

*Scrutiny Review of
Homelessness Services
2011-12*

Report

June 2012

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1.0 Purpose of the report

The purpose of the report, as outlined in the initial topic brief (at Annex 1), is to outline how the following key outputs and outcomes were achieved:

- An understanding of the local authority homelessness role and the services provided in Halton;
- A review of the provision and effectiveness of temporary accommodation and other homelessness services in Halton with a view to identifying gaps in the service and potential efficiencies that can be made;
- Consider and make recommendations to the Healthy Halton PPB on how best to improve standards in the service.

2.0 Structure of the report

This report is structured with the introduction, a brief summary of the methodology followed by evidence, analysis with findings/conclusions and recommendations. The annexes include the following:

- Topic Brief;
- Methodology detail;
- Statutory homeless criteria;
- Local authority homelessness assistance flow chart;
- Notes from visits to temporary accommodation schemes; and
- Potential impact of welfare reform on homelessness.

3.0 Introduction

3.1 Reason the report was commissioned

Councils have a range of duties to those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness in 28 days, at the very least they are obliged to provide advice and assistance on housing options and some households are owed the main homelessness duty, which is the provision of settled accommodation. Local authorities are also expected to implement services to prevent homelessness.

To respond to the housing needs of those who are homeless, it is necessary to provide a range of temporary accommodation that can be accessed in emergencies until settled accommodation can be found. There are a number of temporary accommodation schemes operating in Halton.

It is good practice to periodically assess the effectiveness of services provided for those who are homeless and this review is part of that process. The results will also feed into the wider strategic review of homelessness and development of the borough's next Homelessness Strategy in 2012/13.

This review is also quite timely considering the current climate of restricted mortgage availability and impending housing and welfare reforms, both of which will very likely lead to increased pressure on homelessness services.

3.2 Policy and Performance Boards

This report was commissioned as a scrutiny working group for the Health Policy and Performance Board.

3.3 Membership of the Working Group

| Members | Officers |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Councillor Ellen Cargill (Chair) | Angela McNamara |
| Councillor Sandra Baker | <i>Divisional Manager Commissioning</i> |
| Councillor Chris Loftus | Patricia Preston |
| Councillor Martha Lloyd-Jones | <i>Principal Manager Housing Solutions</i> |
| Councillor Joan Lowe | Natalie Johnson |
| Councillor Marie Wright | <i>Policy Officer (Housing)</i> |
| Councillor Shaun Osborne | |
| Councillor Margaret Horabin | |

4.0 Methodology summary

The scrutiny review was conducted through a number of means:

- Monthly meetings of the scrutiny review working group;
- Presentations by various key members of staff;
- Provision of information; and
- Visits to temporary accommodation schemes.

Further detail on the methodology can be found at Annex 2 and is also referenced in Section 5.0.

5.0 Evidence (summary of evidence gathered) and analysis with findings/conclusions

5.1 The local authority homelessness role – statutory and preventative

The first meeting of the working group was held on 16th November 2011 and was attended by Neil Morland, Communities & Local Government (CLG) Specialist Advisor on housing and homelessness issues. Neil talked to the group about the homelessness legislation, which prescribes what local authorities must do, how it has changed over time and how the increased focus on prevention has resulted in massively reduced levels of homelessness.

Under the terms of the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977, the Housing Act 1996 and the Homelessness Act 2002 all Councils have a statutory duty to people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness in 28 days, at the very least they are obliged to provide advice and assistance on housing options and some households (i.e. those who are deemed ‘vulnerable’ in some way and therefore in ‘priority need’) are owed the main homelessness duty, which is the provision of settled accommodation.

Annex 3 contains a table which outlines the statutory homeless criteria used by local authorities in order to determine whether an applicant is owed the main homelessness duty. Annex 4 contains a flow chart which outlines the type of assistance that local authorities must provide according to an applicants’ homelessness situation.

