



OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

SCRUTINY PANEL 1 – HOMELESSNESS AND ROUGH SLEEPERS

**Response from Emma Forbes, Housing Options & Advice Manager,
Northampton Borough Council**

The Scrutiny Panel is currently undertaking a review: Homelessness and Rough Sleepers

The purpose of the Review is

- To review the way in which the Council and its partners engage with rough sleepers¹, consider the best way in which 'Housing First'² can be used to reduce rough sleeping in the borough, and understand the nature and extent of 'hidden homelessness'³ and how it can best be addressed.

1 For the purpose of rough sleeping counts and estimates, '**rough sleepers**' are defined as people who are sleeping / bedded down in the open air (such as on the streets, in tents, doorways, parks, bus shelters or encampments) or sleeping in buildings or other places that are not designed for habitation (such as stairwells, barns, sheds, car parks, cars, derelict boats, stations, etc).

2 The '**Housing First**' approach was first developed in New York by the Pathways to Housing organisation in 1992 and has proved very successful in the USA, Canada and Europe. Unlike other supported housing models, individuals do not need to prove they are ready for independent housing, or progress through a series of accommodation and treatment services. There are no conditions placed on them, other than a willingness to maintain a tenancy agreement. Housing First is designed to provide long-term, open-ended support for their ongoing needs. Through the provision of intensive, flexible and person-centred support, 70-90% of Housing First residents are able to remain housed. Having a settled home improves health and wellbeing and reduces ineffective contact with costly public services.

3 '**Hidden homelessness**' is a term that is used to describe the people who become homeless but do not show up in official figures. This includes people who become homeless but find a temporary solution by sofa surfing (staying with family members or friends) or living in hostels, nightshelters, squats or other insecure accommodation.

CORE QUESTIONS:

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

- 1 Please provide details of what contact or involvement your organisation has with people who are homeless (sleeping rough or 'hidden') and the services and organisations that are able to address their needs.**

Northampton Borough Council has a statutory duty to provide advice and assistance to everyone who is homeless or threatened with homelessness in the Borough, including people who are sleeping rough.

The Housing Options and Advice Team works to prevent or relieve homelessness all year round, by working with households to help them to retain or secure suitable housing, and to access other forms of support.

In Northampton, we have a dedicated Single Homelessness Service that offers single homeless people and childless couples (including those who are sleeping rough, 'sofa surfing' or at risk of becoming homeless) with advice, information, assistance and support:

Single Homelessness Adviser

Based in the One Stop Shop, the Single Homelessness Adviser provides a 'triage' service for single people and childless couples who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

Working closely with the Street Outreach Team, the Tenancy Relations Officer and the Nightshelter, the Single Homelessness Adviser is particularly adept at delaying and preventing homelessness, especially in relation to private rented accommodation and family breakdown.

Street Outreach Workers

The Council's two Street Outreach Workers deliver an assertive outreach service to people who are sleeping rough, providing them with the encouragement and support to access emergency housing and support.

Using the intelligence they have gathered from a variety of sources (including members of the public) the Street Outreach Workers will visit all areas of the borough (including woods, parks and cemeteries) where it is known or suspected that someone may be sleeping rough.

Northampton's Emergency Nightshelter

Northampton's Nightshelter first opened its doors on 6 February 2017.

Every night, between 9.00pm and 9.00am, it provides somewhere safe, warm and dry to stay for up to 20 homeless men. There is also alternative emergency provision for women who are sleeping rough.

As the Nightshelter is not a direct access shelter, people will only be admitted if they have already been risk assessed and meet the access criteria. Decisions on whether or not a person is accommodated in the Nightshelter are normally made on the day they are interviewed.

Everything at the Nightshelter (including the accommodation, toiletries, evening meal and breakfast) is provided free of charge.

Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP)

Although winter often poses the greatest risk to people's health, it also provides increased opportunities to engage with entrenched rough sleepers and other hard-to-reach groups because they may be more likely to accept support at this time of year.

Although there is no strict definition of what counts as 'severe weather', SWEP normally operates when the temperature falls below freezing and is forecast to remain below freezing for at least three consecutive nights.

Throughout the winter, we monitor the Met Office's weather forecasts, taking into account any weather (including extreme cold, wind and rain) that is likely to increase the risk of serious harm to people sleeping rough.

