

**North East Derbyshire District Council**

**Cabinet**

**10 April 2019**

**Homelessness Scrutiny Review**

**Report of Councillor T Reader - Chair of the Communities Scrutiny Committee**

This report is public

**Purpose of the Report**

- To ask Cabinet to approve the recommendations of the Communities Scrutiny Committee's Review of Homelessness.

**1 Report Details**

1.1 The Communities Scrutiny Committee agreed to undertake a review of Homelessness as part of its work programme for 2018/19. The review panel thought it timely to review the Council's response to the recent introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

1.2 The review aimed to:-

- Review the District Council's Homelessness Service following the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act to ensure the Council was responding effectively to it.
- Gain an understanding of what homelessness is and the implications for the District Council.
- Consider how well the District Council is working with partners.
- Review the effectiveness of the Homelessness Forum.
- Identify any areas for improvement.

1.3 The Review Panel met on seven occasions and considered a variety of information to gain an understanding of the subject area, including receiving a scene setting presentation from the Housing Options Team Leader. The Review Panel interviewed a range of officers, including the Housing Options Team and representatives from Bolsover District Council, Chesterfield Borough Council and the Probation Service. They also discussed a Homeless case study anonymously with a local Councillor. The full report attached at **Appendix 1** sets out in more detail the evidence gathered and a synopsis of the views expressed.

1.4 The recommendations are:

- That consideration be given to further options the Council can pursue to improve the provision of temporary housing, including accommodation suitable for disabled people
- That a review of the Allocations Policy (Cross Party) to include allocations and bandings takes place.
- That the Council develop some relevant local performance indicators for the Homelessness service to facilitate monitoring of the response to the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act, 2017
- That the Homelessness Forum consider how they can encourage the Police, the Fire Service and GP's to provide a commitment that they will also undertake the duty to refer provision
- That the Council release it's funding to the Housing Options Manager and ring fence the funding for the purpose of Homelessness.
- That Rykneld Homes consider how they can raise awareness of the respective roles of officers and councillors
- That the Council discuss with the Probation Services how the Council could undertake triage in the local prison proportionate to our numbers of homeless cases
- That the Authority consider any further actions they can take to assist service users with their Universal Credit applications
- That the Authority consider whether there are any appropriate measures they could take to raise awareness of potential exploitation of homeless people

**2 Conclusion and Reason for Recommendations**

2.1 The Review Panel identified a number of measures the Council was taking to ensure it was responding effectively to the Homelessness Reduction Act. However, some areas for improvement which would enhance current provision were identified.

2.2 To support the Council in ensuring our communities are safe and healthy places to live and that we provide our customers with excellent service.

**3 Consultation and Equality Impact**

3.1 As detailed in the full report.

**4 Alternative Options and Reasons for Rejection**

4.1 Not applicable

## 5 Implications

### 5.1 Finance and Risk Implications

5.1.1 This will be determined if Cabinet decide to accept the Scrutiny Review recommendations as part of the Lead Officer response.

### 5.2 Legal Implications including Data Protection

5.2.1 These will be determined if Cabinet decide to accept the Scrutiny Review recommendations as part of the Lead Officer response.

### 5.3 Human Resources Implications

5.3.1 This will be determined if Cabinet decide to accept the Scrutiny Review recommendations as part of the Lead Officer response.

## 6 Recommendations

6.1 To ask Cabinet to consider the recommendations in paragraph 1.4 of the Communities Scrutiny Committee report and if accepted ask officers to provide a response in consultation with the relevant Portfolio Holder;

6.2 That the recommendations set out in paragraph 1.1 – 1.9 of Appendix 1 be agreed; and;

6.3 Officers, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing be requested to respond accordingly to the Scrutiny Committee.

