

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

MINUTES OF SCRUTINY PANEL 1 - HOMELESSNESS AND ROUGH SLEEPERS

Thursday, 24 January 2019

COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillor Cathrine Russell (Chair), Councillor Zoe Smith (Deputy Chair); Councillors Sally Beardsworth, Jane Birch and Gareth Eales

Witnesses Robin Burgess, Chief Executive, Hope Centre
Steve Jones, Northampton Jesus Fellowship

Councillor Danielle Stone

Officers Phil Harris, Head of Housing and Wellbeing
Tracy Tiff, Scrutiny Officer
Kallie Jones, Single Homelessness Adviser (Observing)

Members of the Public Richard Johnson, Street Pastors
Tara Scarth, Client Services Manager, Hope Centre

1. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received from Ian Bates, Co Optee.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

3. DEPUTATIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESSES

Councillor Danielle Stone and Richard Johnson addressed the Scrutiny Panel.

Councillor Stone circulated a written paper to the Panel and elaborated upon it. She made reference to the number of people sleeping in doorways and in the encampments in church yards, and said that government policy was to blame.

Councillor Stone said that the Council should do everything it can to tackle visible homelessness and invisible homelessness, and she expressed concern about the safety and wellbeing of female rough sleepers some of whom report being sexually assaulted on the streets.

The Scrutiny Panel asked questions of Councillor Stone and heard:

- In response to Councillor Stone's comment regarding abuse of women on streets, the Head of Housing and Wellbeing said it is essential such crimes are reported.
- The Panel was surprised by Councillor Stone's claim that women and children were sofa surfing and the Head of Housing and Wellbeing confirmed that he had not received any reports of this nature from Councillor Stone.
- Councillor Stone advised the Panel that some women with children are going into temporary accommodation but have not felt safe because they were sharing the temporary accommodation with people who were not known to them and felt vulnerable, so had left and gone to sleep on a friend's floor. The Head of Housing and Wellbeing confirmed that he had not received any reports of this nature from Councillor Stone and that there are currently no homeless families living in shared temporary accommodation.

Councillor Stone was thanked for her address.

Richard Johnson, Street Pastor, addressed the Scrutiny Panel commenting that, in his opinion, the town has a housing crisis, with homelessness rising to unprecedented levels and with a corresponding increase in rough sleeping. In his view, the housing crisis has been caused by the policies of Central Government – the lack of house building, cuts in welfare, the shared accommodation housing benefit rate for the under 35s, bedroom tax, a cap on benefits, no cap on rents. He added that landlords evict families for no reason other than putting up rents and converting properties into HMOs. Mr Johnson felt that there had been a huge loss of supported housing for mental health patients, ex-offenders and older people. He felt this was exacerbated by local conditions, particularly hidden homelessness. He queried the data and monitoring.

Mr Johnson concluded his address by commenting on the need for a more proactive approach. He asked for Northampton to revisit its Policy.

The Scrutiny Panel asked questions and heard:

- A recent ROC meeting had taken place with over 70 attendees.
- The Scrutiny Panel needs to look at the 2016 Rough Sleeping Strategy and put forward any recommendations for change.

Richard Johnson was thanked for his address.

4. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 8 November 2018 were signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record.

5. WITNESS EVIDENCE

(A) HEAD OF PSYCHOLOGICAL THERAPIES, NMHT

The Head of Psychological Therapies, NMHT, had sent his apologies and would attend the next meeting of the Scrutiny Panel.

(B) CHIEF EXECUTIVE, NORTHAMPTON HOPE CENTRE

Robin Burgess, Chief Executive, Hope Centre, presented his written response to the core questions, as attached to the agenda, and elaborated upon it. He said that, in his opinion, there is a failure of partnership working, a breakdown of trust and no attempt to engage with the Hope Centre. Mr Burgess added that the town has a real problem with rough sleeping and that, in the last 15 months, 17 people had died. He referred to female rough sleepers being raped and sexually assaulted and said that, although homeless women often do not want to report these crimes, it is important that they do.

The Scrutiny Panel made comment, asked questions and heard:

- It was suggested that an independent body could be brought in to help improve communication between the various agencies.
- It was acknowledged that it can take years to overcome some of the barriers that rough sleepers face. Helping Eastern European rough sleepers is very difficult.
- The Scrutiny Panel commented on the need to stabilise and rehabilitate people in order that they can live normal lives. Counselling does help, but may come later.
- Mr Burgess said there needs to be change: true partnership and respect.
- Mr Burgess said he felt that there is a hardened approach in Northampton and the Council needs to adopt a more considerate attitude and view to homeless people.
- Mr Burgess confirmed that Hope does not do outreach work. It does not supply tents, sleeping bags or food on the streets. He said there are lots of outreach programmes running and, in his opinion, there was too many individuals involved.

Councillor Stephen Hibbert, Cabinet Member for Housing and Wellbeing addressed the Scrutiny Committee, saying that he disagreed with many of the opinions expressed in the written response submitted to the core questions by the Hope Centre's Chief Executive.

He said that all agencies are seeking the same outcome – to help people off the streets – and went on to challenge the accuracy of a number of Mr Burgess' claims.