SWEP will operate from Oasis House between 9.00pm and 7.00am. Anyone wishing to use SWEP must arrive before 11.00pm.

If someone is sleeping rough – or is at risk of having to sleep rough – and does not meet the Nightshelter's access criteria (because, for example, they are unwilling to engage with services) they can register for SWEP.

Multi agency strategy

Working with more than 30 services and organisations, the Council developed a 3 year multi agency strategy, 'TOGETHER we change lives', to tackle, prevent and reduce rough sleeping.

The vast majority of the services and organisations that signed up to the multi-agency strategy – including supported housing providers, faith groups and mental health/substance misuse support providers – have worked collaboratively with the Council to reduce rough sleeping.

Regrettably, a small number of the organisations that initially pledged their support for 'TOGETHER we change lives' have not done what they promised and, as a result of their change of approach, they are undermining our efforts to end the need for people to sleep rough in Northampton and, in some instances, they are sustaining rough sleeping.

2 Please provide details of your understanding of the causes and extent of rough sleeping in the borough.

Rough sleeping is a complex problem and the longer that someone sleeps rough, the harder it can be to help them leave the streets.

The causes of homelessness are numerous and varied, and are exacerbated by the severe shortage of suitable, affordable housing. The main causes are relationship breakdown, leaving hospital or prison in an unplanned way, tenancy breakdown, the loss of private rented housing, mental ill-health, substance misuse and unmet support needs

We are also seeing an increase in the number of people who have arrived in Northampton from other areas, and other countries, without making any accommodation arrangements and end up sleeping rough. As they have no 'local connection', the team will seek to reconnect them to their 'home area' in order that they can access the maximum help available.

Accurately measuring the exact numbers of people sleeping rough is challenging. In 2010, the Coalition Government introduced a snapshot method which requires every local authority either to count or estimate the number of people sleeping rough in their area on one night every year.

Each year, the Council carries out an Annual Rough Sleepers Count strictly in accordance with government criteria and guidance. This is the agreed method for tracking progress in tackling rough sleeping.

During Northampton's last Rough Sleepers Count on 10 November 2017, a total of 36 volunteers took part in the Count, which covered all 33 Wards and was carried out, as usual, between Midnight and 3.00am. The volunteers observed a total of 13 people (10 men and 3 women) 'bedded down' in the borough. On the night of the Count, 11 men were staying in Northampton's Emergency Nightshelter.

The Council is planning to meet with local services and organisations to develop improved ways of recording and assessing rough sleeping. However, based on all of the intelligence available, we estimate that on an average night there are around 25 non-UK nationals sleeping in tents on the outskirts of Northampton and around 15 people sleeping rough.

Our priority – reflected in 'TOGETHER we change lives' – is to intervene early, to get people off the streets before they become entrenched.

3 Please provide details of your understanding of the impact that rough sleeping has on the safety, life expectancy and health of people who are sleeping rough, and the implications that rough sleeping have for safeguarding and community safety.

It is an established fact that people's life expectancy is reduced if they sleep rough regularly and/or over a long period. Sleeping rough also has a devastating effect on a person's health, self-esteem and wellbeing.

As reported in the Government's Rough Sleeping Strategy (August 2018):

- The average age of death for a person who dies whilst living on the streets or in homeless accommodation in England is 47 years, compared to 77 for the general population
- It is estimated that around 35% of people who die whilst sleeping rough or living in homeless accommodation died due to alcohol or drugs, compared to 2% in the general population
- Evidence suggests that homeless people have far higher rates of schizophrenia, anxiety disorders, depression and personality disorders than the general population
- Around 31% of homeless people have complex needs (two or more support needs)
- Evidence suggests that a person's support needs increase the longer they stay on the streets, and also with age
- People who sleep rough are frequently victims of violence and theft. In a survey of 458 homeless people who had slept rough in the past 12 months, one in three reported that they had been deliberately hit or kicked or experienced another form of violence, and more than half reported having their possessions stolen

Community safety

Although the Council's priority is to ensure that people who are sleeping rough receive the help, support and encouragement they need to come off the streets, it must protect the health and safety of the wider community.

The Anti-Social Behaviour Unit and the Community Safety & Engagement Team are responsible for tackling ASB in the town.