## 7 Decision Information

<b>Is the decision a Key Decision?</b> A Key Decision is an executive decision which has a significant impact on two or more District wards or which results in income or expenditure to the Council above the following thresholds: <i>BDC:</i> Revenue - £75,000 <input type="checkbox"/> Capital - £150,000 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>NEDDC:</i> Revenue - £100,000 <input type="checkbox"/> Capital - £250,000 <input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Please indicate which threshold applies	No
<b>Is the decision subject to Call-In?</b> (Only Key Decisions are subject to Call-In)	No
<b>District Wards Affected</b>	N/A
<b>Links to Corporate Plan priorities or Policy Framework</b>	N/A

**8 Document Information**

Appendix No	Title	
1	Homelessness Scrutiny Review	
<b>Background Papers</b> (These are unpublished works which have been relied on to a material extent when preparing the report. They must be listed in the section below. If the report is going to Cabinet (NEDDC) or Executive (BDC) you must provide copies of the background papers)		
Report Author		Contact Number
Sue Veerman Overview & Scrutiny Manager		(01246) 217060

AGIN 4 (CAB 0410) 2019 – Homelessness Scrutiny Review/AJD

**NORTH EAST DERBYSHIRE  
DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY  
HOMELESSNESS**

**March 2019**

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## **Chair's Foreword**

It gives me great pleasure to present this report on behalf of the scrutiny review panel of the Communities Scrutiny Committee. It details findings, conclusions and recommendations from its review into Homelessness and how the Council is responding to The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

For the purpose of the short review period the Committee made contact with a number of stakeholders including, colleagues at other neighbouring councils, probation and colleagues at Rykneld homes to name a few.

The Committee are pleased that North East Derbyshire District Council has hit the ground running when the act came into force and we felt very much that there has been positive steps to supporting the people of North East Derbyshire who are unfortunate to find themselves homeless.

The Committee heard from a number of different sources and it was especially interesting to hear from probation and hear how homelessness can lead to re-offending.

It was also very useful to get information from Rykneld colleagues regarding the limitations councillors roles have when it comes to allocations, which has led the committee to feel that further guidance be offered to councillors around the area and also that a full review of the allocations policy take place with all councillors being involved.

I do hope that the recommendations contained in the report are considered and that the Council will agree that the review contributes to supporting the people of North East Derbyshire whilst supporting our council with its duty under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

I would like to extend a personal thank you to all of our stakeholders and everyone who took part in the review. Thank you to all the scrutiny panel members who made the process so enjoyable and interesting. I would also like to extend a special thanks to the Scrutiny Manager Sue Veerman for her hard work and without her input this review would not have been possible.

Kindest regards

Councillor T Reader  
Chair of Communities Scrutiny Committee

## **Review Panel**

The review panel comprised the following members:

Councillor T Reader	-	(Labour) – Review Panel Chair
Councillor W Armitage	-	(Conservative)
Councillor B Barnes	-	(Labour)
Councillor L Blanshard	-	(Conservative)
Councillor M Foster	-	(Conservative)
Councillor C Hunt	-	(Labour)
Councillor D Marriott	-	(Labour)
Councillor L Robinson	-	(Labour)
Councillor C Tite	-	(Labour)

## **1. Recommendations**

- 1.1 That consideration be given to further options the Council can pursue to improve the provision of temporary housing, including accommodation suitable for disabled people
- 1.2 That a review of the Allocations Policy (Cross Party) to include allocations and bandings takes place.
- 1.3 That the Council develop some relevant local performance indicators for the Homelessness service to facilitate monitoring of the response to the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act, 2017
- 1.4 That the Homelessness Forum consider how they can encourage the Police, the Fire Service and GP's to provide a commitment that they will also undertake the duty to refer provision
- 1.5 That the Council release it's funding to the Housing Options Manager and ring fence the funding for the purpose of Homelessness.
- 1.6 That Rykneld Homes consider how they can raise awareness of the respective roles of officers and councillors
- 1.7 That the Council discuss with the Probation Services how the Council could undertake triage in the local prison proportionate to our numbers of homeless cases
- 1.8 That the Authority consider any further actions they can take to assist service users with their Universal Credit applications
- 1.9 That the Authority consider whether there are any appropriate measures they could take to raise awareness of potential exploitation of homeless people

## **2. Introduction**

- 2.1 At its meeting on 8<sup>th</sup> June, 2018 the Communities Scrutiny Committee agreed to undertake a review of Homelessness.
- 2.2 The review panel thought it timely to review the Council's response to the recent introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act, 2017.