The Homelessness Act 2002 shifted the emphasis from local authorities' statutory duty to help those whose homelessness is immediate or imminent to much earlier intervention designed to prevent homelessness. While the statutory duty still exists, local authorities must now also develop a Strategy in partnership with the Council's social services department and a range of other statutory and voluntary agencies to prevent homelessness for all people at risk (including those households who would not be owed the main homelessness duty). The Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities stresses the importance of a preventative approach:

"The prevention of homelessness should be a key strategic aim which housing authorities and other partners pursue through the homelessness strategy. It is vital that individuals are encouraged to seek assistance at the earliest possible time when experiencing difficulties which may lead to homelessness."

The Code recognises the benefits of early intervention to those at risk of homelessness and to local authorities:

"Homelessness can have significant negative consequences for the people who experience it. At a personal level, homelessness can have a profound impact on health, education and employment prospects. At a social level, homelessness can impact on social cohesion and economic participation. Early intervention to prevent homelessness can therefore bring benefits for those concerned, including being engaged with essential services and increasing the likelihood that children will live in a more secure environment. Investment in prevention services can also produce direct cost savings for local authorities, for example through lower use of temporary accommodation and fewer social services interventions. Furthermore, measures to prevent homelessness will also help to reduce longer-term pressures on wider services, such as health and employment."

The shift in emphasis has had a significant impact on the way all local authorities are now expected to deliver homelessness services and work in partnership with other departments/agencies.

Homelessness statistics

Local authorities complete quarterly 'P1E' returns to CLG in relation to their activities under the homelessness legislation. The local impact of increased work around homelessness prevention can be seen through the statistics:

| | | |
|--------------------------------|---|---|
| Statutory homeless acceptances | Households that are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eligible for assistance; • Unintentionally homeless; and • In priority need. <i>(See Annex 3 for criteria)</i> | 2003/04 = 257 <i>(780 decisions)</i> ↓ 2010/11 = 37 <i>(78 decisions)</i> |
|--------------------------------|---|---|

Of the 37 households accepted as statutory homeless in 2010/11, the majority were:

- Lone females with dependent children (22);
- Aged 16-24 (18), closely followed by the 25-44 age group (14);

- Homeless as a result of a violent relationship breakdown (10), closely followed by parents no longer being willing/unable to accommodate (7);
- In priority need because the household included dependent children (24).

The statistics also reveal that Halton compares favourably on a regional basis in terms of the number of households owed the main homelessness duty (i.e. statutory homeless acceptances) per 1,000 households – in 2010/11, the rate for Halton was 0.8 compared to a North West average of 1.3.

Conclusions:

- The expectations placed on local authorities are clear, both in terms of their statutory obligations and prevention focus.
- It is also clear that a co-ordinated and strategic approach is vital to delivering a successful homelessness service. Homelessness statistics reveal particular groups within Halton that require support from homelessness services.
- Prevention has been proven as a successful approach, even in a difficult climate of high property prices and, more recently, restricted mortgage availability due to stricter lending practices and the requirement for larger deposits. Also, there are restricted levels of properties in the private rented sector because of a declining buy-to-let market and restricted levels in the social rented sector due to historic right-to-buy sales and reduced levels of new house building.
- In the midst of the current squeeze on public sector finances, the local authority will have to deal with the challenges of doing more with less.

Recommendations:

- Undertake a strategic review of homelessness in Halton in 2012 and develop a strategy to commence 2013.
- Continue to offer a high quality statutory homelessness service.
- Continue to focus on prevention early on in the homelessness risk process.
- Ensure that members of the public are able to access housing options advice through a number of means (leaflets, online, face-to-face etc.).
- Ensure that the authority has the resources (i.e. prevention tools, officers) to deal with the level of demand.
- Ensure that the authority is able to prevent rough sleeping as far as possible.

5.2 Temporary accommodation in Halton

The second meeting of the working group was held on 13th December 2011 and was attended by Kath Howarth, Supporting People Development Manager and Donna Ryan, Quality Assurance Manager who gave a joint presentation on the accommodation provision under Supporting People and the processes for monitoring the quality and performance of these services.