ASB that is linked to rough sleeping may include urinating and defecating in the street or shop doorways, aggressive begging, injecting drugs, leaving drug paraphernalia in public places, and street drinking. Members of the public can find this behaviour very intimidating.

Each year, the Council invests a significant amount of time and money in clearing tents, soiled bedding, bloodied needles, human waste and discarded rubbish from sites that have been used, but are then abandoned, by people sleeping rough.

In 2018, the workers who cleared one of those abandoned sites – in the grounds of a church, close to a children's nursery – removed a total of 300 needles, including some that had been concealed in the canvas around the tent poles in order to hurt anyone who attempted to remove them.

Tents, bedding, food and personal possessions will only be removed if they have been abandoned, are obstructing the highway or pose a risk to community safety.

If the Police or the Council are concerned about a particular site and decide that it needs to be cleared, they will normally speak to the occupants during the days before the site is cleared in the hope they can be persuaded to move to another location. This approach usually works.

When a site is cleared, the Police and/or the Council will arrange for any tents, soiled bedding/clothing, food, drugs paraphernalia, human waste and rubbish to be disposed of. Any personal possessions will be put into bags, 'tagged' and placed in storage for 28 days. Relevant agencies will be informed of the action that the people who are affected will need to take to recover their possessions from storage.

4 Please provide details of your understanding of the nature of the work that is currently being undertaken by Northampton Borough Council and local groups, services and organisations to engage with people who are sleeping rough in the borough.

Every week, the Street Outreach Workers undertake at least two outreach sessions (one very early in the morning and the other very late at night) to find, and engage with, people who are sleeping rough in Northampton.

Using the intelligence they have gathered from a variety of sources (including members of the public) the Street Outreach Workers will visit all areas of the borough (including woods, parks and cemeteries) where it is known or suspected that someone may be sleeping rough.

The Street Outreach Workers are assertive, persistent in persuading people to leave the streets, and deliver a consistent message. Often this can take time, especially if the person who is sleeping rough has multiple complex needs and/or has been sleeping rough for a long time.

In addition to the twice-weekly outreach sessions, the Outreach Workers hold regular housing advice surgeries in Oasis House and the Guildhall.

The Street Outreach Workers' priority is to intervene as early as possible in order to prevent homelessness and reduce, to an absolute minimum, the time people spend sleeping rough. To do this, they negotiate with landlords and families and help people access the Nightshelter, local housing projects and the private rented sector.

Many of the people sleeping rough in Northampton have previously been let down by local charities and services. Establishing a rapport with them, and gaining their trust, can take time but this is something that the Outreach Workers are very good at.

More recently, we have found that a small but vociferous group currently operating in Northampton has deliberately undermined the work of the Outreach Workers and actively discouraged homeless people from leaving the streets.

One of the challenges the Street Outreach Workers are facing at the moment was succinctly articulated by one of the people they found sleeping in a shop doorway in Abington Street who said: "I am getting three square meals a day, free clothing, bedding and toiletries, and money from benefits and begging to spend on drugs and alcohol. Why would I want to go into the Nightshelter?"

During a recent outreach session, the Street Outreach Workers found four people who were sleeping rough but were not homeless; they had accommodation but, for a variety of reasons, did not return home that night. The Outreach Team is working to understand and address this.

5 Please provide details of your understanding of how effective Northampton Borough Council and local groups, services and organisations have been in engaging purposefully with people who are sleeping rough and helping them to come off the streets.

The Council is successful – the Single Homelessness Adviser, the Street Outreach Workers and the Nightshelter Team don't give up on people.

A minority of groups and organisations undermine what the Council is doing by refusing, or failing, to share information. This is to the serious detriment of homeless people and is putting their lives at risk.

The Hope Centre, for example, has recently stated (on its website) that 60 people sleep rough in Northampton every night, but it has not provided the Street Outreach Team with details of where they are sleeping rough.

There can be no justification for local groups, services and organisations withholding information that will help the Council and its partners to identify, and engage with, people who are sleeping rough with a view to helping them to come off the streets.

6 What changes would you like Northampton Borough Council and local groups, services and organisations to make in order to engage more effectively with people who are sleeping rough and to help them come off the streets, in a planned way, as quickly as possible?