## **3. Scope of Review**

- 3.1 The review aimed to:
  - Review the District Councils Homelessness service following the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act to ensure the Council was responding effectively to it



- Gain an understanding of what homelessness is and the implications for the District Council
- Consider how well the District Council is working with partners
- Review the effectiveness of the Homelessness Forum
- Identify any areas for improvement

#### **4. Method of Review**

- 4.1 The review panel met on seven occasions to consider the scope of the review, key issues they wanted to discuss and key people they wished to interview.
- 4.2 Evidence was gathered in a variety of ways including written sources and interviews with a range of stakeholders.

#### **5. Evidence and Research**

- 5.1 A number of documents and evidence were provided to the review panel for consideration. Details are provided below:
- Presentation by the Housing Options Team Leader to set the scene on what Homelessness was and how the service is delivered in the Council following the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act.
  - Housing Options/Homelessness Prevention 2017/18 report
  - An Easy Read Guide To Your Tenancy Agreement
  - Homelessness Service User Survey
  - Presentation by Deventio Housing Trust
  - Choice Based Lettings and Allocations Policy

#### **6. Key Findings**

##### **6.1 Strengths/Observations**

##### **6.1.1 Housing Options Team**

The review panel heard evidence from external stakeholders on how the Housing Options Team (Homelessness) were viewed. Several comments were made that they were considered to be a knowledgeable team who had implemented the Housing Reduction Act well. It was expressed by many

external stakeholders that their approach both to colleagues and to users of the service was open, empathetic and they had received positive feedback on the service. Other comments received included that the Manager was receptive to ideas and was driving the service on and that the team at North East Derbyshire were cracking. They have a can do attitude and I think you can be proud of the service as a Council, as it is above average.

From the interviews carried out with members of the Housing Options team it was clear that there was recognition and understanding of the complexity of some Homeless people's situation and issues they may be dealing with such as mental ill health and drug use. It was stated that it was important to understand that inter agency working was required to help people. This was a view shared by external stakeholders. Whilst a home was very important it may not be the only issue that needed to be addressed. Within the team staff spoke highly of the manager and vice versa. A member of staff when asked about what they do when contacted by a customer said we always respond and explain people's rights and what the Council can do to help them. We aim to prevent them from becoming homeless. If people are homeless we will see them within a day and get them accommodation. Comments were made by the staff about trying to make the service approachable and reference was made to a new interview room that had been provided to create a more family friendly environment.

#### 6.1.2 Awareness/Training

All stakeholders felt that the Council had undertaken a lot of promotion of the service regarding what it can offer and letting people know how it has changed. Lots of posters had been displayed and information included on the Councils website. A lot of information was also given to customers. It was stated that a lot of training had been provided following the introduction of The Homelessness Reduction Act. Examples of training provided included working with social care, the call centre and Rykneld Homes. It had also developed good links with other authorities. Work had additionally been undertaken around hospital discharge of homeless people and a prison release protocol had been developed. The review panel was also advised that information packs had been provided to local offices regarding what was expected of them, thereby ensuring there was a consistent approach to delivery of the service.

#### 6.1.3 Partnership Working

A large amount of evidence demonstrated that the team were working well in partnership. Positive feedback was received from both partners and outside agencies that the team were responsive and always prepared to discuss and share ideas. Reference was made by several stakeholders about the amount of joint working taking place. Prevention was done jointly and it was felt it was very good. Reference was made to The Derbyshire Officer Group which stakeholders considered a good strong group with a strategic focus. They felt it ensured commonality of service across Derbyshire. Two neighbouring Councils mentioned that North East Derbyshire District Council, Bolsover and

Chesterfield are working well together, sharing good practice and a training network but also linking with other Councils. The review panel was advised that all of Derbyshire was sharing processes and it was working well. A joint portal had been established and this meant that processes could be joined and grants could be pooled. Several external stakeholders said they appreciated the opportunity to take part in the Scrutiny Review and they thought it was a positive sign that the Council recognised the importance of this area.

