



## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

### SCRUTINY PANEL 1 – HOMELESSNESS AND ROUGH SLEEPERS

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 sleepers<sup>1</sup>, consider the best way in which 'Housing First'<sup>2</sup> can be used to reduce rough sleeping in the borough, and understand the nature and extent of 'hidden homelessness'<sup>3</sup> 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.**

Hope runs extensive services for homeless people, including our day centre project running six days a week plus our training, social enterprise and food aid projects. We see approximately 100 people a day who are homeless according to Crisis definitions, of within which, across a week, perhaps 60-80 rough sleepers attend our services. As a result, and drawing from 45 years delivery of service, we believe our understanding of the nature of the problem, its causes and solutions, is unrivalled.

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

Many of the causes are national or even international in causation: the reduction in social rent properties brought about by sale of council houses and the failure to replace these with others of equivalent type. The private rented sector makes up part of the gap but increasingly, and perhaps more so in Northampton, insecurity in private rented tenancies (PRT) is an increasing cause of homelessness and more and more landlords sell, or otherwise harass and evict people they no longer want as tenants; or refuse to let to people on low wages or benefits. Wages in Northampton are low, and work often insecure, and rents high, which compounds the problem.

The problem is heightened by the allocation policies and practice of housing department staff within Northampton Borough, which takes a highly restricted response to the needs of homeless people, usually putting them through barriers and hoops, often hard for both homeless people and referrers to understand, before considering them; and compounding the problem with rules on local connection. The limited access through tough selection criteria and small size of the night shelter adds to rough sleeping specifically.

This assertion is independently evidenced by the report compiled by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism last summer.

We believe there may be as many as 100 street homeless using the Crisis definition which includes people in tents, cars, sheds etc. This figure is based on the number we have assessed since July 2018 and not subsequently to our knowledge housed/died etc.

- 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.**

There is simply no question that rough sleeping is dangerous and damaging to the health; through cold, violence by others, drugs and alcohol, and risk from traffic. The scale of deaths in Northampton, from the data collected by ONS and the BoIJ, is apparently far above that experienced in any other area of comparable size; but to date, despite government instruction that deaths should be reviewed, none have, and the data has instead been quibbled over.

Rough sleepers are more likely to be the victims of violence rather than its perpetrators, although there is a degree of risk between its own members. Women are at heightened risk including of sexual violence and exploitation. There are some associated problems with drunkenness and ASB but people begging and generally on the street often make people assume these problems are all to do with homelessness but often they are not.

**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.**

The Borough provides outreach services and the night shelter, with its move on, and obviously manages general homelessness applications that do not go through the night shelter.

Our view is that these services are run in such a way that is often perceived by service users and workers in other agencies as hostile and punitive towards homeless people, requiring them to navigate sometimes incomprehensible barriers of access, and delivered with a perceived lack of compassion and empathy for their needs. Some parts, like outreach, are far away in tone, coverage and quality from what we would expect to see delivered under this umbrella – we say this with the CEO having managed this function in Northampton on behalf of the council in another agency in the 1990s. Outreach staff never come into the day centre, nor once attended SWEP last year, and their outreach rounds cover a tiny area.

The limitations of the night shelter were demonstrated in the BOIJ report last year, but this followed on from a joint request for changed practice from 3 agencies to the Borough in January 2018 that was ignored by Borough staff until the Bureau's report was published, after which practice was relaxed to at least utilise the full capacity. This is welcome – and the decision to expand it this year, given the pressure on it, welcome too. But the problems of putting barriers and hoops before people can get in and excluding people remain. It is not a night shelter in any true sense. It is a hostel with very high restrictions on access.

As one simple piece of evidence of the hostile attitude cited, when told that a rough sleeper turned away from the night shelter for £80 rent arrears had lost 8 of his toes to frostbite, a council staff member said '*That'll teach him to pay his rent then*'. A further example is the decision, given to us by council staff on 8<sup>th</sup> Jan 2008, not to follow the new guidance on triggering SWEP, seemingly ignoring its advice that this decision should be reached using '*empathy, humanitarian concerns, fairness and common sense*'.

Similarly these attitudes are reflected in the way some within the Borough's housing team and the councillor responsible for housing respond to outside agencies, including but not limited to Hope. There is no attempt at true joint working marked by respect and partnership, that is seen in other areas and was enjoyed here in Northampton under different administrations. We strive to work very closely with Borough staff yet it is an uphill struggle to be acknowledged and receive replies. There is limited attempt on behalf of Borough housing staff to co-work or manage clients with us; information is not shared with us, and there is lack of co-operation. The expectation is all one way in terms of requiring us to supply information but returning almost nothing. We find it consistently hard to get our knowledge and points across to NBC, indeed generally our recommendations and experience are ignored and our efforts dismissed (for example, in the submission made by the council to this committee, September 2018; the behaviour of council staff at the meeting in January 2018 with 3 agencies raising concerns and the subsequent decision not to change admission practice in the light of our combined requests; the at least initial support given by the Council to Midland Heart's decision to evict Hope; the suggestion made by the head of housing that we falsified the figures of the number of street homeless to increase donations). We know this view is shared by other agencies and community groups and leaders from their own experience (look at social media).