It is necessary to provide a range of temporary accommodation for those who are accepted as statutory homeless (which is eligible for assistance, unintentionally homeless, in priority need and with a local connection) until permanent accommodation can be found/offered. In addition, those who are intentionally homeless but in priority need must also be offered a temporary place to stay until they can find a settled home.

Temporary accommodation is also a vital resource as part of the homelessness prevention agenda, as it provides a much needed place to stay for single homeless people alongside the support they need to stabilise their lives and develop the skills needed for independent living. Early intervention and the provision of accommodation with support means rough sleeping is avoided and so too is the statutory homelessness route.

Households accessing the Housing Solutions Service are interviewed by an adviser to determine the level of duty owed and, if necessary, a referral to one of the temporary accommodation schemes is made.

Overview of provision

| Scheme | Location | Scale | Client group | Contract value Per Annum | Service users 2010/11 |
|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Belvedere | Runcorn | 23 units | Single adults aged 18 and over | £343,761 | 75 |
| Grangeway Court | Runcorn | 32 self-contained | Primarily those accepted as statutory homeless and mainly pregnant women/homeless families | £198,157 | 113 |
| Halton Goals | Runcorn Widnes | 22 general units 4 move-on units | Young people aged 16 to 25 | £289,438 | 92 |
| Orchard House | Widnes | 6 units | Young people aged 16 to 25 with complex needs | £149,883 | 35 |
| Women's Aid Refuge | Widnes | 15 bed-spaces | Women (and their children, except males aged 13 or over) escaping domestic violence | £141,998 | 90 |
| YMCA | Runcorn | 66 units | Single adults aged 18 and over | £457,288 | 166 |

Temporary accommodation provides much more for individuals than just a place to stay. Clients are assigned a 'Key Worker' upon entering the scheme who works with the individual/family to identify the underlying causes of their

homelessness and support them to make the necessary life changes in order to prevent the same situation recurring in the future.

The schemes provide a secure and stable environment in which the client is supported to develop the life skills and support networks needed for successful independent living. Support is tailored to each individual's specific needs and they are able to progress through a programme of change to address their personal and social problems.

Detailed below are some examples of the kind of support provided:

- Assistance with the completion of benefit application forms and ensuring clients are in receipt of all the correct benefits;
- Support to find employment, including help with putting together a CV, assistance in searching for a job, providing access to work experience opportunities, development of training/education programmes to increase employability and general support to increase confidence/motivation;
- Clients are encouraged to establish local support networks (i.e. with friends/family/ external agencies) and young people are supported to return to the family home, wherever possible;
- Other contributing factors, such as misuse of drugs/alcohol and health/mental health issues are also addressed;
- Practical skills such as budgeting, shopping and cooking healthy meals are part of the preparation for move-on and independent living.

The Council's Quality Assurance Team monitors the quality and performance of temporary accommodation through a number of means, including, the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF), the Supporting People Outcomes Framework and an assessment of performance related information.

To this end, scheduled monitoring visits take place which look at service referrals, utilisation and throughput, safeguarding, support and risk planning, complaints, staffing and consultation with residents. QAF validations involve assessing policies, procedures and service delivery against a national framework. Unannounced spot-checks also take place in response to complaints, a poor track record/service rating, safeguarding incidents and negative consultation feedback.

Services are scored A (excellent), B (good) or C (minimum standards met but room for improvement) under the QAF – all of the temporary accommodation schemes have a score of B, apart from Grangeway Court, which is C due to a change in provider meaning that the good practice in relation to service user consultation had not been met.

The Quality Assurance Team also rate the services as Red (serious issues warranting intensive monitoring), Amber (some concerns) or Green (all criteria met). All of the schemes have a rating of Green, apart from the Women's Refuge, as there are some concerns following on from complaints from residents about the quality of the accommodation.

