

**NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL/
NORTHAMPTONSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**

HOMELESSNESS TASK AND FINISH GROUP

Friday, 27 January 2006 commencing at 10:00am

PRESENT:

| | |
|-------------------------------|-------------|
| Councillor Lee Mason | NBC (Chair) |
| Councillor Margaret Pritchard | NBC |
| Councillor Mark Bullock | NCC |

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE

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| Mohammed Sabeel | East Midlands Regional Manager, HomelessLink, (Item 5) |
| Ann McGail | Team Manager (Community Support) Learning Disabilities Unit (Item 8) |
| Councillor Yousuf Miah | Residential Operations Portfolio Holder, NBC |
| Fran Rodgers | Corporate Manager, NBC |
| Madeline Spencer | NBC |
| Linda Brede | NBC |
| Geoff Stokes | NCC |
| N Stock | NCC |

1 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Marion Allen and Councillor Brendan Glynane (Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee).

The Chair welcomed Mohammed Sabeel, East Midlands Regional Manager, HomelessLink, to the meeting.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

3 MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 6 JANUARY 2006

The minutes of the above meeting were agreed.

4 MATTERS ARISING

The Group heard that the average length of time people were housed in temporary accommodation was approximately 22 weeks. 25 households (from a total of 120) have been in temporary accommodation for longer than 22 weeks. There was a shortage of 2-bedded accommodation, which was the type of property that was most in demand. Although larger families were living in temporary accommodation, the trend was towards smaller families. Exit

plans are being produced for all those residing in temporary accommodation; looking at need against aspiration. The Authority resists using one-bedded flats.

The Chair welcomed looking at exit plans and emphasised the demand for two-bedded properties.

5 DISCUSSION WITH MOHAMMED SABEEL, EAST MIDLANDS REGIONAL MANAGER, HOMELESSLINK

Mohammed Sabeel advised the Group of his role. He is the Regional Manager for the East Midlands region, covering Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, Rutland and Northamptonshire. There were nine regional managers across the country and their role was to support the Voluntary Sector. They were able to respond to both regional and local priorities. One of their roles was mediation. Homelesslink identified opportunities and sources of funding and disseminated good practice. Regional Managers were funded by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM). He referred to the Government's Strategy - 'Change Up', regarding supporting the Voluntary Sector. There was a concern whether smaller organisations providing a front line were sustainable. Therefore, funding of £90 million from April 2005, for three years, had been granted by the ODPM and HDIP. In turn, it generates funding from the Housing Corporation. SRB funding and European Social funding can also be matched. Most of the £90 million funding has been committed.

Homelesslink was looking at hostels and night shelters. Revamping them, all with en suite rooms and taking out the letter 's' in order that they looked more like hotels. 90% of individuals residing in hostels were unemployed. M Sabeel was looking at the Strategy for hostel provision and the need for 'joined up' provision. There was a need for a strategic overview through a Providers' Forum, to continuously improve and review.

Homelesslink has knowledge of good information and provides a lot of support. Leicester City Council (Beacon status), Nottingham City and Nottingham County Council were members.

It was commented that the County's Homeless Strategic Partnership should work with the Rough Sleepers Forum.

M Sabeel first visited Northampton in August 2005 and advised that he is very aware of the vast difference since his first visit. He commended NBC. He did add that NBC needed to realise that it could not tackle everything itself; there are other providers who can assist. M Sabeel supported NBC's Rent Assistance Scheme and suggested that the Authority consider introducing a Rent Deposit Scheme.

M Sabeel acknowledged that NBC has a strong homelessness agenda. He advised that Leicester City Council and East Lindsey District Council have been recognised as best practice. He suggested that David Pressey, East Lindsey District Council, be contacted for advice. East Lindsey had a good

Rent Deposit Scheme. Front Line staff had the authorisation to approve rent deposits and maintenance work up to the value of £300. For example, a tenant was being threatened with eviction due to the state of the garden, front line officers authorised the garden clearance at a cost of £140; the tenancy was safeguarded.

