racist or homophobic behaviour is)
- Hidden homelessness is not a well-known term to the Police. A DASH form is completed for every domestic abuse incident the Police attend. This assesses the risk to victims and gauges them as standard, medium or high. High risk is prioritised.

Rich Tompkins, Detective Chief Inspector, within Public Protection, Northants Police was thanked for his address.

(B) DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH, NCC

The Director of Public Health, NCC, was not present. She would be invited to the next meeting.

(C) DIRECTOR, NASS

Apologies were received from the Director, NASS.

(D) CHAIR, NIFF

The Chair, NIFF, was not present at the meeting.

6. WRITTEN EVIDENCE

A written response, as yet, has not been received from NACRO.

7. SITE VISITS

The Chair presented the briefing note on the recent site visits highlighting the key points and conclusions.

The findings from the site visits would inform the evidence base of this scrutiny review.

8. RELEVANT LEGISLATION

A briefing note around relevant Legislation was noted.

The findings from the briefing note would inform the evidence base of this scrutiny review.

9. BEST PRACTICE

A briefing note around best practice was noted.

The findings from the briefing note would inform the evidence base of this scrutiny review.

10. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

A briefing note around background information was noted.

The findings from the briefing note would inform the evidence base of this scrutiny review.

11. BRIEFING NOTE: GOVERNMENT'S ROUGH SLEEPING STRATEGY

Phil Harris, Head of Housing and Wellbeing, gave the Scrutiny Panel a comprehensive presentation on Government's Rough Sleeping Strategy. A copy of the presentation was circulated.

The Scrutiny Panel made comment, asked questions and heard:

- Phil Harris gave examples of how entrenched Rough Sleepers are supported
- In response to a query regarding Rough Sleepers who present at the Nightshelter who are heavily under the influence of drugs or drink, Phil Harris advised that the Team Leader on duty at the Nightshelter makes the decision on whether or not they should be admitted for the night. As the Nightshelter is not a direct access shelter, they will not normally be considered if they have not already been approved.
- Phil Harris explained that the Nightshelter was making a real and lasting difference to the hundreds of people who have stayed there. However, it is not the only housing option available to people who are sleeping rough and it is unreasonable to expect the Nightshelter to meet everyone's housing and support needs, irrespective of the risk they pose and their level of engagement.

- The Scrutiny Panel felt that there needed to be a Social Media Strategy in place as it was realised that a lot of mis-information can be put on social media. Housing and Wellbeing has an information page on the Council's Web Page.
- The Scrutiny Panel was concerned about the psychological impact that rough sleeping has on individuals. The Chair advised that a psychologist will be invited to attend a future meeting to provide information and answer questions.
- Getting agencies to work together again is essential. The Co-Optee offered his help in working with local groups to encourage collaboration.

Phil Harris was thanked for his informative presentation.

12. PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT SCRUTINY

The Scrutiny Panel received information on:

- HML01 Total number of households living in temporary accommodation
- HML07 Number of households that are prevented on becoming homeless

The Chair would report back to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee who had asked this Scrutiny Panel undertake performance management Scrutiny on its behalf.

Phil Harris, Head of Housing and Wellbeing advised that, over the past two and a half years, the number of homeless households living in temporary accommodation had increased from 66 to 303. More than half of the households that approach the Council for assistance had lost their private rented accommodation and been unable to secure an a suitable property to move into.

Preventing homelessness is essential, but is proving very difficult, given the severe shortage of affordable housing. A restructure of the Housing Options & Advice Service is underway and will increase the capacity and the level of expertise in the team.

The Scrutiny Panel noted the need to recruit staff to manage temporary accommodation and 'free up' the social lettings agency staff to focus on private rented accommodation.

The Chair would report the above findings to the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Due to the time constraints, the Scrutiny Panel agreed not to watch the short TED video on hidden homeless. Instead, the Scrutiny Officer undertook to circulate the link to the Panel.

The meeting concluded at 8:15 pm