The Scrutiny Panel made comment, asked questions and heard:

- It was thought that there has been a breakdown in communication.

- The Chair commented that Greater Manchester's ethos is "about people rather than politics"

Mr Burgess was thanked for providing a response to the core questions, which will inform the evidence base of this Scrutiny Review.

(C) DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH, NCC

The written response of the Director of Public Health, NCC was noted. The response will inform the evidence base of this Scrutiny Review.

(D) CHIEF EXECUTIVE, CENTRAL AND NORTANTS CAB

A response to the core questions of the Scrutiny Panel from Chief Executive, Central and Northants CAB was not received.

(E) MANAGER, NORTHAMPTON SALVATION ARMY

A response to the core questions of the Scrutiny Panel from the Manager, Salvation Army was not received.

(F) MANAGER, NORTHAMPTON JESUS FELLOWSHIP

Steven Jones, Manager, of Northampton Jesus Fellowship, Abington Centre addressed the Scrutiny Panel. He had been in post for 15 years. He commented that he was keen to be involved in partnership working to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping.

Mr Jones said it is vital for his organisation to know where to refer people. There is a need for agencies to share information about what they do and how they can help. Each has a lot of expertise. He explained that the Northampton Jesus Fellowship had sent representatives to the recent ROC discussions and believed that there is a lot of potential and a lot happening in the town but it is not joined up.

The Northampton Jesus Fellowship is open Monday to Friday. It has a drop-in ("Step Up") for two hours every morning. Between 70 - 80 people visit the organisation on Sundays. Attendance has increased significantly during the past year and is now around twice what it was a year ago. Mr Jones felt that Universal Credit has had an impact and there is now a large representation from Eastern Europe.

Mr Jones advised the Scrutiny Panel that the Northampton Jesus Fellowship has an excellent relationship with the Council's Street Outreach Workers who visit the building regularly. Although he will always signpost homeless people to the Guildhall for advice on housing, he does sometimes wonder whether the person gets there. He is very keen on the idea of the Street Outreach Workers having an 'Advice Desk' at the Northampton Jesus Fellowship in order to provide on-the-spot advice.

Mr Jones explained that some of the people who visit the Northampton Jesus Fellowship have lost their ID, are sleeping in tents and trying to maintain a job from a tent. There is a need to work with them to make private rent affordable without a big deposit; there is a

need for discussions with private landlords. Mr Jones felt that Housing First is an interesting approach.

The Scrutiny Panel made comment, asked questions and heard:

- It was suggested that it would be useful for a booklet, or similar, to be produced, listing the agencies that people could be signposted to. This was agreed as a potential recommendation of the final report.
- It was also suggested that the Street Outreach Workers are asked to attend the Northampton Jesus Fellowship to speak with clients.

Mr Jones was thanked for his address; the information would inform the evidence base of this Scrutiny Review.

(G) CHAIRS AND CO CHAIRS OF THE VARIOUS NORTHAMPTON COMMUNITY FORUMS

A response to the core questions of the Scrutiny Panel from the Chairs and Co Chairs of the various Northampton Community Forums was not received.

6. WRITTEN EVIDENCE

(A) HOMELESSLINK

A response to the core questions of the Scrutiny Panel from HomelessLink was not received.

(B) NORTHANTS HEALTHWATCH

The written response from Northants HealthWatch was noted, the details would inform the evidence base of this Scrutiny Review.

7. SITE VISIT

The Chair advised that she, along with the Deputy Chair and NBC's Housing Options & Advice Manager had undertaken a site visit to Great Manchester which covers ten local authority areas. They had met with the Strategic Lead for Homelessness.

The Authority has a number of community facilities, including a Winter Shelter and Community Centre. Everyone receives the same service. There is good partnership working with voluntary agencies. The necessary resources are provided.

The Deputy Chair said she had observed that everyone was proud in what they did but still knew more could be done. Data is inputted onto one system and is shared by all agencies. There is good engagement with the voluntary sector. The Winter Shelter in Manchester has proper beds and the homeless people who stay there are awarded Housing Benefit which is paid direct to the Shelter.

It was suggested that a potential recommendation of the final report could be that post unitary, discussions are held regarding the sharing of data to all agencies.

The update on the site visit to Manchester was noted.

At this point the Head of Housing and Wellbeing gave the Scrutiny Panel an update on SWEP and the Winter Shelter. Over 50 people had volunteered so far in 2019 and it had been staffed by an NBC Officer. The Winter Shelter had opened on 17 January 2019 and had closed on the morning of 24 January 2019. During this 7 day period, 58 people had used the facility. Patterns of use will be recorded and monitored.

Mr Harris advised that more volunteers were needed and it was hoped that the Winter Shelter might operate as an all-weather Winter Shelter from February until 31 March 2019.

Statistics for the use of the SWEP centre were given and Mr Harris confirmed that these would be published on the Council's website.

A potential recommendation of the final report was suggested – public donations could be used to fund rent for three months for those homeless people (mainly East European) who are not eligible for benefits but would be considered by NAASH if the rent was guaranteed.

The meeting concluded at 7:43 pm