

## CORE QUESTIONS:

A series of key questions have been put together to inform the evidence base of the Scrutiny Panel:

### **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.**

Homelessness takes many forms and, although people who are sleeping rough on the streets or living in temporary accommodation are literally homeless, people do not need to be roofless to be classified as 'homeless'.

Someone who is sofa surfing or living in unreasonable conditions may still be 'homeless', and someone who is likely to become homeless within the next 28 days may be treated as being 'threatened with homelessness'.

There are many causes of homelessness. In Northampton, the main causes are:

- Termination of an Assured Shorthold Tenancy (AST) because the landlord wants to sell the property or let it to someone else who is able to pay a higher rent;
- Relationship breakdown (violent / non-violent); and
- Family or friends no longer able or willing to accommodate.

Other causes of homelessness include illness, bereavement, the loss of employment, a sudden reduction in income, harassment and unlawful eviction, tenancy breakdown, unmet support needs, mental health problems, substance misuse, leaving prison or hospital in an unplanned way, and difficulty in accessing private and social housing.

Homelessness can have a significant impact on people's health, wellbeing and safety:

- Disrupting schooling, healthcare, employment and support networks;
- Placing a strain on budgets (meals, transport, removals and storage);
- Limiting space and privacy (affects relationships, friends and homework);
- Causing a deterioration in physical and mental health;
- Reducing self-esteem, confidence and personal hygiene;
- Increasing isolation and the risk of physical assault; and
- Increasing the misuse of alcohol; and drugs

Please see **Appendix 1** (attached) for statistics / data relating to homelessness.

### **2. Please describe the services, assistance and support that are available to people who are homeless, including rough sleepers.**

The Council's Housing Options and Advice Team provides comprehensive advice and assistance to everyone who is homeless or threatened with homelessness.

It will work proactively and collaboratively with other services and organisations, as appropriate, to ensure that people receive the help and support that they need in order to avoid becoming homeless or to recover from a period of homelessness.

The primary focus of the Council's Street Outreach Team – which works with a wide range of services and organisations – is to provide people who are sleeping rough with the necessary advice and assistance to leave the streets as quickly as possible.

The Street Outreach Workers help people who are sleeping rough to access the support they need to address their health needs, alcohol and substance misuse issues, secure an income, and access volunteering, training, employment and suitable accommodation.

Reconnection will also be an option where someone is stuck in an area that they do not want to be in and requires help in moving to another area where they will be able to benefit from being closer to their family, friends and support networks.

**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.**

Multi Agency Rough Sleepers Strategy

'**TOGETHER we change lives**', the borough's ambitious, 3 year multi-agency strategy for ending the need for people to sleep rough in Northampton, was launched in July 2016 and was informed, developed and agreed after a Rough Sleepers Count in March 2016 and a series of workshops attended by more than 30 services and organisations.

'**TOGETHER we change lives**' sets out 10 strategic objectives that Northampton's multi-agency alliance will achieve by working together. Most of the objectives will be achieved within the next 12 months, with the following 2 years being used to ensure that the new ways of tackling, preventing and reducing homelessness is embedded across all services and organisations in Northampton.

The 10 strategic objectives include setting up a temporary emergency night shelter, establishing a multi-disciplinary Street Services Team, working with hospitals, prisons, supported housing schemes and social landlords, developing individual multi agency support plans for individuals sleeping rough, and developing a comprehensive programme of volunteering, training and employment to improve people's life chances.

Housing Allocations Policy

The Council is reviewing its Housing Allocations Policy, to ensure that it is fit for purpose and meets its strategic objectives in relation to the allocation of affordable housing.

Consideration will be given to the ways in which the Housing Allocations Policy can be amended to support everyone's efforts to prevent homelessness, tackle severe overcrowding, safeguard children and vulnerable adults, facilitate move-on from hospital and supported housing, and assist the future growth of Northampton.

Countywide Housing Protocols for Young People

The Council's Housing & Wellbeing Service took the lead in the development and implementation two Countywide Housing Protocols: a Housing Protocol (Homeless 16 & 17 Year Olds) and a Housing Protocol (Care Leavers).

