

AD-HOC SCRUTINY PANEL

A meeting of the Ad-Hoc Scrutiny Panel was held on Thursday 23 February 2023.

PRESENT: Councillors M Saunders (Chair), D Davison (Substitute for C Dodds), J McTigue, D Rooney, J Thompson and M Storey

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: S Gill (Homelessness Café) Cllr J Rathmell

OFFICERS: S Bonner, A. Glover, R Jenkins and E Scollay

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: Councillors C Dodds, T Mawston and J Walker

22/1 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest received at this point in the meeting.

22/2 **SCRUTINY REVIEW - SUPPORT TO THE HOMELESS IN MIDDLESBROUGH**

The Chair welcomed representatives from The Neighbourhood Welfare Hub, also known as Homeless Café, as well as officers from Adult Social Care and Health Integration and invited the service area to present their information.

The Director of Adult Social Care and Health Integration introduced himself to the Panel advising he was a career Social Worker with 15 years' experience in the field and had spent the last seven years as Director.

He explained that a briefing paper on homelessness had been distributed to the Panel and that the Accessing Change Together (ACT) Lead Officer would provide further detail to that end.

The Director commented that, while legislation existed in relation to homelessness, any discussion by the Service Area ran risk of them seeming unsympathetic. While each case of homelessness was a tragedy, the Service had to abide by the statutory requirements governing the subject.

The ACT Lead Officer proceeded to brief Members and responded to questions. It was explained the underpinning legislation for homelessness was the Housing Act 1996. It was against this legislation an individual was assessed for their eligibility to receive support. As part of this an individual would be assessed against several criteria including priority need and their connection to the local area.

There had been some amendments to this process. For example, the 2002 Homeless Act introduced the need for a homelessness strategy and efforts to address the root causes of homelessness. Importantly, this did not just cover rough sleeping.

In 2017 the Homelessness Reduction Act was introduced which required local authorities to intervene at earlier stages to try and prevent homelessness, which contrasted with the 1996 Housing Act that largely focussed on responding to service requests.

Members were advised that Middlesbrough had always gone beyond legislative requirements, and as such the requirements of the 2017 Homelessness Reduction Act had less impact in Middlesbrough as they were already being undertaken. One of the provisions of the 2017 Act was to afford 56 days to local authorities to find a solution to an individual's housing needs.

Those requesting service underwent a test to determine eligibility. The test comprised several elements including if an individual could legally or reasonably reside in a property and of their ability to reside at a property was prohibited or presented a risk of violence.

Another element was priority need, which was arguably the most contentious element of the test. Essentially, this element of the test examined vulnerability factors including those who were pregnant, had dependent children or if the individual was elderly.

The assessment process did not end with the test and the Council was required to continue working with individuals to try and find accommodation.

A Member queried what provision was in place for emergency accommodation. It was clarified the Council worked to a framework for emergency housing. Members also discussed options individuals had for securing accommodation should the need arise. It was commented that individuals seeking assistance needed to attend Middlesbrough House. A determination about somebody's housing needs could be made quite quickly and if that was not possible the Council would look to place that individual in emergency accommodation.

As part of the eligibility tests the Council assessed if an individual was intentionally homeless, namely was their situation a result of engaging in anti-social behaviour. Even if this was the case the Council would still attempt to resolve the individual's housing problem within 56 days.

The Council could also examine if an individual had a local connection to the area, for example had they lived in Middlesbrough for the last three of five years or six of 12 months. It was clarified for that local connections could include family connections however those links had to be relevant. An example was provided whereby an individual not speaking to their parent for 10 years would not qualify as a local connection. There was also the possibility that an individual may have a stronger local connection to a different local authority area and so may be referred there.

A Member commented that local connections was ordinarily the last factor the Council would look at as part of the assessment. It was also noted that an appeals process existed for those who were unsuccessful.

A Member questioned if the Council Housing Solutions Team out of hours service was maintained 24 hours a day. There was evidence to suggest that calls placed in the early hours of the morning were not being answered until after 9am. The Director of the Service stated he would investigate the matter.

Members queried if accommodation commissioned by the Council were monitored. It was confirmed that monitoring of such accommodation was undertaken in line with contractual arrangements. It was also confirmed that should there be any failings in service this would need to be looked in to.