Visits to temporary accommodation schemes

On the 23rd and 24th January 2012, members of the working group visited the six temporary accommodation schemes (further visits also took place on 2nd March 2012). During these visits, Members took the opportunity to have discussions with residents and were also given a tour of each of the premises.

The full notes from the January visits can be found at Annex 5, but in summary:

- Residents are supported to develop the skills required to sustain independent living.
- Residents are assigned a 'Key Worker' who provides support with employment and money management issues etc.
- Regular meetings between staff and residents take place where any issues can be raised and addressed. Residents felt like their opinions were listened to.
- Activities take place within the schemes.
- There are good relations between the schemes and their local community.
- Residents continue to be supported for an appropriate period of time once they have moved on.
- Residents felt well supported and safe and often commented that they wouldn't have been able to get their lives back on track without such security.
- It was reported that the weekly Housing Solutions clinics had been well received by both staff and residents – they were particularly useful in terms of reinforcing the consequences of licence breaches and helping to make move-on more successful.
- The schemes have good working relationships with other organisations (e.g. Connexions) and multi-agency working had improved over the last few years.
- The majority of residents were engaged in employment or training.
- An issue raised across all of the schemes was in relation to the policies regarding visitors – residents were unhappy that visitors were only allowed at certain times/in certain areas or not at all in some cases. However, there were valid reasons for this in terms of safeguarding and the legal responsibilities of the scheme.
- Grangeway Court appeared to be in need of repair/decoration and would benefit from a larger communal area for residents and staff to mix.
- The quality of the accommodation at YMCA was very good since refurbishment. There was some concern that some of the residents didn't actually need the level of support offered at YMCA (i.e. because they had previously managed their own accommodation and therefore didn't need the life skills training).

- Residents at Halton Goals reported some issues in terms of shared facilities, especially around cleaning responsibilities. It was also noted that the kitchen area did not contain a dining table and chairs.
- Halton Goals residents suggested that it would be helpful if there was a scheme whereby cookery items could be booked in and out of a central pool, as such items could be expensive to buy when just wanting to try out a particular recipe. They had found a cookery course that was held at the church to be very useful, as it only cost £1 per day and they had a meal at the end of it.
- Residents at Belvedere felt that there was a need for more washing machines and tumble dryers.
- Staff at the Women’s Refuge commented that they would like to see the building re-modelled into self-contained units for each family rather than having them share living rooms, kitchens and bathrooms. It was noted that there was a lot of unused space so re-modelling would be possible but would reduce the number of units from 15 to around 8 or 9).
- One resident at the Women’s Refuge requested a water cooler for the top floor so she didn’t have to go downstairs to get her child a drink in the night.

The following table highlights the action points that were agreed following the visits and an update as to progress:

| Action point | Progress |
|---|---|
| Discussions to take place with Quality Assurance Team regarding the condition of units in Grangeway Court. | Regional Manager asked to provide details of maintenance schedule for service. QA team to monitor progress of works. |
| Contact the Grange Community Centre to see what opportunities exist for residents of Grangeway Court to mix with other residents. | Staff at Grangeway Court confirmed that residents already link in with activities held at the Community Centre, for example, the cooking sessions. A number of activities are also offered at the scheme itself, including, coffee mornings, gardening projects, advice sessions and arts and crafts. |
| Work to be undertaken to explore options available to ensure that only residents who need support are able to access the schemes. | Principle Manager Housing Options and Policy Officer Housing to work on draft procedure and guidance for operational staff regarding criteria for access to services. |
| A welcome pack to be produced for Halton Goals (and other schemes as necessary) detailing local amenities and services. | Quality Assurance team tasked with ensuring that welcome packs are in place within all services |

