

Executive Member Response To Homelessness Scrutiny Review

Date Recommendations agreed by Housing Development and Scrutiny Committee:

Housing Development and Scrutiny Committee, Thursday, 13 June 2013

Date responses should be made by:

Executive responses should be received by Friday 23 August 2013

Recommendations:	Executive Response:	Revised Update following 12 January 2015 CSC Meeting
1. That the tracking of homelessness applications be improved with improved IT. (Action – Jaime Cresser)	This is programmed for the final quarter of 2013/14. We will be looking at updating our housing advice database which holds both housing advice and homeless cases.	The database that the team use is an Access database which needs to be replaced. The team have been working with colleagues to implement the new allocations policy on the Northgate Housing IT system. Deferring the replacement of the access database until the next financial year will enable us to take account of any issues that arise

		<p>related to the rebuild of Northgate. Preliminary work will be undertaken by the team in Q2 15/16 to identify products available</p>
<p>2. That Officers identify ways to assist people in managing their finances. (Action – Jaine Cresser)</p>	<p>Money advice has increasingly become a necessary skill alongside housing rights based advice. The Housing Advice team have become equipped with training and tools to undertake this work. This including having access to online-benefit calculator tools, and legal text resources including the welfare rights handbook, debt advice handbook, and the fuel poverty handbook. The team is able to provide Debt advice, budgeting and money advice, and welfare benefits and tax credits advice, including the drafting of personal finance statements to the standard of “Money Advice Trust, British Bankers' Association and Finance & Leasing Authority license standard. This action is completed.</p>	<p>The team continue to provide a comprehensive service, as described previously, in relation to helping clients manage their money. There is a project due to start in Quarter 4 2014/15 which will involve contact being made with those who we have place in the private sector. This project is based on the outcomes of a survey carried out in late 2014, asking customers to comment on their readiness for Universal Credit. Meetings are underway with the DWP in relation to the roll out of Universal Credit. Stevenage Borough Council has indicated that it would prefer to be last tranche in the roll out for Universal Credit to NEW Claimants, claiming JSA. There will be a Delivery Partnership arrangement (DPA) under the framework of “Universal Services Delivered Locally” (USDL) which will encourage partners to work together to identify customers who will benefit from this approach. In addition to this the work carried out by the debt Advice and Support worker, who</p>

		<p>predominantly helps tenants will support the advice and support given by the homeless team.</p>
<p>3. That the Council identifies ways of reinforcing the involvement of the voluntary sector, for example providing a 3 year contract with the CAB. (Action – Jaine Cresser)</p>	<p>The council is currently in the 2nd year of a 3 year financial inclusion services contract with the CAB. There is a further option to extend this contract by a further year if required. In addition the council also partly funds the CAB to provide a court deskworker and debt advice service that is aimed at households threatened with homelessness.</p> <p>Also we currently fund a Young Person Prevention Worker with Herts Young Homeless</p> <p>How the council commissions or supports voluntary and community based organisations in the future will be addressed through a refreshed Homelessness Strategy.</p> <p>We operate a joint homelessness forum with North Herts DC which involves a variety of statutory and voluntary organisation in shaping the future of local services.</p> <p>We support and lend our name to our voluntary sector partner's funding</p>	<p>The grant given for the Women's refuge has now elapsed. It was not considered to be a long term growth item. The funding ceased as part of the savings options considered by the Council as the Hightown Praetorian organisation are no longer in need of the support. The reduction in funding has not adversely affected the service provided.</p> <p>SBC provides significant in-kind support towards the operation of the Women's refuge in the form of two 5 bedroom houses. These are operated by Hightown Praetorian on a rent free basis.</p> <p>In addition to this the Council funds a domestic Advise Co-ordinator. SBC's total "in kind" support is in excess of £100k per annum.</p> <p>Support services are provided by County.</p>

	<p>applications</p> <p>We provide funding to the Stevenage Women's refuge</p>	
<p>4. That Officers identify ways of promoting the use of the Credit Union to residents (Action - Richard Protheroe)</p>	<p>Discussions are underway with various Credit Unions to identify how best they can promote and improve their range of services (such as managed payment accounts) for the benefit of Stevenage. With the assistance of SBC Stevenage Credit Union has moved into new town centre offices in Swingate House next to the CAB.</p>	<p>Work has been undertaken to promote the Cred E card with Stevenage Credit Union. Staff, in the homeless team and across tenancy management continue to support the Credit union and provide information to customers (mindful of FSA restrictions on promoting one financial organisation over another). There have been incentives in the past to increase membership, and the number of members exceeds 2,500.</p>
<p>5. That Officers review the Council's and Partners severe weather provision for the homeless. (Action – Jaine Cresser)</p>	<p>The council is in the process of establishing severe weather provision for rough sleepers that will be provided by the Haven.</p>	<p>The redevelopment of the Haven has had an impact on our effectiveness in cold weather provision and last winter SBC housed 2 individuals which we would have expected the Haven to pick up. This year due to pressures on our TA caused by a lack of affordable Private rented accommodation we cannot house those we have no duty to accommodate. The Haven uses accommodation in Hitchin, though some people refuse to travel. The 40 bed space Hostel is due to be completed by March 2015. The 5 bungalows are due to be completed by</p>