A discussion took place regarding the cost of providing the service. Members were advised that while managing the public purse was important, the priority was helping those in need. It was also clarified there was a challenge in Middlesbrough regarding temporary accommodation. A review was planned into how the Council contracted accommodation and how to get the most out of those contracts to create environments that could help people.

The Housing Solutions Team worked with individuals that had experienced multiple traumas whose patterns of behaviour were established due to their earlier experiences. One of the key challenges for Adult Social Care was to recognise those traumas. Therefore, the accommodation recommissioning exercise was crucial in this regard.

A Member commented that while the recommissioning exercise was welcome, the process could take a while and until it was completed there were examples of individuals staying in unsuitable accommodation. This was sometimes the case with individuals having complex needs who needed emergency accommodation.

It was agreed that individual examples of unsuitable accommodation would be picked up outside the meeting.

A Member commented that Middlesbrough House was not a suitable location to receive those in need of accommodation and a safer space was required. It was commented that this had been recognised and work was underway, albeit at an early stage, to address it.

It was questioned how often the Council inspected its accommodation. It was confirmed this happened regularly, but the frequency would depend on the type of accommodation. However, it was reiterated that should there be specific examples of unsatisfactory accommodation these could be taken up outside the meeting. It was agreed that the frequency of inspections at different types of accommodation would be sent to the panel.

Members were reminded that all decisions made following the assessment could be appealed within 21 days. Appeals would be considered by officers not involved in the decision-making process.

At this point in the meeting the Chair invited the representative from the The Neighbourhood Welfare Hub to provide their presentation.

Members were informed that all services operating from the Hub had been voluntary since 2007 and that the service supported those from disadvantaged backgrounds, not just the homeless. The Hub supported individuals with a range of needs including those with histories of substance misuse and addiction.

The Hub offered a place for individuals to access a warm environment, a cooked meal and a change of clothes. It was explained that, due to the relationships formed in the Hub, support included a safeguarding element as well as helping to arrange funerals for individuals that had passed away. It was explained that a great deal of coordination was required to provide the support offered.

The representative from The Neighbourhood Welfare Hub felt that, given the nature and level of support offered, from the Council were not assisting the Hub's activities enough. Members were advised that, while it had started as a homeless café, the Hub had become much more. The presentation continued to explain how the support offered by the café should have been taken on by the Council.

The Chair thanked the representative from The Neighbourhood Welfare Hub for their presentation and invited questions from the Board.

The Chair commented the support provided by the Council for those with disadvantaged backgrounds was of a good standard. It was important to recognise those deemed homeless could be disadvantaged.

Members commented it was important for the Hub to keep records of how many individuals accessed support as this would inform how the Council could assist. It was clarified the Hub collected information on all individuals it supported and had approximately 300-400 records. It was queried if any other services operated from the Hub. It was clarified that the local PCSO had space available to work from when necessary but that other services, such as probation, would contact the hub for information.

Members queried if there had been an increase in support provided to those with particular needs. It was clarified this would require analysis of data submitted to government.

In terms of the statistics collected by the Council, it was explained the Council collected data based on specific criteria. At the time of the meeting there were approximately 50 people in temporary accommodation.

In terms of rough sleepers, the count was an average of 16 over several months. It was clarified that individuals varied from day to day and the Council knew of those individuals and how to engage with them. It was also explained how it was important to engage with rough sleepers and the homeless to try and overcome their psycho-social trauma.

While there were three rough sleeper counts a week, other specialist outreach teams also worked to reach rough sleepers.

Members queried how many people access the homelessness café a day and it was confirmed approximately 10 individuals per day accessed the café.

Members agreed that the Assertive Outreach Team should be invited to a future meeting of the Panel to understand how they interacted with disadvantaged groups such as the homeless. It

was also suggested that representatives from various housing associations be invited to attend future meetings as well as the organisation Cardboard Citizens.

At this point in the meeting a document was tabled for members consideration. It was deemed non-germane to the proceedings of the Panel and not considered further.

The Chair thanked all attendees for their input.

ORDERED that:

- 1. The information presented be noted;**
- 2. Inspection regimes be provided to the Panel;**
- 3. An invitation be provided to the Assertive Outreach Team to a future meeting of the Panel;**
- 4. An invitation be provided to local Housing Providers about how they support the homeless and;**
- 5. An invitation be invited to Cardboard Citizens to understand their role.**

22/3

ANY OTHER URGENT ITEMS WHICH IN THE OPINION OF THE CHAIR, MAY BE CONSIDERED.

None.