Northampton's Maple Health Practice was unique, the only one of its kind in the country. The holistic service is committed to providing service to all disadvantaged groups. It is being investigated to promote this as good practice across the country.

M Sabeel has been working with the YMCA and NBC regarding funding opportunities. £140,000 had been approved, for refurbishment of Derngate premises

In response to Councillor Bullock's request of issues to bring to the attention of the ODPM representative at the next meeting, M Sabeel advised that the ODPM representative was committed to Authorities that needed advice and funding. It was the wide view that NBC was improving its service. He suggested that the Group inform the ODPM representative what it is doing in respect of the homelessness agenda and temporary accommodation. He felt that the Authority was already doing a lot in these areas.

In answer to Councillor Pritchard's query whether the Rough Sleepers Forum was the same as the Homeless Forum, M Sabeel advised that it was perceived that the Rough Sleepers Forum concentrated on rough sleepers only and not the wider agenda of homelessness. RSLs were invited to be part of the Homeless Forum. The Forum was run by Voluntary Providers and supported by agencies.

F Rodgers commented that the first step was to ensure everyone was on board and then to decide on the priorities; but rough sleepers must not be forgotten. If the Authority is to continue with its Rough Sleepers' Forum it needs to be re-launched.

Regarding rough sleepers, M Sabeel commented that there would always be individuals that preferred to live 'on the streets', but many do not and there were resources available to help them. Providers are very keen to work together with NBC. F Rodgers added that the Authority had signed up to a common agenda and had set some standards; there was a need to ensure that performance standards were reached.

Councillor Pritchard brought to the Group's attention a rough sleeper, with a dog, in the Hazelwood Road area and that hostels did not generally take individuals with dogs. M Sabeel advised that some hostels did take dogs but this was an important issue that the Forum should investigate.

Councillor Bullock commented that there were some vulnerable children, under the age of 16, living on the streets.

In response to the Chair's request for details of what happens if an individual/family becomes homeless, M Spencer reported that after they had called the out of hours number, the homeless officer would go out and house them into emergency accommodation until the morning when an interview would then take place.

The Chair referred to the Torch Forum commenting that it had a lot of funding available, which must be wisely spent. The agencies that were members of Torch included the YMCA, CAN, Soup Kitchen, Mayday Trust, Acorn House, NBC, NCC, PCT, Supporting People, Northants Police. N Stock added that this Forum should be a countywide forum of providers and suggested that it would be beneficial if M Sabeel could be involved. It was envisaged that Torch would be re-launched in February/March.

M Sabeel was asked to give examples of the types of services carried out by 'good' Councils:

- East Lindsey has a Homeless Prevention Scheme and Rent Deposit Scheme (for individuals with a bad rent payment record)
- Moving individuals on from hostels quickly, offering training on basic life skills.
- The ODPM is keen on temporary accommodation and homelessness prevention agendas, rent deposit schemes and mediation services

The Chair thanked Mr Sabeel for his interesting and informative address.

6 PATHWAYS PROTOCOL - UPDATE

M Spencer advised that she had liaised with N Stock, NCC, and a positive outcome had been achieved. They had concentrated on 16/17 year olds. NBC had agreed to sign up to the Protocol that was in existence for the rest of the county. A meeting would then be held with the Team Leaders. NBC's Homelessness Section would take the lead and there would be joint working in all areas. N Stock added that a range of meetings had been set up in relation to children and young people issues. Joint training across the teams was being investigated. The two Local Authorities were looking at the commonality of the customer. There was a need for an updated Protocol and this would be developed with input from all Authorities.

M Spencer advised that a County Housing Homeless Officers Forum would be set up shortly, comprising housing officers across the county.

The Group welcomed the Protocol but suggested that there was a need for discussions to take place about sharing budgets. Either or both Authorities might have to put in more resources. Both Authorities committed a lot of resources to homelessness.

Regarding the LAA and how funding was monitored, F Rodgers advised that the principles were about pooling budgets and working to a set standard of principles. A board would be set up to cover this area. Performance

management was key too. The Chair suggested that any further developments needed to be referred to in the recommendations of the Group's final report.

