

MEETING:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Strong and Resilient Communities Workstream
DATE:	Tuesday, 23 March 2021
TIME:	2.00 pm
VENUE:	Held Virtually

MINUTES

Present Councillors Ennis OBE (Chair), Bowler, Carr, Fielding, Leech, Noble, Smith, Stowe, Tattersall and Wilson together with co-opted member Ms. G Carter

6 Apologies for Absence - Parent Governor Representatives

No apologies for absence were received in accordance with Regulation 7(6) of the Parent Governor Representatives (England) Regulations 2001.

7 Declarations of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interest

Councillor Tattersall declared a non-pecuniary interest in Item 13 as she is a Berneslai Homes Board Member. Councillor Noble also declared a non-pecuniary interest in Item 13 as she is a tenant of Berneslai Homes.

8 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 9th March 2021 were received.

9 Homelessness in Barnsley

Members of the Committee were invited to consider a report of the Executive Director Core Services and the Executive Director Adults & Communities regarding the issue of Homelessness in Barnsley.

The following witnesses were welcomed to the meeting:

Wendy Lowder - Executive Director Adults & Communities, BMBC
Phil Hollingsworth - Service Director Stronger, Safer, Healthier Communities, BMBC
Paul Brannan - Head of Safer Barnsley, BMBC
Michelle Kaye - Group Leader, Housing and Welfare, BMBC
Rachael Todd - Team Leader, Housing & Triage, BMBC
James Harding - Team Leader Housing & Support, BMBC
Cllr Jenny Platts - Cabinet Spokesperson Adults & Communities, BMBC

Cllr Jenny Platts introduced this item, outlining the changes to homeless legislation and practice over the last few years and giving an update on the current position in Barnsley and the plans to address homelessness and rough sleeping post Coronavirus (Covid-19). The past 12 months have brought the issue of homelessness into sharp focus, with those facing homelessness at great risk of

coming to harm during the pandemic, necessitating an urgent look at how to support them. Ensuring a warm and safe place to live for these vulnerable people has been a challenge given the urgency and complexity of the problem and the Government directive to do this. However, there is a positive story to celebrate, remarkable efforts have been made to make sure that those Barnsley people facing homelessness and rough sleepers are helped and supported irrespective of the complexity of their situations.

Phil Hollingsworth gave an overview of the situation prior to the pandemic, when the priority was delivery of the Homeless Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy and meeting the requirements of the Homeless Reduction Act 2017, encompassing homeless prevention through partnership working, developing personal housing plans for individuals, addressing the causes of homelessness, looking at alternative accommodation provision and working with private landlords and the development of a Homeless Alliance alongside partners.

However, Covid 19 has impacted significantly on the service, with a Government requirement to step up emergency provision as part of the well-publicised 'Everyone in' campaign. As part of this, an additional 12 flats were stepped up to use as temporary accommodation alongside an increase in the number of temporary accommodation units through Berneslai Homes. . More rough sleepers have been accommodated, leading to increased cost of accommodation including use of B&B and hotels, for which £400k of additional funding has been secured from government. More people are presenting in crisis rather than at a preventative stage. The team have worked incredibly hard to put recovery efforts in place, including a proactive early morning outreach to identify any rough sleepers. Entrenched rough sleepers have been remaining in accommodation and have started to develop a good relationship with services. The 12 temporary flats will close eventually but a new service will be developed with a 'Complex Lives Team' approach, learning lessons from the experience of the supporting complex individuals during the pandemic. . It is hoped to move back to a more preventative way of working now that things are settling down.

In the ensuing discussion, and in response to detailed questioning and challenge the following matters were highlighted:

One of the positives to come out of the Covid-19 crisis and associated lockdowns has been the way in which BMBC has tackled the homelessness issue in Barnsley and the speed at which emergency provision was implemented, despite the many challenges.

A lot of work to address the root causes of homelessness was done prior to Covid and laid the foundations for the strategy. There is lots of national data available about why people become homeless. Reasons for homelessness include relationship breakdown, asylum programme, sofa surfing, single people, prison release and hospital discharge. Resources are now being redirected to prevent repeat homelessness, working closely with prisons, hospitals etc. Reasons for homelessness are very similar to those in neighbouring authorities. There has been a 'spike' during Covid 19 in homeless cases due to domestic abuse. Both perpetrators and victims of domestic abuse have been supported.

Around 130 Rough sleepers have been taken off the streets since Covid began. Care leavers also feature in the homeless population and information can be provided regarding the actual numbers, but they are relatively small. Causes of homelessness can be due to lifestyles, life chances, drugs, alcohol and mental health which are all key factors that appear in homelessness. There is an exit plan to accommodate these individuals in a managed way, with funding opportunities, as part of the recovery plan. A diverse range of accommodation options are being explored and developed.

There are very limited numbers presenting from outside of the area, usually bordering authorities. These cases are sometimes accommodated on a very short term basis and then re-accommodated in their relevant local authority, which is possible under legislation.

It was highlighted that many of those supported have had a difficult path in life from childhood through to adolescence and adulthood and will have been in contact with a wide range of services. The key to success is ensuring that partners work around the person to get them back into accommodation with therapeutic services, which is often a gap. Individuals have a personal housing plan developed with them setting out what BMBC will do, what partners will do and expectations of the individual. This support plan is closely monitored and reviewed and all those involved will have a copy. If an individual is not happy with the plan it can be renegotiated and revised whilst managing expectations.