The Housing Protocol (Homeless 16 & 17 Year Olds) is designed to ensure that, in Northamptonshire, everyone works together to provide a consistent and co-ordinated response to 16 and 17 year old young people (including teenage parents and pregnant teenagers) who present as homeless and are in need of accommodation or accommodation-related support. It seeks to prevent homelessness and promote and safeguard the wellbeing of 16 and 17 year olds.

The Housing Protocol (Care Leavers) is designed to ensure that 'looked after' children are prepared for independent living, leave care when they are ready and move on to settled housing (which may include social rented housing) in a planned way.

As well as setting out the roles and responsibilities of Children's Social Care, the Leaving Care Team, the seven local Housing Authorities and the social housing providers, the Housing Protocol (Care Leavers) describes the action that the young person needs to take to apply for social rented housing and what each Housing Authority will then do to ensure that the young person receives an offer of suitable housing when they are ready to leave care and are able to sustain their tenancy when they are rehoused.

**4. Please provide details of the action that your organisation is taking to improve the health, wellbeing and safety of homeless people.**

One of the priorities in this year's Housing and Wellbeing Service Plan is to carry out a review of the Council's use of temporary accommodation and reduce its use of Bed and Breakfast (B&B) accommodation. It is hoped this will reduce the number of families and vulnerable people placed in B&B and keep them in Northampton, so as to minimise any disruption to their employment, schools and support networks.

For those who are placed in temporary accommodation outside of the borough, every effort is made to ensure that appropriate support is provided and that they are transferred to temporary accommodation in Northampton as soon as possible.

**5. Please provide details of the local Homelessness Strategy and Rough Sleepers Strategy and how their implementation is being monitored and assessed.**

The Council is planning to undertake a comprehensive Homelessness Review and produce a new 3 year Multi Agency Homelessness Strategy in April 2017.

Following publication of the Rough Sleepers Strategy, we are finalising the Action Plan that will set out how Northampton's multi agency alliance will achieve the 10 strategic priorities in the Strategy. 'Task and finish' groups are being established to ensure the successful and timely implementation of the Action Plan.

Performance and progress against the 10 strategic priorities and the Action Plan will be monitored quarterly by a multi agency Rough Sleepers Strategy Steering Group and reported to the Council's Cabinet annually.

**6. Please provide details of the arrangements that have been put in place to provide rough sleepers with emergency shelter during severe weather.**

In recent years, emergency shelter has been provided for people who are sleeping rough in Northampton when the temperature is forecast to be below freezing for at least 3 consecutive nights. Shelter has been provided in the Hope Centre (part of Oasis House) and, during their stay, rough sleepers received a hot meal and drinks, and the chance to engage with services that can help them access support and accommodation.

As the Council is opening an emergency nightshelter in November 2016 – to end the need for people to sleep rough in Northampton – this winter’s severe weather project (known as SWEF) will operate from the new nightshelter.

**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.**

Please see **Appendix 1** (attached) for statistics / data relating to homelessness.

The Street Outreach Workers undertake several outreach sessions each week, where they will go out and look for people sleeping rough in known ‘hot spots’ and town centre locations. They will respond to intelligence provided by members of the public and other services and organisations. Recording every person they find ‘bedded down’, they will continue to work with them to get them off the streets as quickly as possible.

Councils are required by Government to complete an annual count of rough sleepers in their area, and submit their findings. This can be done in the form of an actual count, or an estimate. Government prescribes who should and shouldn’t be counted.

On 24 March 2016, the Council – assisted by 32 volunteers from a wide range of services and organisations – completed a comprehensive, borough-wide count. Between Midnight and 3.00am, a total of 21 people were found ‘bedded down’. It is believed that only 4 of these 21 people are now sleeping rough in Northampton.

The next rough sleepers count is scheduled to take place in November 2016. It is hoped that, as a result of the work undertaken to date and the opening of the emergency nightshelter, less than 10 people – and as close to zero as possible – will be found ‘bedded down’ on the night of the count.

