

Overview & Scrutiny – Homelessness (LGSS revenues & benefits)

Purpose of Report

To highlight to the committee the involvement that the LGSS Revenue and Benefit Department has in supporting colleagues in dealing with homelessness & homeless prevention.

Key Activities

Revenues and Benefits as a service support the homeless agenda in a number of ways:

1. There is a KPI specifically aimed at dealing with the most vulnerable people - 95% of all Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) are review within 14 days.
2. The team reach out to NPH and other Housing Associations when there are additional funds encouraging them to get customers who may be struggling to apply.
3. There is a fast track process to ensure claims that are subject to eviction are processed immediately
4. The Housing & Wellbeing team have direct access to a Housing Benefit Team Leader. They review cases together discuss the issues and work through the best solution for the customer.
5. The revenues and benefits service has a dedicated officer to liaise with 3rd sector partners and attend cross party meetings to better understand the wider picture and relay the Revenues & Benefits perspective. Specific meetings of note relevant to the review are:
 - a. Citizen Advice Bureau (CAB) & community Law Service (CLS) group
 - b. Northampton Agency Partnership (Multi agency forum)
 - c. Northampton Financial Inclusion Forum
6. There is a regularly updated register of Stakeholders (copy below) should communications or contact need to be made with specific bodies.
7. LGSS chair a Welfare reform Steering group that involves key stakeholders from Northampton Borough Council, Northampton Partnership Homes, LGSS Revenue & Benefits and the Department for Work & Pensions. The group meet fortnightly to discuss upcoming reforms and their impact on individuals, services and finances working together to find mutually agreeable resolutions to the issues the reforms bring.
8. When recovering monies owed rent and council tax and considered priority debts and debts are deferred where a customer can show they are already facing hardship that could lead to homelessness.
9. CAB & CLS are able to propose payment plans for customers based on the work they have done with the customer and their understanding the financial circumstances, the customer only has to go through a debt management process once and due to close liaison with these organisation we are happy to accept their recommendations.

10. There are various considerations and concessions made when a customer has been identified as vulnerable; these are broadly used when a customer is looking like they may lose their home.
11. The service has both a discretionary discount scheme and write off policy that can be utilised should all other methods have been considered and rejected.
12. All the Council Tax paperwork has reference to debt and getting professional debt advice, this is replicated on the website and the team are also encouraged to deliver this message when they encounter someone who may benefit from this type of support.
13. The team are also empowered to look at other solutions to help customers by checking potential benefit availability or finding out why they haven't moved from a house they can't afford, clearly this has to be done with some sensitivity but it helps to form a picture of the customer, their circumstance and any potential vulnerability.
14. The policy to charge Council Tax on empty homes and the premium charge on homes that have been empty over two years would be seen as an incentive to encourage individuals to place their properties back on the housing market.

Stakeholders



LGSS stakeholders
Feb 16.doc

Core Questions

I have not specifically referred to each core question (appendix a) as Revenues & Benefits does not keep data on homelessness, the core business is dealing with customers who are in homes paying rent &/or council tax. The department is aware of the impact that debt can have on home stability and as detailed above has a number of mechanisms to identify, help or refer customers to advice and support.

Alongside this we have shown how we support those with direct involvement in homelessness issues to mitigate and where possible prevent a homeless situation.

Appendix a

1. Please describe your understanding of the nature, causes and extent of homelessness and rough sleeping, and the impact that homelessness has on the health, wellbeing and safety of homeless people.
2. Please describe the services, assistance and support that are available to people who are homeless, including rough sleepers.
3. Please provide details of the contribution that your organisation is making (through its work and the initiatives in which it is involved) to tackle, prevent and reduce homelessness and rough sleeping in the borough.
4. Please provide details of the action that your organisation is taking to improve the health, wellbeing and safety of homeless people.
5. Please provide details of the local Homelessness Strategy and Rough Sleepers Strategy and how their implementation is being monitored and assessed.
6. Please provide details of the arrangements that have been put in place to provide rough sleepers with emergency shelter during severe weather.
7. Please provide us with any statistics and data you hold in relation to the number of people / households that are homeless, and details of the methodology you have used to count the number of people sleeping rough.
8. Are you aware of any specific groups that are not accessing local services and, if you are, please can you provide details and describe the reasons why some homeless people are difficult to engage and support?
9. Are there any significant gaps in service and do the services link together well enough?
10. How can we increase awareness of the services, assistance and support available to people who are homeless, including rough sleepers?
11. What action is being taken to ensure that all agencies and members of the public know what to do if they know that someone is homeless or sleeping rough?
12. Do you have any other information you are able to provide in relation to homelessness and rough sleeping?
13. What is the Council doing to bring empty homes back into use in Northampton