From 31st May the temporary ban on S21 evictions will be lifted and an increased number of people facing homelessness from private accommodation is expected. There has already been an increase in numbers of people with S21 notices and early work and support is being done with landlords and tenants. The exact numbers are unknown, but the team is encouraging landlords considering eviction to approach them. Financial support is available for those who are struggling, with proactive support available for both landlords and tenants.

Prior to the pandemic lots of work was being done around prevention but this has changed due to Covid, with more people presenting as in crisis, with less opportunities to work with people in a face to face setting. There is a need for all agencies who do early preventative work, both statutory and non-statutory, to refer people at an early stage for advice and support. This includes landlords and private lettings agencies. Elected Members are also strongly advised to refer in when they become aware of a potential homeless issue.

There is a small cohort of people repeatedly presenting as homeless. This can be due to complex needs such as being in and out of prison, sofa surfing, mental health and trauma. These underlying issues have to be addressed to break the cycle of homelessness, using a partnership approach. The landscape of legislation is complex and the relationship between safeguarding adults and homelessness is now being strengthened, aided by the establishment of the Vulnerable Adults Panel.

There was an increase in families using B&B accommodation prior to the pandemic, due to changes in both policy and changes in need. The service was working hard to secure alternative accommodation to B&B, including Berneslai Homes properties, with the number of family accommodation units increasing from 5 to 19. The standard of B&B accommodation provided out of area is inspected by other local

authorities and is visited by staff in the Housing Options Team. . Many local hotels, including 'chain' hotels, have closed due to the pandemic. The vision for the future is not to use B&B at all if possible, as stated in our Strategy.

Members highlighted that some serious anti-social behaviour had been experienced in communities over the last few months, perhaps as a result of the ban on evictions, and some individuals had been congregating and causing a nuisance. Members were reassured that there is no excuse for antisocial behaviour and the Service Director and/or Head of Safer Communities is happy to discuss individual cases with Elected Members outside of the meeting.

A small dedicated 'Complex Lives Team' will work with individuals historically in housing crisis over a number of years, to minimise the challenges and maximise the positives. Officers will carry small caseloads of 5 or 6 cases. Success will be reliant on close partnership working, with a proactive package of wraparound support available to those individuals moved on into their own accommodation, including tenancy support and support with other wider issues.

A small number of ex-forces veterans present as homeless and are linked in to the diverse range of services and armed forces organisations who can help them to secure accommodation, provide bonds, purchase furniture, help with alcohol, drugs and mental health issues, and pay off any arrears if needed. Often the link with the Armed Forces is not made until individuals present with a problem. A huge amount of work has been done under the Armed Forces Covenant Plan to re-energise work with veterans both locally and across the South Yorkshire Region and to meet the needs of veterans.

Access into primary and secondary health care services for the homeless and rough sleepers is currently being explored with the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG). Such wraparound support is part of the recovery plan and closer links to GPs are crucial to this going forward. The service has been working closely with the CCG on Covid vaccinations, and the majority of the residents in the 12 flats have received their first vaccine. . Follow up work will be done with regard to those not yet vaccinated and how to manage the second vaccination. How to manage those currently on the streets and in B&B accommodation is currently being addressed.

Plans are in place to close the 12 temporary flats post-Covid and close work is underway with Berneslai Homes around temporary dispersed accommodation. The service is hoping to replicate the temporary flats model and purchase a small self-contained unit with staff on site 24 hours , with work to move people on in a managed way. A range of options are being explored to enable an assessment of the individual's needs, including dispersed and clusters of accommodation. A 'Housing First' model is currently being successfully piloted in Rotherham and Sheffield. This will use a preventative approach, with dispersed properties and wraparound support from a range of services. Barnsley is seeking to learn from these pilot areas to develop a scheme that can work for Barnsley.

It was acknowledged that those with complex needs will require support from services which are currently under strain, such as mental health. Flexibility and ease of access to services is crucial and is currently being explored together with how individuals can be supported to engage with services, keep appointments etc. It is hoped that the Complex Lives Team will be able to address some of these issues as

part of the wraparound core offer. The Health and Wellbeing Board is also picking this issue up as an area of focus. A Mental Health Partnership has been established and will look at the whole issue of mental health post-Covid for the entire Borough. There is also a mental health helpline to enable individuals to get early help.

It was highlighted that people in local businesses and communities build up relationships with people who may be at risk of homelessness. Work has been done in the town centre around this, as rough sleepers use the shop fronts of larger stores to sleep in etc. and stores were aware of how to refer individuals in. Since the pandemic work has also been done with shopkeepers in outlying areas such as Wombwell. This is something which needs to be done do across the Borough, as many people within communities do not know where to refer concerns about individuals but are keen to help.

Many volunteer groups work closely with the homeless and the work of volunteers and what they offer is very highly valued. Many groups feed in intelligence and drop-in sessions which have continued to run throughout the pandemic are attended by staff, to maintain contact with vulnerable individuals where possible.

RESOLVED that

- (i) Witnesses be thanked for their attendance and contribution;
- (ii) Information about care leavers experiencing homelessness be shared with the Committee,
- (iii) Further information be provided on the Housing First Model, and
- (iv) Shops and businesses in principal towns be approached about the Duty to Refer and raising awareness of the services available.

Chair