7 HOUSING OFFICER SHADOWING – REPORT BACK

Councillor Allen had taken part in the Housing Officer's Shadowing exercise and sent her thanks to the whole team. She would welcome work with the homeless team regarding mental health discharge.

Councillor Pritchard circulated her report on the visit to the Homelessness Unit on 16 January 2006. She had observed:-

Homeless Exit Interview

A young single male foreign student. He had previously been in Bed and Breakfast accommodation for a week and was offered a one-bedded furnished flat. The door to the airing cupboard had been damaged and the sink and washbasin were blocked but the officer promised these would be repaired. He accepted the tenancy. However, since 16 January it had been ascertained that the student would not be able to take on the tenancy permanently. The flats had been furnished and the cost of the furniture would be 'clawed' back over a four-year period. Therefore, in this case, he could not be given a permanent tenancy for that flat. He is still residing in the flat and would be allocated another property in due course.

L Brede advised that the Management Agency, responsible for the management of the flats, should have a more vigorous checking policy and there was a need for this to be tightened up. She added that this Agency was being paid a lot less than the Management Company responsible for managing the Authority's private accommodation leases.

Front desk of Housing and Money Advice

The desk was very busy, two employees manning the desk. Constant queues.

Councillor Pritchard was concerned about the lack of privacy at this first point of contact. Barriers were in situ where people waited but conversations could easily be overheard. F Rodgers agreed with the lack of privacy comments, adding that a lot of Councillor Pritchard's comments had already been fed back to the team. There was a need to find some quick fixes, privacy was an issue.

Housing Options Interview

The interview room contained Christmas decorations. Councillor Pritchard felt that they were slightly inappropriate and maybe some toys would have been better to entertain the children. She was also concerned that the room was very small.

Rent Assisted Scheme

Details of the scheme were explained. Clients could find accommodation where they chose to live, but rent had to be within the Housing Benefits that they could claim.

Interview with Debt Counsellor

Councillor Pritchard gave details of a young disabled woman who had asked for advice on her debts including tax, water arrears, catalogue bills and money owing to a finance company.

Temporary Accommodation meeting

Details of the current availability of different types of accommodation were given. The section was not computerised; therefore working practices were difficult and time consuming. Further concerns were relayed about Brer Court. The budget of £2,500 had been spent and there were no available resources for window locks, replacement furniture and repainting, which had been promised previously.

Councillor Pritchard suggested that the following improvements be made:

- Privacy for the front desk
- Improvements to the Interview Rooms
- Computer data base for temporary accommodation
- Re-allocation of finance to improve the living conditions in Brer Court and especially the security of the houses.

L Brede advised that a disabled access interview room was available. IT officers were today investigated how the system could be used for temporary accommodation. She further commented that she had visited Brer Court recently to discuss maintenance issues. A copy of Councillor Pritchard's visit summary would be circulated to all Housing Staff.

F Rodgers advised that there was lots of potential to develop accommodation with private landlords on a five-year lease basis rather than short term. NBC was looking at procuring with one organisation that would then sublet to others. Councillor Bullock advised that NCC had a large procurement team and would ask the manager to contact F Rodgers.

Councillor Pritchard conveyed her thanks to the Homeless Unit Team.

8 CASE STUDIES

Ann McGail, Team Manager (Community Support), Learning Disabilities Unit, advised the Group of case studies that she had been involved in.

She commented that there were a number issues in respect of individuals with learning disabilities. Often they did not reach the statistics stage, for example,

if they had an elderly parent (their carer) who died suddenly, they would be taken into emergency respite. Some were often there for over a year. Some needed residential care and others would be able to look after themselves. She felt that younger people with milder learning disabilities were vulnerable, for example, a young man had been asked to leave home, and had been offered a flat in Spring Boroughs, close to a flat that had been closed down as it had been operating as a 'Crack House.' The young man is now housed in a sheltered flat in Northampton and was doing extremely well. The Unit still supported him but on a lesser scale. It can be difficult for similar individuals to make a homeless application.