		<p>the Summer of 2015. SBC will have nomination rights to the bungalows, one of which is already allocated.</p> <p>There is also the issue of the houses at 3 and 4 Ditchmore lane and talks are underway to decide how these houses should be used in the future and also for what client group.</p>
<p>6. That Officers investigate ways and means of avoiding future use of bed and breakfast accommodation as the level of demand on Council services increases, to be addressed through the drafting of a Temporary Accommodation strategy. (Action – Sue Waller)</p>	<p>A new approach to temporary accommodation provision will be addressed through a new Homelessness Strategy that is currently being developed.</p>	<p>Draft strategy written – to go to February Exec.</p> <p>There has been recent increased pressure on the need to provide emergency and temporary accommodation for those approaching SBC as homeless. To avoid the use of bed and breakfast we currently use our designated stock as well as general need hard to let properties. Investigations are currently underway to review the current provision and to determine if there are any short/medium term solutions to provide additional units. This includes looking into Catref, looking at rooms used by caretakers at the tower blocks and conversion of space at Wellfield Court. Proposals are being considered with the Portfolio Holder for Housing</p>
<p>7. That Officers examine more creative ways of dealing with claimants, for example by providing</p>	<p>These options are to be considered as part of the HRA Asset Management</p>	<p>The HRA Business plan, which includes asset management has been</p>

<p>extensions to existing properties to deal with overcrowding. (Action - Richard Protheroe)</p>	<p>Review.</p>	<p>agreed by Exec in Nov 2014.</p>
<p>8. That Officers investigate supporting / mentoring those requiring assistance, especially as access to benefits is proposed to be via on-line methods and penalties for non-compliance (i.e. failure to notify change of circumstance or attend for interview) are severe. (Action - Richard Protheroe)</p>	<p>This action is scheduled for Q4 year 2013-14 and forms part of the overall council work on Welfare Reform.</p>	<p>This forms part of the work of the Corporate Welfare reform Steering Group. The team are due to start a project in Q4 2014/15 looking at the outcomes of the resident impact survey and contacting all those placed by us in PRS., as updated above.</p>
<p>9. That the Head of Housing Mangement keep Housing Scrutiny Members informed of any significant pressures on the Council and its partners to deliver an effective service in the future. (Action - Richard Protheroe)</p>	<p>Noted by the Portfolio Holder for Housing and the Head of Housing, Community and Communications.</p>	<p>The current pressure in relation to the availability of temporary and emergency accommodation are regularly updated to the portfolio holder.</p>
<p>10. That consideration be given by officers to how individuals who present themselves as Homeless are initially dealt with by the Council, with specific thought given to providing a more private area for interviews. (Action - Richard Protheroe)</p>	<p>The feasibility of this will be discussed with Donna Smith Head of the CSC in Q3 2013-14.</p>	<p>Ongoing discussions with the CSC, changes in partner services have occurred smoothly and have not impacted on our service delivery. We will continue to monitor. Diversionary activities for children (tablets with headsets) are available for use in the CSC. All rooms have panic buttons installed for the protection of staff.</p>
<p>11. That officers consider providing an electronic banner messaging service in the Customer Services Centre to signpost what support services are available with partners outside of the Council.</p>	<p>The feasibility of this will be discussed with Donna Smith Head of the CSC in Q3 2013-14.</p>	<p>This is being considered in the overall review of the CSC.</p>

(Action - Richard Protheroe)		
<p>12. That officers consider using a “mystery shopper” in the CSC to test the service to make sure the advice and service given regarding Homelessness is as helpful as possible.</p> <p>(Action - Richard Protheroe)</p>	<p>We are proposing to undertake a mystery shopping exercise in early 2014/2015 using volunteers from our partner agencies</p>	<p>This has not taken place. When we spoke to our main client group (families) they were unhappy to participate. This will be incorporated into the peer review scheduled for 2015/16. We will consider the use of mystery shoppers in this exercise once we have established membership of the peer group review.</p>

A copy of these recommendations have been sent to the named officers for a response on behalf of the Executive.