

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

MINUTES OF SCRUTINY PANEL 3 - HOMELESSNESS (PRE-DECISION SCRUTINY)

Thursday, 26 January 2017

COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillor Zoe Smith (Chair), Councillors Rufia Ashraf, Vicky Culbard, Terrie Eales, Elizabeth Gowen and Dennis Meredith

CO-OPTED MEMBER: Pete Smith, Head of Partnerships, Homelesslink

WITNESSES Lesley Hagger, Director, Children's Services, NCC
Suzanne Binley, Business Manager, Northamptonshire Safeguarding Children Board
John Rawlings, HeathWatch Northants

OFFICERS Phil Harris, Head of Housing and Wellbeing
Tracy Tiff, Scrutiny Officer

Members of the Public Lucy Metcalfe, Anca Mandache and Bogdan Btu

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Aziz, Councillor Duffy and Councillor Russell.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

3. DEPUTATIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESSES

There were none.

4. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the meeting held on 24 November 2016 as a true and accurate record.

5. WITNESS EVIDENCE

(A) PROGRAMME MANAGER, THE BRIDGE

The Chair advised the Scrutiny Panel that the Programme Manager, the Bridge was unable to attend the meeting.

(B) DIRECTOR, CHILDREN'S SERVICES, NORTHAMPTONSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Lesley Hagger, Director of Children's Services, Northamptonshire County Council, and Suzanne Binley, Business Manager, Northamptonshire Safeguarding Children Board, advised that over the last period 60 young people, under the age of 18, were referred to the MASH, as homeless. There are a broad number of reasons for this including family fallout, sofa surfing stopping, not wanting to be tracked down. It is very rare for young people to choose to be homeless. There are limited options available to them. Homeless young people are the statutory responsibility of Children's Services.

The Scrutiny Panel asked questions, made comment and heard:

- A multi-Agency Task and Finish Group was set up in the summer 2016 and is working towards embedding and updating key Protocols. A Protocol for 16-17 year olds has been in place since November 2015. It has been reviewed and revisited.
- There is a lot of collaborative working and a lot of impetus to get the Protocol working well.
- A Homeless Family Protocol is being developed, along with a Pre Eviction Protocol and Care Leavers' Protocol. Good progress is being made
- Children's Services, NCC, and Housing and Wellbeing, NBC, are working closely regarding intentionally homeless families. There is a good working relationship. There is a multi-Agency approach. There is a need to look at preventative measures.
- Children cannot be allowed to sleep rough. If a young person is found to be sleeping rough, the appropriate action is taken.
- The Scrutiny Panel heard of the procedure that Melton Borough Council has implemented regarding potential evictions as it had been found it was more expensive to evict that look at other options. Therefore alternative options are investigated.
- It is ensured that there are clear and robust procedures in place regarding families with no recourse to public funds.
- The Scrutiny Panel was referred to the Legislation "Staying Put" where a young person can stay in care, if in full time education until the end of the academic year that they are 18.
- New Legislation "Staying Close" means young people living in children's homes, and have to leave the accommodation at 18, will be placed in accommodation near to the children's home so that they can maintain links
- The majority of 18 year olds move into independent, supported accommodation. The accommodation has to be 100% suitable for the young person.
- The housing process is complex. It is a legal process that has to be followed. Individuals have to explain how they became homeless.
- The Scrutiny Panel heard that rough sleepers had increased by 20%

- The Night Shelter will open on 6 February 2017, 60 volunteers will be recruited and trained. A co-ordinator and an assistant for the Night Shelter have been recruited. Both have a wealth of experience in managing volunteers.
- The Night Shelter will be open every day until September 2018. There are different arrangements for women.
- In response to a question, Lesley Hagger undertook to provide statistics regarding the number of children missing education due to their housing situation.
- The Scrutiny Panel commented that often families have a choice to either feed their children or send them to school. There is a need to find homeless families accommodation in Northampton. It was suggested that a potential recommendation of the final report could be around this issue such as “it is recommended that it is explored that the Authority is doing all it can to ensure people who present and are assessed as homeless remain the borough.”
- It was noted that the Homeless Families Protocol looks at early intervention to prevent families becoming homeless.
- The Scrutiny Panel heard that people are placed in temporary accommodation outside the borough as there is genuinely no spaces within the borough.
- Rising private sector rents is a key reason for homelessness.

Lesley Hagger and Suzanne Binley were thanked for their informative address.

(C) CHIEF EXECUTIVE, CENTRAL NORTHANTS CAB

A representative from Central Northants CAB was not present.