Partners also mentioned that they have a good relationship with the Councils Call Centre, Revenues and Benefits Section, Discretionary Housing Payments Team and with Action Housing, the Law Centre, and the Citizen Advice Bureau. They also had regular contact with Rykneld Homes and Derby Welfare Rights. They commented that the Social Care response was not as good but recognised the pressures they were working under and said that they do work with the Council where needed. Pathways, which was an initiative for single people to be helped from the age of 18 years, had recently been launched and was working well. It was helping the teams to reach as many people as possible. Work with the Empty properties project to bring houses back into use was also taking place. Events were being held like the recent private landlord event, to help build relationships and improve provision. A discussion with an officer from the Department of Work and Pensions on Universal credit had also been held.

#### 6.1.4 Temporary Accommodation/Private Rented Accommodation

A number of comments were made for improvement of accommodation provision as mentioned below in 6.2.1. However, the Homeless team advised the panel that they did monitor temporary accommodations and the use of Bed and Breakfast facilities. They were currently discussing with Rykneld Homes to see if anything further could be done to improve provision. They were also looking to undertake a comparison exercise with other Local Authorities to see how they run their temporary accommodation. The Council additionally offered support to private landlords on their responsibilities, as some were not professional landlords. They were encouraged to contact the team and a good relationship had been developed with them. The panel was advised that the biggest reason for eviction was landlords selling their properties. Therefore, this work had the potential to support the team when seeking to prevent evictions by landlords because of the help, education and good relationships that had been established.

The review panel also heard from the Assistant Director of Strategy from Deventio Housing Trust on the work they undertake with homeless people. This project aimed to deliver sustainable solutions to hospital in-patients who are homeless and high impact users of urgent care. They provide advice, advocacy and practical interventions. Deventio used a Housing First model of delivery and had workers based both in hospital and in the Community. The organisation worked with a number of partners including Councils and the NHS. The Assistant Director provided information on the funding arrangements of the organisation, an overview of the statistics and

demographics for North East Derbyshire and detailed the positive impacts the Housing Trust had achieved in the Councils area. This included 34 people who had been housed and received support plus 163 people had received advice and advocacy interventions and there had been an overall reduction in the use of urgent care by 93.33%.

#### 6.1.5 Night shelter

The Review panel heard positive feedback about the provision of a Night Shelter in Chesterfield that provided accommodation on very cold nights. The Government had provided some funding for the provision and this was supplemented by financial support from NEDDC, CBC and BDC. The Shelter was also supported by local Churches who take it in turn to host the provision. This was helped by volunteers and some paid staff. Several stakeholders stated this had been a great success. It helped to keep costs down on cold weather provision and provided a safe, welcoming environment. In support of this there was a zero tolerance policy of people who presented drunk or in a state. People were welcomed as a guest but it was made clear that if behaviour wise they were not ok they would be asked to leave. Staff and other service users' safety was important.

#### 6.1.6 Homelessness Forum

Stakeholders were asked for their views on the effectiveness of the Homelessness Forum that had been established. This Forum was made up of a collection of agencies and had been developed by NEDDC, CBC and BDC. Partners participating in the forum included other Councils, the Police, the Fire Service and the NHS. Comments received included that it was well attended, partners had lots of enthusiasm and it provided a framework for delivering the service and the homelessness strategy. Meetings that had taken place had facilitated a discussion of ideas, sharing of best practice and created an understanding of what each of the participants can do. Every session had discussed various parts of the Act like the Duty to Refer provision. It had also led to the setting up of training for other partners and Councillors. The Forum has outcomes set up which was positive as some stakeholders commented that in the past groups could be talking shops with no actions.