The Learning Disabilities Unit had good links with Marion Marriott, Housing Needs Assessor, NBC and advance liaisons take place, often enabling the situation to be pre-empted.

The Group heard of a young couple, with learning disabilities, living in a caravan waiting for accommodation. They had a poor history due to their behaviour. Their learning disabilities had not been taken into account previously. The Unit did try to direct people away from the homelessness route. There was a need for links in. The Unit needed to liaise with Supporting People regarding individuals with mild learning disabilities. The Unit dealt with people in Northampton but also received referrals from Daventry and Towcester, as these towns did not have a team. For practical reasons the Unit was unable to travel out of Northampton but did go as far as Brayfield.

A lot of the Unit's time was taken moving individuals from areas. A small amount of funding was received from Supporting People. The Team understood that it fitted in with Supporting People's Strategy.

Individuals were assessed by Social Services and Health Teams. If they had an IQ below 70 they were categorised as having learning disabilities. A lot of people will fall just outside that figure. The Unit had grave concerns regarding the individuals that fell just outside that grouping and could be classed as 'hidden homeless'. Cases were screened over the telephone by the Adult Care Squad. If not categorised as critical they would be signposted to another Agency, for example, housing. This Group of people above the threshold would often appear on housing lists and as rough sleepers.

A Forum was set up last year, but due to huge changes in the Learning Disabilities Services, A McGail was unsure of its future.

M Spencer advised that Stonham catered for individuals with learning disabilities, but she was not aware of any RSLs in Northampton that did. Muir Housing however, was looking to test out how individuals with mental health and learning disabilities coming out of care could live in society before moving them on. There was a huge potential for the Authority to work with housing associations on themed issues.

F Rodgers agreed that there were issues regarding communication and links. She acknowledged that pre-empting homelessness was vital. A good example could be how NBC could adapt its sheltered accommodation, with the right support package – working within the Supporting People Strategy.

M Bullock suggested that individuals with learning disabilities be encouraged to register. There was a need to produce a countywide register, otherwise it would be an increasing problem, for example, there could be many young people being referred who were currently being looked after by their parents. They needed an advocate to help them to deal with Agencies. He added that at the next meeting, when the ODPM representative would be present, he would refer to a pilot regarding finding out whom, numbers of etc. individuals with learning disabilities and producing a register.

The Chair thanked A McGail for her address adding that the Group would highlight this as an area that needs investigation and further work.

The Group then looked at case studies that had been submitted to the Group for consideration.

CAB

The case study that had been submitted from the CAB was in respect of its Service Level Agreement (SLA) Appraisal 2005/06. F Rodgers commented that it was an example of a daily occurrence at Fish Street.

The young couple referred to in the case study - young pregnant girl living with her mother who was going to be evicted had asked for accommodation for both herself and her boyfriend. She was informed that accommodation would not be provided for both of them, as they did not currently reside together. F Rodgers advised that the Authority would need to see evidence that people were living together as a couple, the Authority can be seen as being obstructive but it is actually doing something beneficial in the long term.

In response to Councillor Bullock's question when Section 17 came into force, the Group heard that this was at birth. A baby did not count until it was born. As soon as a homeless application is submitted, the Authority has additional powers, it can ask difficult questions and look back at other records.

If an individual presents himself or herself as homeless to NBC, the first question that is asked is whether they have anywhere to stay that night. If so, an interview is arranged for the next day. The duty officer will carry out the interview. Often parents will keep them for an extra night and the next day at the interview the Officer might persuade them to keep their son/daughter for a longer period. If not, temporary accommodation is found. People are not turned away at the counter; they are either offered a booked appointment or a duty officer appointment. Individuals do tend to find somewhere to stay for one or two more nights. Quite often people think that the only way to be offered a house is to present themselves as homeless. The officers on the front desk will pre-scan the applicant. They are very knowledgeable and skilled. Pre-scanning is a filter. The interview is then held in private.