(D) MANAGER, MAPLE ACCESS CENTRE

A representative from the Maple Access Centre was not present. The Scrutiny Panel was disappointed that a representative was unable to attend to elaborate upon the response to the core questions that had been provided to the previous meeting. The Scrutiny Panel highlighted the value of witness evidence to the Scrutiny review process.

The Scrutiny Panel was pleased to note that a GP from the Maple Access Centre is present two days a week at Oasis House. The GP has also given a mental health presentation at the Night Shelter.

(E) OPERATIONS MANAGER, MIDLAND HEART HOUSING ASSOCIATION

A representative from Midland Heart Housing Association was not present.

(F) CHIEF EXECUTIVE, HEALTHWATCH NORTHANTS

John Rawlings, representing the Chief Executive, HealthWatch Northants, addressed the Scrutiny Panel. He advised that there had been a lot of pressure on HealthWatch recently. He went on to advise that a draft report was currently available and when in final format it would be sent to the Scrutiny Panel for its information.

As part of its evidence gathering, HealthWatch spoke with 25 homeless people of which 9 were from Northampton. They also spoke with five support Agencies and the Hope Centre. A lot of positive comments were received and the link between NBC and the Hope Centre had been highlighted.

The draft report recognises the value of the Hope Centre, access to Mental Health and other signposting. It was felt that provision in Northampton was very good, in fact a lot better than elsewhere in the county.

John Rawlings went on to advise of the facilities provided at Oasis House.

A number of rough sleepers sleep during the day as they feel safer, but by doing this they can miss out on food. Mental health is an issue. 70% of all clients sleep rough. Alcohol use is a barrier to accessing mental health support.

The draft report consists of a number of recommendations around:

- The appointment of assertive outreach workers to avoid the duplication of provision of service
- Surgeries should be on a theme basis, for example, dental provision model.
- A community psychiatric nurse is based in the Night Shelter.
- Alcohol and drugs support services for homeless people is holistic. Homeless people interviewed confirmed they want to be treated holistically.

The Scrutiny Panel was provided with an example of a tenant who was sleeping rough as he was renting out his flat to feed his drug addiction.

The Scrutiny Panel welcomed the Night Shelter commenting that it will make a huge difference regarding sleep deprivation.

The Scrutiny Panel welcomed the HealthWatch report and the precis of the recommendations contained within it. It was commented that joint working and Multi Agency working is key in supporting homelessness and rough sleeping.

John Rawlings referred to a model of tackling rough sleeping in Hungary. The Police would remove them off the streets which in effect made sure they were safe.

The Scrutiny Panel commented that if non rough sleeping beggars could be tackled, it would help rough sleepers. It was felt that it would be useful to have data regarding the number of rough sleepers and beggars on specific dates. This would be a useful internal resource.

John Rawlings was thanked for his informative address.

(G) SERVICE MANAGER, SALVATION ARMY

A representative from the Salvation Army was not present.

(H) SERVICE MANAGER, EMMAUS HOMELESS CHARITY

A representative from the Salvation Army was not present.

6. THE SCRUTINY PANEL TO RECEIVE A WRITTEN RESPONSE TO ITS CORE QUESTIONS

Written responses were not received.

7. REPORT BACK FROM RECENT SITE VISITS

The Scrutiny Panel noted the briefing note regarding its site visits.

The Chair advised that free Wi-Fi is an important resource in temporary accommodation and suggested a potential recommendation for inclusion in the final report that access to free Wi-Fi is available in all temporary accommodation. This helps regarding benefits, schools and links to the outside world. It is a key aspect to wellbeing.

It was noted that Wi-Fi is available in the Night Shelter.

In answer to a query regarding the key reason for homelessness, Phil Harris, Head of Housing and Wellbeing confirmed that this was due to the ending of short term tenancies. The Scrutiny Panel commented that the impact of homelessness is properly quantified and this would be highlighted in the final report.

In response to a query regarding properties on the border of Northampton, Phil Harris confirmed that there is a Northampton related development area.

8. BACKGROUND INFORMATION - HOMELESSNESS REDUCTION BILL

The briefing note on the Homelessness Reduction Bill was noted.

9. BACKGROUND PAPER - SOCIAL LETTINGS AGENCY

Phil Harris presented the briefing note highlighting that it was anticipated that a Team would be in place by April 2017. It was expected that the Social Lettings Agency would become self-financing.

The Scrutiny Panel supported the setting up of the Social Lettings Agency.

The meeting concluded at 8:00 pm