### 6.2 Areas for Improvement/Observations

#### 6.2.1 Temporary Accommodation/Private Rented Accommodation

Temporary accommodation was an issue raised by several stakeholders, all of whom felt there was not enough available. One officer stated all stock is usually full as it was in great demand. All stakeholders who commented said they were using similar bed and breakfast in Chesterfield. All made the same point that they did not think that bed and breakfast use was ideal and it was also expensive. However, they said they had little choice but to use it as a last resource. Lack of provision, particularly for disabled people or people with mobility issues was also specifically raised. There was no supported

accommodation but the Homeless officer stated that they still find a solution if people stay engaged with the team. However, the general consensus was that both additional disabled access accommodation and more supported housing needed to be provided. All also agreed there was a need to improve access to the private rented sector. If the Council had different types of accommodation available it would make it easy to find homes for people.

### 6.2.2 Allocations Policy

Officers from Rykneld Homes attended the review on two occasions to discuss with the panel how the Choice Based Lettings and Allocations Policy operated. This discussion was very helpful. Members had considered some information provided on a case study with a local Councillor who was supporting a homeless couple. She provided evidence of the experience she had during the process. The panel also then discussed further experiences some members had in similar cases. These cases were discussed anonymously to protect the identity of the people involved.

A further discussion was also held on how the Allocations Policy operated for people who had mental ill health and service personnel suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Evidence was provided from the Housing Policy and Intelligence Officer – Housing Strategy on some proposed minor wording amendments to the policy that were currently being finalised. The panel welcomed these suggestions.

Arising out of these discussions the panel expressed frustration that they felt they could not fully fulfil their role as local councillors in supporting their constituents. They felt strongly that there must be more that they could do and asked that Rykneld Homes produce some guidelines to help Councillors understand what role they can play. It was also suggested that a reporting system that Councillors could use would be useful. As there was a current review ongoing of the Allocations Policy the panel said they would like to see the establishment of a cross party working party to go through the policy with officers and link into the current policy review. One area for discussion identified would be the scope for officer discretion on banding for real crisis situations.

### 6.2.3 Performance Monitoring

In answer to a question on how stakeholders were monitoring the Councils response to the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act several stakeholders commented that it was still early days for measuring outcomes since the Act came into force. They supported the need to undertake this monitoring but thought it would be a few months before any meaningful results would be available. The use of the Locator system would prove useful in producing statistics to help inform stakeholders and all eight Districts were signed up to it. They said it definitely needed to happen but felt that any national indicators provided needed to be meaningful and effective. Some stakeholders commented on the quality of the previous performance indicators

for Homelessness and stated that they were not considered good ones. The panel was also advised that as previously mentioned a comparison exercise with other Local Authorities was being undertaken by the service to see how they run their temporary accommodation and it was hoped this exercise would be completed by January.

#### 6.2.4 Duty to refer

The Homelessness Reduction Act had introduced a provision that placed a duty on specific public authorities to refer services users who they think may be homeless or threatened with homelessness to the local authority's Housing Options/Homelessness team. This requirement included such partners as Local Councils, Social Service Authorities, Job Centres, Emergency Departments and Hospitals. The thinking behind this measure was that it would help ensure services were working together effectively to prevent homelessness by ensuring that peoples housing needs were considered when they come into contact with public authorities. However, some stakeholders felt that others who had not been included on the list like General Practitioners, the Police and the Fire Service needed to give a commitment that they would also refer as they all came into contact with homeless people needing assistance. One example quoted was rough sleepers who can cause fires which the fire service have to deal with.

#### 6.2.5 Funding

Funding was raised by several stakeholders. During discussion on the funding available to Councils the view was expressed that government funding was not huge. Homelessness prevention grant differs between organisations yearly and there was also a flexible health and support grant. The Homelessness Reduction Act new burdens element had also been provided but it was a small amount of money. Partners had realised that to get more services Councils benefitted by putting the money together. It was stated that this ensured better value for money if joint bids were made. However, it was suggested that the bidding process for national funds could be improved by the Government providing a longer lead in time. This would help officers to prepare and plan their bids and assess better what was required.

The other issue raised with the review panel was the non-ring-fencing of the homelessness grant to the Homelessness service at North East Derbyshire. Currently it was held in the general fund to cover other resources such as staffing. Several stakeholders felt it would help if this funding came to the homelessness budget to be available for direct service provision. One external partner commented I can keep the grant and the new burdens element and it is a god send as it allows me to commission service and provides for initiatives like The Hub (point of contact) and the night service.

