

Report to the Health Improvement Board

Homelessness Prevention Activity in Oxfordshire

This report is for information.

Background

The Health Improvement Board has agreed the prevention of homelessness as a key priority for housing and health inequality issues.

Local housing authorities are required by legislation to periodically carry out a review of the homelessness situation in their area and to develop their strategy for reducing the incidence of homelessness and ensuring that homeless persons have the accommodation and support that they need. Each Council's latest strategy can be found on their web site.

This paper gives details of current key issues across the county and describes how the issues are being addressed.

Key Issues

- Mitigating the impact of welfare reform, i.e. preventing people from getting into financial difficulty and improving access to private rented accommodation
- Implementation of No Second Night Out in respect of rough sleepers
- Commissioning supported accommodation for homeless single people and meeting a countywide savings target of £270k
- Prevention of homelessness of young people particularly 16 and 17 year olds

Main causes of homelessness

The main causes of homelessness across the county are;

- Being asked to leave by parents, other relatives or friends;
- Termination of privately rented shorthold tenancy;
- Rent or mortgage arrears

- Relationship breakdown including fleeing domestic violence or abuse;

Current trends

There remains a shortage of social housing to meet demand and access to private rented accommodation for households on modest incomes is increasingly restricted because of high general demand sustaining rent levels above Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates set for housing benefit eligibility and a noticeable reluctance of landlords to offer tenancies to households who may be dependent on housing benefit.

There are a number of challenges to be met locally if a rise in the number of households being threatened with homelessness is to be successfully prevented. The impact of the current economic climate, a much reduced new build programme for affordable housing in some parts of the county, the impact of various Welfare Reform measures and continued reductions in funding for housing related support all have the potential to give rise to an increase in the incidence of homelessness.

Nationally, government figures published for quarter 3 of 2012, show that homelessness rose in England by 11% compared to quarter 3 of 2011 and that there has been an 8% annual rise in the number of households in temporary accommodation, including a 29% rise in the number in bed and breakfast.

Although the number of households becoming homeless is not increasing, the emerging picture locally is of an increasing number of people seeking assistance because of concerns about homelessness. In quarter 3 of 2012, a total of 119 households made a homelessness application of whom 55 were accepted as being eligible and owed a duty to secure accommodation. There were also 526 cases where homelessness was prevented by positive action compared to 376 in quarter 3 of 2011.

Welfare Reform

A number of welfare reform measures have already been introduced. Local Housing Allowance (LHA) now only covers the cost of the cheapest 30% of rental properties in the private sector rather than the average cost and single people up to the age of 34 who rent from a private landlord now have their housing benefit entitlement restricted to the cost of a room in a shared house.

From April 2013, the LHA rate setting maximum eligibility for housing benefit for private rented accommodation will be based on CPI rather than RPI and this change is expected to restrict entitlement even further. In his autumn statement last year, the Chancellor also announced a 1% maximum rise in uprating LHA for 2014/15 and 2015/16. The Welfare Benefits Up-rating Bill that is currently being considered by parliament also proposes a maximum

uprating of 1% for most working age benefits, including employment and support allowance over three years.

From April 2013 until the end of September, the national roll out of a maximum cap will be imposed on the amount of benefits a household can claim of £500 per week for couples and lone parent families and £350 per week for single people.

Also, in April 2013, housing benefit will be reduced for working age social housing tenants who occupy a larger property than the family needs, set at 14% reduction of eligible rent for one extra bedroom and 25% for two or more extra bedrooms.

Further major changes are due to be made with the roll out of Universal Credit from October 2013 and the routine payment monthly in arrears of the housing element of Universal Credit direct to housing association tenants unless tenants are considered to be vulnerable. Demonstration projects set up to test the impact of this change in the way that benefit is paid have indicated that even with increased support, some tenants are likely to get into arrears as a consequence.

There are also various other relevant changes that are in the process of being implemented such as the replacement of Disability Living Allowance with Personal Independence payments which will result in a reduced income in some cases.

From April 2013, as part of the Government welfare reforms, the national Council Tax Benefit scheme will no longer exist in its current format but will be replaced by locally-run schemes that are the responsibility of local Council's to determine and administer with 10% reduced grant from Central government. For the first year, all the Oxfordshire district councils, Oxfordshire County Council and the Police Authority are working together to ensure that support provided will continue to protect all claimants in 2013/14.

Each local authority has the following arrangements in place with regard to assisting people who are likely to be affected by the changes being made to housing benefit entitlement because of the proposed cap on benefits and the introduction of bedroom tax:-

- Notification to claimants as soon as they are identified and further advice and support offered
- Review of policies with regard to effective utilisation of Discretionary Housing payments (DHP) to top up benefit entitlement as a temporary measure

- Close working with housing associations to support those affected by the bedroom tax e.g. consideration for DHP, assistance to move to somewhere smaller
- Liaison with other agencies e.g. CAB and Job centre Plus to ensure that claimants receive support and advice
- Workshops and forums to ensure other statutory and voluntary agencies are aware of the changes and the help available
- A move towards a more holistic approach to housing options by undertaking joint initiatives to facilitate access to employment and training

Rough Sleeping

The incidence of rough sleeping is greatest in the City and data from the Oxford City Outreach service indicates that on average 2 to 3 people come onto the streets of Oxford each week. This is in addition to a population of 25 entrenched rough sleepers who live consistently on the streets and a further 13-15 rough sleepers who sleep rough intermittently combined with sofa surfing and/or episodes in prison.