| Action point | Progress |
|--|--|
| Quality Assurance Team to follow up with Halton Goals issues regarding rubbish outside the scheme and the broken boiler. | These issues were followed up with Halton Goals and a response had been received which explained that the boiler problem was caused by a recurring fault – it had been looked at and fixed a number of times and it is due to be completely replaced. With regards to the furniture, it was not the same pieces that had been sat outside for a lengthy period; rather furniture of the same style had been replaced in all of the units over several weeks/months in order to keep removal costs down. The Fire Service had completed a risk assessment and confirmed there was no fire hazard. |
| Discuss with Quality Assurance Team the lack of support around healthy eating/meal planning in Halton Goals. | Arrangements made for Healthily Eating sessions to take place within service. |
| Work to be undertaken to consider alternative forms of provision for victims of domestic violence, e.g. dispersed accommodation and consider options to re-model the existing accommodation. | Project group established. Initial audit of supply/demand and performance completed. |

Procurement of housing support services

Towards the end of 2011, tenders were invited for accommodation-based services and domestic abuse and floating support services.

Accommodation-based services

Current provision:

YMCA – Halton YMCA

Nightstop – Halton YMCA

Y's Up advice and guidance – Halton YMCA

Belvedere – CIC

Halton Goals – CIC

Orchard House - CIC

There was very little interest with in the main only existing providers submitting a tender.

Following evaluation and consultation with the scrutiny working group at the working group meeting held on 13th December 2011, the following direction of travel was agreed in respect to hostel provision:

- Achieving a better distribution across the borough of supported housing for the single homeless;
- Improving the quality and fitness for purpose of accommodation offered to the single homeless; and
- Reducing Supporting People expenditure.

The above will require change at a strategic and operational level. Key changes proposed include:

- Prioritising access to services to those who are statutorily homeless and for whom the Council has a full rehousing duty, rather than those who are simply homeless;
- Ensuring appropriate referrals into services;
- Increasing capacity at the schemes by reducing the duration of stay at each scheme from 2 years to 6 months;
- Monitoring throughput from services to ensure timely move on; and
- Focusing on homeless prevention and mediation.

Domestic abuse services

Currently Halton & District Women's Aid provide refuge accommodation and a domestic abuse support service (the Independent Domestic Violence Advocate [IDVA], floating support and the sanctuary scheme) under two separate contracts. The tender was for a holistic approach to include all elements of existing service delivery.

Only one tender was received from the current provider, therefore, due to insufficient competition, the current service arrangements were extended until the end of August 2013 and there will be a re-tender exercise in May 2012.

Members agreed that further work should be undertaken to explore other models of provision, such as Community based services (Dispersed Housing).

Floating support services

Competition was achieved with tenders for the following support services, currently delivered by SHAP, Carr Gomm, Plus Dane and Imagine:

- Black and Minority Ethnic communities;
- Anti-Social Behaviour;
- Mental health;
- Generic support.

A new contract with Plus Dane is to commence 1st April 2012 – efficiencies are to be achieved by delivering all four services out of one office base.

Conclusions:

- Halton provides a good range of temporary accommodation for the key homelessness risk groups in order to meet the obligations under homelessness legislation and to contribute to the prevention agenda.
- The schemes have measures in place to support individuals to develop the life skills necessary to sustain independent living and they are regularly monitored in order to ensure quality in service provision.
- The schemes were visited by the working group as part of the review and

the overall outcome was positive, however, some areas for improvement were identified and are being addressed.

- A recent tender exercise for accommodation-based and associated support services has led to opportunities to achieve efficiency savings and to consider new models of service provision and the potential to re-configure existing services.

Recommendations:

- Deliver on the actions arising from the visits to temporary accommodation schemes.
- Secure efficiency savings through new contracts with Halton YMCA for the YMCA hostel and Nightstop and de-commissioning of Y's Up advice and guidance.
- Secure efficiency savings through new contract with Plus Dane for floating support services.
- Achieve efficiencies through the reconfiguration of remaining hostel provision for single people in order to improve the distribution of services across the Borough, prioritise access to services for individuals to whom the Council has a statutory duty, increase focus on homelessness prevention to assist individuals to resolve housing issues.
- Consider moving to a crisis intervention model for young homeless people in order to maximise the potential for young people to return home to their family.
- Consider benefits of alternative models of provision for those escaping domestic violence.