F Rodgers advised that it was vital to make it clear what happened at the first stage of an individual presenting himself or herself as homeless. She added that the Authority should provide CAB with more details of its service. The case study that CAB had submitted contained details of the legislative process; there was a need to work with other Agencies regarding preventative work.

The Chair commented that CAB had pointed out that there was a huge housing waiting list. CAB is not always aware of what is available.

Brian Binley, MP

A case study was issued from Brian Binley, MP, which gave details of joint custody orders. Both parents would share looking after the child and therefore would need two houses. He felt that this issue would create a lot of legal arguments. There were issues regarding access to both parents, human rights etc. In cases of joint custody, agreement has been made to joint residency and both parents would receive child benefit. Joint custody was generally new; mostly custody was awarded to one parent.

Councillor Bullock suggested that the size of the problem needed to be ascertained and he suggested speaking to the ODPM representative at the next meeting and that this Group offer to carry out research in this area.

The second case referred to in the MP's letter involved a family break up with children. The break up occurred in another area and the child remained there with the mother. There seemed a period of time when neither NBC or NCC could state which one had duty of care for the gentleman. Once NBC agreed that it had duty of care a home was found. The MP felt there was a genuine need for Councils to correspond with each other quickly to establish responsibilities. Councillor Bullock suggested that NBC and NCC could devise a Protocol in respect of such cases. M Spencer advised that liaisons were currently taking place between the two Authorities in respect of joint needs and support plan.

F Rodgers undertook to draft a response to Brian Binley, MP.

Other case studies were then discussed such as a 16 year old not reported directly as homeless; they were sped through the system and were not supported and housed in unsuitable areas. The tenancy then broke down and they were back in the system. The Group emphasised that bricks and mortar was important to young people but support was absolutely vital. N Stock advised that NCC had a clear responsibility for 16/17 year olds but he felt that this should be widened to include 18 year olds. The Authority had a clear obligation to those in care for longer than 13 weeks and by their 16th birthday. NCC does offer support post 18, but this is not a legal requirement. There is a need to ensure that staff has the correct support to make confident decisions.

L Brede advised of a case of a pregnant lady, speaking no English, who presented herself as homeless at the Housing and Money Advice Centre. An

interpreter was found and an interview took place later in the day. She was homeless and was living with friends. She informed officers that she had left her husband, as it was financially better; there had been no violence in the marriage. Her husband was a tenant in a Council property. The Officer interviewing the applicant could foresee no reason why she could not return to her husband. She then returned to the Centre claiming domestic violence and was housed in temporary accommodation. Her husband was then interviewed and he stated that there had been no violence and that his wife had left of her own free will, they wanted a larger house for the baby. The applicant was advised of the rent assistance scheme and Stonham support, which she refused. Officers will interview her friend too. L Brede emphasised that the investigatory process must be carried out correctly and thoroughly and assumptions must not be made. Usually, in cases of reported domestic violence, Officers would ask for medical advice and refer the applicant to the Sunflower Centre and ask if they had contacted the Police, doctor, hospital etc. CALs provides interpreters for NBC, usually female interpreters are used for female applicants.

In response to Councillor Bullock's comment that CALs did not have the provision of signers, L Brede advised that NBC had Officers trained in signing. The Group felt that language was a Council issue and therefore a side issue to homelessness. L Brede would report back to the next meeting regarding language group.

F Rodgers emphasised the importance of better links to Agencies in respect of domestic violence. L Brede was liaising with Women's Aid. Staff working in homelessness needed to understand cultural issues. Links needed to be built with groups such as the Somalian Representation Community Group.

N Stock then circulated copies of his case studies (copies would also be forwarded to Councillors Allen and Glynane). The Group decided that discussion of Mr Stock's cases would take place at the next meeting. Case studies from Sally Keeble, MP, were also expected and these too would be discussed at the next meeting.

9 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting would be held on Friday 17 February at 10am in the Jeffery Room, the agenda would include:-

- Discussion with the ODPM Representative
- Case Studies:-
 - (a) N Stock
 - (b) Sally Keeble, MP
- New EU regulations
- Chair's Interim Report

The meeting closed at 12:55 pm