A service model of No Second Night Out was implemented in July 2012 in order to try and ensure that no rough sleeper would need to spend more than one night on the streets in Oxford. This initiative is in the process of being rolled out to the rest of the county.

No Second Night Out works on the following principles

- Providing a rapid response to new and returning rough sleepers
- Making a single service offer of suitable accommodation and support for new and returning rough sleepers, based on individual assessment
- A focus on linking people who migrate into Oxfordshire back to accommodation and services where they have a local connection
- A partnership approach of relevant agencies and services working together to achieve the aims of the model

The service model is based on verification that someone is actually sleeping rough in order to access services, a highly assertive outreach approach, the establishment of an assessment unit at O'Hanlon House in Oxford where rough sleepers can receive a rapid assessment of their needs and receive a Single Service offer with rough sleepers being prioritised for accommodation within the Oxford Homeless pathway.

The NSNO initiative sits alongside an action plan to tackle rough sleeping in the City which includes the following responses:-

- Assertive Outreach – providing intensive approach to entrenched rough sleepers whilst on the streets
- Tasking and Targeting – Individual case management and action planning
- Personalised Approaches
- Improving the accommodation and service offer for entrenched rough sleepers
- Meaningful Occupation – creative responses to working with rough sleepers.

Other Work underway to address these issues

With regard to the prevention of homelessness of single people and particularly those who are rough sleeping, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire have been allocated a one off sum of £455k transitional homelessness funding to be spent on front line prevention measures. The action programme that has been agreed for the two counties has 3 strands of work which are now underway and overseen by the Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Single Homeless steering Group. These are:-

- Mitigation of the impact of Welfare reform by identification of those affected, raising awareness of individuals and other agencies, sharing best practice across authorities, ensuring effective housing options advice for those affected, development of incentives to private sector landlords to let properties within Local Housing Allowance rates, development of credit union services, delivering partnership work to tackle worklessness and improved access to employment and training
- Effective implementation of the No Second Night Out model across the two counties, including commissioning an outreach service for rough sleepers in the Districts, provision of additional emergency beds in homeless projects outside of the City and a personalisation of support project for rough sleepers
- Development of improved move on options from supported accommodation including assistance to access private rented accommodation

Supported accommodation for homeless single people

One of the biggest challenges facing the county is achievement of a countywide savings target of £270k to be met as part of the retendering of hostel and supported accommodation for homeless single people during 2013/14.

The majority of this provision comprises the three main hostels in Oxford City, and achieving the savings target will require difficult decisions to be made on the amount of provision that should remain in the City, and whether there is an opportunity to replace some of this provision with smaller, move on accommodation and floating support in other parts of the county. Work is on-going to look at the options to achieve the savings target, with a view to new services becoming operational in 2014.

Many of the people in homeless services have complex needs, where in addition to having problems with housing, they need support with substance misuse, mental health and to reduce offending behaviour. A group of organisations, led by Homeless Link, are offering areas support to look at ways to establish cross-sector support for this group, under the banner 'Every Adult Matters'. While there is no funding attached to this, it may offer the opportunity to think about things differently and Oxfordshire has submitted an expression of interest, indicating our wish to be involved. If successful we would hope to link this with the broader work of the Health Improvement Board.

Homelessness and Young People

A Joint Housing Team comprising representatives from the local housing authorities and the County Council's Children, Education and Families Directorate works in a collaborative way to prevent young people from becoming homeless, oversee the effectiveness of the Young People's pathway of supported accommodation and to ensure that each agency's responsibilities with regard to meeting the housing needs of potentially homeless 16 and 17 yr olds, children leaving care, teenage parents and other vulnerable young people are met.

In May 2009 Oxfordshire published, *"Housing and related Support for young people aged 16-24 years: Oxfordshire Joint Commissioning Strategy 2009-14."* This report set out a coherent strategy for jointly commissioning services to meet the needs of young people and young families in Oxfordshire, bringing together funding from Children's Social Care (CSC), Supporting People and the district councils.

A Young People's pathway of supported accommodation was commissioned and contracts have been in place for these services since 1 April 2010. With the exception of One Foot Forward in Oxford, all services within the Pathway need to be retendered and new contracts in place by 1st April 2015.

A review of the effectiveness of current services will inform the content of specifications for the new services going forwards.

The aim of the Young people's pathway was to change the focus of current services and set out a service model that had a clear support pathway from prevention, assessment and referral to access, progression and move-through and then into independence. It places primary importance upon preventing homelessness.

A recent review of the effectiveness of the pathway in meeting the strategic objectives was that the structure of the pathway is broadly operating well. A notable success of the Pathway has been its ability to house priority needs group, predominately 16 and 17 year olds. This has however had a number of consequences. In particular, the nature of many of the projects has changed and the predominance of 16 and 17 year olds and those with high needs or challenging behaviour has highlighted the need for greater countywide provision for those young people with the most complex needs, including short-notice accommodation. Another consequence of giving priority to 16 and 17 year olds has been a shortage of provision to meet the needs of 18 to 24 year olds needing housing related support.

In recognition of the close and mutually reinforcing relationship between housing and education, employment and training (EET), with research identifying engagement in EET as a protective factor in securing and maintaining accommodation, one of the key outcomes that will be sought from the newly commissioned services will be improved performance by service providers in respect of ensuring engagement of their clients in EET.

In order to meet the savings target set for 2013/14, the supported lodgings provision in the pathway has had to be de-commissioned.

Lesley Sherratt
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