5.3 The Council's Housing Solutions Service

The third meeting of the working group was held on 15th February 2012 and during this meeting Patricia Preston gave a presentation on the Council's Housing Solutions Service.

The service performs the local authority functions in relation to statutory and preventative homelessness in Halton. The team is comprised of a Principal Manager, Operational Manager, six Housing Solutions Advisers, one Young Persons Officer, one Landlord Accreditation Officer and one Administration Support Officer.

The focus of the team's work is prevention, in line with the government push for local authorities to have less of a 'legalistic' focus on their work around homelessness, and also because early intervention and preventing homelessness brings about particular benefits. As at April 2011, the number of households on the waiting list for social housing was 2,683 (Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix), therefore, enabling people to remain in homes where it is reasonable for them to do so helps to make best use of a limited resource. In addition, early intervention often results in lower costs for local authorities and other agencies. The key measures employed to prevent homelessness are outlined below:

Prevention services

| Measure | Overview |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Mediation | <p>Family breakdown is a primary cause of homelessness, often arising from problems between parents and adult children – this is particularly the case in Halton. Therefore, Housing Solutions work closely with families to re-establish relationships and enable the young person to continue living in the family home where this is appropriate. Since April 2011, Housing Solutions have had a dedicated Young Persons Officer who focusses specifically on 16-17 year olds and acts as a much-needed link between Housing Solutions and Children’s Services.</p> |
| Nightstop | <p>The Nightstop service has developed a supported lodgings scheme providing very short-term accommodation for young people via volunteer host families together with a mediation service which aims to resolve issues which have led to the breakdown in family relationships.</p> <p>In 2010/11, 34 young people were hosted for a combined total of 348 bed nights and 252 mediation sessions were held.</p> |
| Domestic Abuse Sanctuary Scheme | <p>This scheme enables victims of domestic abuse to remain in their home by fitting enhanced security measures (including reinforced doors/windows, locks/alarms for doors/windows and security lighting) where it is safe to do so, is the victim’s choice and the perpetrator does not live in the accommodation.</p> <p>In 2010, 49 properties had sanctuary measures installed at a total combined cost of £25,000.</p> <p>The Council is currently developing a scheme in partnership with Registered Providers whereby they will be responsible for the cost of measures installed in their properties and the Council will cover the costs relating to private sector properties.</p> |
| Bond Guarantee Scheme | <p>In an effort to increase prevention of homelessness, the Rent Deposit Scheme was launched in 2007. The scheme was developed to assist homeless individuals and families to access private rented sector (PRS) accommodation by providing the deposit required by landlords.</p> <p>In 2009 Rent Deposit Scheme was changed to the Bond Guarantee Scheme (BGS). The scheme now provides the written promise of the deposit amount should it be required at the end of the tenancy.</p> <p>BGS allows the Council to assist more households into the PRS as no funds are released unless the landlord has reason to claim on the bond for rent arrears or property damage.</p> <p>Since the scheme’s introduction 328 tenancies have been created and of these 67% are ongoing, 15% ended without a claim and 18% ended with the bond being claimed (either in part or in full).</p> |