#### 6.2.6 Rykneld Homes

Rykneld Homes look after the Councils housing stock on behalf of the District Council. They are responsible for operating the Choice Based Lettings and Allocations Policy and are therefore involved in the rehousing of homeless people. Comments were made that the organisation had done a lot for tenants and the social housing provision they provided was of a good standard. Several stakeholders said they had regular contact with Rykneld Homes on Homelessness. However, members of the review panel felt that it would be helpful if the respective roles of officers and Councillors could be clarified for some more junior members of staff to ensure they were aware of the democratic legitimacy of elected members.

#### 6.2.7 Prisoner Release

A representative from the Probation Service attended a session of the review panel and provided a useful insight into the support he provides, as a Housing Welfare Officer, to people leaving prisons who may be homeless. He commented that he thought based on his own experience and feedback from his team that the Council was responding well to the new Act. He had a good relationship with the team and he attended the Homelessness Forum which he would encourage other local authorities to engage with.

When asked whether he had any ideas for improvement he suggested the Council consider whether it could participate in triage surgeries in local prisons. He recognised that the numbers of homeless prisoners being released for the Council were not huge and resource may be an issue. He referred to the timescale the authority has to respond to a possible homeless case which is now increased to 56 days and felt that anything that can be done early before the prisoner is released would be beneficial. He also advised the panel that some short term prisoners do not have 56 days to sort accommodation issues before they are released. Accommodation he said was a major factor in helping to prevent reoffending.

#### 6.2.8 Universal Credit

The impacts arising from the implementation of Universal Credit were raised by stakeholders and a number of comments made. These included that some people were being pushed into rent arrears which appeared to be more prevalent. Some people's accounts were being frozen and their application could take five weeks to be processed which was causing difficulties. One stakeholder said she suspected Universal Credit would be dire for some people, especially those in private rented accommodation where rents are higher.

The review panel were also mindful that applying for benefits online for many people who are homeless could be an issue. Some people may not have an online facility or for a variety of reasons may have difficulties with this method. Concern was expressed that this may lead to some people becoming homeless because they had been unable to access benefits. Reference was

made to some steps being taken to help in this area including holding an initial event with the Department of Works and Pensions which if successful could be held perhaps three times a year. Additionally the Communities Scrutiny Committee had been advised that the Council had been helping people in this process, with funding provided for this purpose. However, this provision was due to finish and this assistance would be relocated to another agency.

#### 6.2.9 Risk of Exploitation of Homeless People

The review panel discussed how we could improve exploitation awareness of vulnerable people who may be homeless. Concerns were raised that people who were homeless could be exploited in various forms but one member raised specific concerns regarding people undertaking casual work such as car washing. The review panel felt it would be useful to consider whether there was any action the Authority could take in this area.

### **7. Conclusions**

- 7.1 The review panel heard views from a wide range of stakeholders both internal and external during the review. It identified a number of measures the Council was taking to ensure it was responding effectively to the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act. The commitment that internal staff and partners had to work together and meet the challenge of preventing homelessness was very evident.
- 7.2 However, some areas for improvement which would enhance the current provision were identified around temporary housing provision, performance monitoring, policy review, funding and some additional support measures that the Council may wish to investigate further.



## **Appendix A**

### **Stakeholders Engaged During the Review**

D Bonsor	-	Bolsover District Council
J Carpenter	-	Deventio Housing Trust – Assistant Director Strategy
M Connell	-	Choice Move Allocations Officer – Rykneld Homes
R Dixon	-	Housing Options Team (Prevention)
C Griffiths	-	Chesterfield Borough Council
J Hobbs	-	Probation Service
D Parker	-	Housing Policy and Intelligence Officer – Housing Strategy
J Kirkwood	-	Housing Options Team (Homelessness)
L Pepper	-	Housing Options Team Leader
J Richardson	-	Accommodation and Prevention Officer
K Rouse	-	Councillor
H Summers	-	Head of Neighbourhoods – Rykneld Homes

Survey of service users  
Case Study