The overall failure of the Council's response is reflected in the discrepancy between the target in the strategy, '*to reduce rough sleeping to as near to zero by summer 2017*' and the reality, where there are now possibly 100 or more rough sleepers in the town. Yet we have had it suggested that the failure is not down to the Borough's policy, but to the support Hope and others give to homeless people, sustaining their lifestyle. We disagree: it is housing that helps people leave homelessness; it is not sandwiches that keep people there.

- 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.

We have said much of this above. Overall we believe the council's strategy and practice on homeless leaves a great deal to be desired; exposed negatively in external independent national scrutiny; as having achieved the alienation of the faith, community and voluntary sectors; a failure to hit its own targets, and the creation of lack of hope amidst large sections of the client group that any help is available to them, which is why they fail to even bother accessing council services (Cllr Hibbert identified this problem in his BBC interview, 8<sup>th</sup> Jan, blaming them for their failure to engage, rather than recognising they often see no point).

The Council achieves some effectiveness with the comparatively restricted cohort of men whom it chooses to accept and to work with, by being able to

offer housing. But it fails to encourage people to attend Hope or any other services and at times has attempted to duplicate work support services we already provide rather than refer to our proven and successful provision; the exchange of information back to Hope is poor and lack of communication woeful (eg after October 18<sup>th</sup>, re SWEF, until the recent issues, no-one from the Borough had responded to any of the requests from Hope to plan for its triggering nor take any of the actions it promised to do). With a better attitude on the part of the council's staff, services could work together very effectively, but there seems to be no willingness to engage with us or anyone else in a constructive manner.

Other services have effectiveness. We believe that Hope is a paradigm for quality in day services, but what we do is dismissed openly by such figures as Councillor Hibbert in the media (cf Jan 8<sup>th</sup>, BBC Northampton). We believe we in the very forefront of achievement in offering services that advance people's lives, skills, confidence and management of their problems, but that none of this is recognised by certain members of the council's staff and Cllr Hibbert. There is effectiveness in what NAASH does too.

- 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?

Sadly we believe really fundamental changes in attitude and practice are needed: With an open and listening approach by the NBC housing team, we would be able to work in collaboration not conflict. NBC should work properly in partnership and respect with external agencies like Hope and others, sharing decision making and working together in equality. NBC could readily and simply improve its reputation with peers, community leaders, the community and the client group, with a better attitude and less arrogance on the part of the council's staff. NBC should adopt more compassionate and fair attitudes and working practices when engaging with homeless people and voluntary agencies and community groups. You could contract with us or others to provide services instead of doing it all yourselves. You could listen and not judge. We believe outsourcing, and stepping back from direct provision is the way forward, as it was in the past, in an era when the problem was managed with compassion and fairness and good relationships existed between the council and the voluntary and community sector.

- 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?

We believe that housing first is a good way forward for some street homeless people and we would be willing to provide, if funded to have the capacity, support for people in tenancies; we would of course work to identify people for housing. It's obvious; housing is one of the best ways to solve homelessness, alongside the proper support which we are well placed to provide.

- 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.

There are possibly thousands of people who are in practice in some way de facto 'homeless' in our town; young people forced to stay with their parents; people sharing flats etc, alongside the street homeless, of whom there may be over 100 (this figure derives from our assessment completed via the Saturday service we provide). Our main expertise is with the latter and we have given details of what we think to be their numbers. Groups in specific communities – LGBT, ethnic minorities - are particularly hidden.

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

Funding agencies like Hope and others to do real outreach work based on wanting to help them, not on wanting to exclude them.

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

We know that the official figures understate the level of the problem in every category. For example the rough sleeper figure given in street counts, by ignoring the latitude in the guidance to include people who by common sense could be judged to be homeless, was and is inaccurate and this has led to non-allocation of central government funding as a result (we have seen correspondence from the Government department with Borough staff obtained via FOI requests that have been passed to us by others).

- 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?

We have said all this above. Many homeless people do not present to the council and refuse to attend because of the attitudes we have described above. They know this what they are going to experience and don't need more pain in their lives. They would rather sleep in a tent.

- 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?

Communication is very poor indeed, between services and to the public.

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

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

We have said all we need to say.