If everyone works together, we can end the need for people to sleep rough in Northampton. Although this was something that everyone signed up to in 'TOGETHER we change lives', a small number of groups, services and organisations are not sharing information, working in a collaborative, joined-up way and/or delivering a consistent message.

Too many people are condoning rough sleeping and, intentionally or unintentionally, sustaining people on the streets rather than doing everything they can to help them to come off the streets.

What we need is for everyone to become more outcome-focused and to focus on improving the life chances of people who are sleeping rough.

We hear time and time again of the people who have been accessing some services for a number of years but are still sleeping rough or without settled accommodation. It is only right that we ask why that is and what (if anything) have those organisations done to change that?

Engagement is a vital tool in our toolkit, but it must be purposeful and focus on our desired outcome: helping people to leave the streets.

7 In what ways do you think the 'Housing First' model can be used most effectively to reduce rough sleeping in the borough, and in what ways (if any) could your organisation work differently to ensure its success?

The 'Housing First' model could play a key role in meeting the needs of people sleeping rough with complex needs (where our usual approach would not be successful) and we are keen to learn more about how this could work in Northampton.

The Government is planning to undertake an extensive and robust evaluation of its three 'Housing First' pilots and it has given an undertaking to ensure that all learning from these pilots will be used to inform decisions on rollout. The evaluation will begin in autumn 2018

The 'Housing First' model is prescribed and requires appropriate resourcing to ensure successful outcomes.

We will need to carefully consider how we make best use of this model, so that it is a real tool to help the most vulnerable, and does not incentivise disengagement from services, or a refusal to engage with services in hope of being 'fast tracked' into this type of housing.

8 Please provide details of your understanding of the nature and extent of ‘hidden homelessness’ in the borough, including the profile of the people affected and what contact (if any) they have had with Northampton Borough Council, Northampton Partnership Homes and/or other local advice and support providers.

By its very nature, ‘hidden homelessness’ is extremely difficult to quantify.

We are hoping that, as a result of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and the changes we have recently made to our Single Homelessness Service, we will be better equipped in the future to comment on the nature and extent ‘hidden homelessness’ in the Borough.

During Autumn 2018, we will establish a Homelessness Forum and start work on the development of a comprehensive Homelessness Review that will inform the new ‘Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy’.

9 Please can you suggest ways in which services and organisations can connect with, and meaningfully engage with, harder to reach groups?

With such a large number of groups, services and organisations, Northampton is very well placed to engage with harder to reach groups.

It is essential, however, that everyone is committed to sharing information, working together, delivering consistent messages and encouraging them to engage with services that can help them leave the streets.

It is essential, also, that groups – such as Project 16:15 – stop using misinformation and personal abuse on social media to undermine the action that the Street Outreach Workers, the Nightshelter and other organisations are taking to tackle, prevent and reduce rough sleeping.

Misinformation and adversarial ‘posts’ on social media have put the Street Outreach Workers at risk of abuse from those who are sleeping rough and members of the public because of the way they have been portrayed.

Rather than undermining the good work that is being done to tackle, prevent and reduce rough sleeping, everyone should affirm their commitment to ending the need for people to sleep rough and commit to using all of their influence to persuade people to come off the streets.

10 How are data, statistics and demographics gathered and used to meet the needs of men and women who are homeless?

The Council submits quarterly homelessness returns (P1E / HCLIC) to the MHCLG. It also has access to locally collected data, including the Street Outreach Log, the Nightshelter Referrals, the Nightshelter statistics and the Single Homelessness Adviser’s assessments and records.

The new ‘Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy’ will be informed by a range of data and information.

11 What do you think are the main reasons for hidden homelessness and why do you think people sofa surf and are without settled accommodation?

The main reasons are the lack of affordable accommodation in the private sector, shortage of accommodation in the social sector and welfare reforms. Sometimes people do not know what help is available and/or how to access that help. There needs to be a 'one door' approach, more effort needs to be made to increase awareness of the housing options available and all organisations need to make every contact matter.

12 How effective do you think the Council is at informing people and organisations about its homelessness policies and procedures, and in what ways could it improve its communication?

There is a lot of room for improvement.

In response to the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, the Council is seeking to improve the information on its website and in leaflet form, particularly for vulnerable groups. This information will be available in different languages.

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

N/A

14 Do you have any other recommendations for the Scrutiny Panel to consider including within its final report?

N/A

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