**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?**

Some people who are sleeping rough refuse to access local services or take up offers of advice, support and assistance.

There are predominantly 2 groups:

- **Eastern European nationals who are not exercising their treaty rights**, a group of which are refusing help and refusing to come off the streets. Reasons cited are mostly an unwillingness to pay rent. The Council is working closely with the Police and Immigration Service to tackle this issue.
- **Entrenched rough sleepers** will often take a long time to gain trust in services before they will start to work with them. They often require a specially tailored, multi agency solution to make the very difficult transition from the street into a home.

As it will often take several attempts to get an entrenched rough sleeper off the streets, it is important that the person sleeping rough and the agencies involved persevere and do not regard unsuccessful attempts as failure. It is important, also,

that the person sleeping rough knows that the support will still be there for them when they are ready to try again.

**9. Are there any significant gaps in service and do the services link together well enough?**

It would be helpful to have Countywide Protocols for victims of domestic abuse and for offenders, in order to ensure that people are able to move on from refuges, prisons and probation hostels into settled accommodation in a planned way, avoiding a crisis.

Despite Northamptonshire's Housing Protocols for homeless 16 and 17 year olds and care leavers, Children's Services do not always comply with their obligations under the Protocols, leaving the Council to deal with them on its own.

The sharp increase in rents, together with lack of access to the private rented sector, is making it extremely difficult for the Council to prevent homelessness by helping people to remain in their existing accommodation or to move to alternative private rented accommodation that they can afford. This reduces the lack of options available to people and, in common with other parts of the country including Northamptonshire, it is contributing to a sharp increase in homelessness in Northampton.

In order to prevent homelessness, reduce the Council's use of B&B, improve local housing conditions, increase choice and make it easier for people to access good quality, well managed private rented accommodation, the Council is in the process of setting up a not-for-profit Social Lettings Agency.

Although there is still a lot of work to do to link services together, and to get them to work more effectively with one another in partnership, '**TOGETHER we change lives**' has acted as a catalyst for change and led to a notable increase in flexibility and willingness to work collaboratively to get the best outcomes for people who are homeless.

**10. How can we increase awareness of the services, assistance and support available to people who are homeless, including rough sleepers?**

When implementing '**TOGETHER we change lives**', Northampton's multi-agency alliance of services and organisations will work together to agree common messages that will be used in literature to promote the wide range of services that are available to end the need to sleep rough in Northampton.

It has been agreed, also, that Northampton's multi-agency alliance will develop a comprehensive guide to local services and organisations that offer advice, support and assistance to homeless people, in order to help everyone understand what help is available and to encourage joined-up working and solutions.

**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?**

Through a series of workshops – attended by people representing more than 30 services and organisations operating in Northampton – the Council has been able to raise awareness of the work undertaken by the Street Outreach Workers and how people can get in touch to report someone who is homeless or sleeping rough.

The Council's website has contact details for the Street Outreach Team, and a link to 'Streetlink'. Streetlink is a web based service that aims to offer the public a means to act when they see someone sleeping rough, and it is the first step someone can take to ensure rough sleepers are connected to the local services and support that they need.

The Council is also considering how social media can be used to enable agencies and members of the public to alert it to people who are in need of housing support.

**12. Do you have any other information you are able to provide in relation to homelessness and rough sleeping?**

N/A

**13. What is the Council doing to bring empty homes back into use in Northampton? (question for internal witnesses).**

As part of its plans to establish a Social Lettings Agency, the Council is proposing to appoint an Empty Homes Officer who will work proactively to encourage the owners of empty properties to sell, lease or let their accommodation.

It is hoped that the Empty Homes Officer will persuade many owners to lease their accommodation to the Social Lettings Agency or to allow the Social Lettings Agency to manage their accommodation on their behalf. In some instances, the Council will organise and pay for essential works for the owner on the understanding that the cost of those works will be reimbursed from future rent / lease payments.

Although most of the work that the Empty Homes Officer undertakes will involve negotiation and persuasion, the Officer will also pursue enforced sales (where the Council is owed money) and compulsory purchase.