| Measure | Overview |
|----------------------|---|
| Mortgage Support | <p>The current economic climate has led to an increased number of people finding themselves in mortgage difficulty and Halton has been identified by CLG as a national 'hotspot' for repossessions. In response to this, Halton established a Repossessions Action Plan and Working Group to bring together the work of various agencies in the borough in preventing repossessions.</p> <p>Housing Solutions also has a dedicated Mortgage Rescue Adviser, although the post is currently vacant following the departure of the previous post-holder in October 2011, the position is to be re-filled in the near future following recent advertisement of the vacancy.</p> <p>Since January 2010, the Mortgage Rescue Adviser provided tailored advice to 187 households and 94 cases were prevented from repossession.</p> |
| Home Essentials Fund | <p>The lack of furniture and essential equipment can make people reluctant to move from temporary accommodation and can contribute to abandonment of new tenancies. In Halton, this is particularly the case for younger people.</p> <p>In an effort to help towards the cost of setting up a new home, the Council has established a Home Essentials Fund, which those aged 16-25 can access if they have become unintentionally homeless and have been provided temporary accommodation in one of the borough's hostels. The Council will purchase items (up to a total value of £300) from a set list on behalf of the customer to help towards the costs of fully furnishing their new home when they move on.</p> <p>Since June 2011, 12 young people moving on from hostel accommodation have been provided with essential home items, including microwaves, toasters, bedding and cookery items up to a total value of £300.</p> |
| Tenancy sustainment | <p>Housing Solutions also advise or refer customers to other organisations for advice on a wider range of tenancy sustainment issues, to ensure early intervention in the homelessness risk process. For example, for debt/money advice and for those with specific support needs (i.e. those with drug/alcohol abuse problems or mental health issues).</p> |

Internal review of the Housing Solutions Service

In November and December 2011 an internal review of the Housing Solutions service was undertaken by staff from the authority's Policy and Development Services Division. The purpose of the review was to highlight opportunities to improve the operational efficiency and effectiveness of the service.

The review highlighted many positives. For example, the current staff appear to be dedicated, hard-working individuals who are keen to learn more and open to new ways of working. They have developed a strong peer support

system and were appreciative of the guidance and support given by the Team Manager. The advice given to clients at appointments was found to be accurate with all options explained and the client interviews were handled professionally.

Some opportunities for improvement were identified and measures to address these have either been carried out or plans have been put in place to address them, as summarised below:

- The current system of only having appointments on specific days at Halton Direct Links appeared to result in a high proportion of clients not turning up for those appointments (approximately 50%). Presumably some clients had made other housing arrangements in the intervening period between initial contact and the appointment so consequently hadn't been given the full range of options to secure a more sustainable housing solution. It was recommended, therefore, that a permanent staff presence be established at each HDL so that immediate advice can be given to the client. Preliminary steps to introduce this have already been undertaken and the new system is in the process of being phased in.
- There were opportunities to improve some of the ICT systems used by the team. In particular the Peter Lally system used to record homelessness presentations and outcomes only offers limited functionality and so does not currently support a move to remote working at HDLs. However, there are existing plans to commission a new ICT system and it was recommended that the potential functionality and scope of the new system is a key consideration in the commissioning process. In addition, there were opportunities to reorganise internal ICT systems such as the shared team drive and the complaints database to ensure that appropriate information can be quickly and easily accessed. These tasks have already been undertaken and staff are now using the new systems.
- It was recommended that the current paper filing system is reviewed to ensure that files can be easily stored and accessed and a booking out system be established so that files can be traced if they are removed from the filing cabinets. An initial meeting of relevant officers has been held and options for improvement are currently being considered.
- There was a need to develop clear policies and procedure guides for the team to help new employees to quickly settle into their role. Staff are currently developing an Information Guide which will contain everything an employee needs to know about Housing Solutions e.g. summary of legislation/guidance, procedural flowcharts and key contact details in the form of an A4 Lever Arch file which can be easily updated as necessary.
- A new training programme has been developed to support new staff, incorporating a range of formal and informal training methods.

Conclusions:

- The Council has a good quality Housing Solutions Service, which offers a range of tools to prevent homelessness.
- An internal review of the service highlighted some areas for improvement – an action plan is currently being pursued in this respect.

Recommendations:

- Continue to offer a range of prevention services for those facing homelessness.
- Deliver the actions arising out of the internal review of the Housing Solutions Service.

5.4 Challenges for the future

Localism Act 2011

This Act sets out plans to give communities and local authorities greater powers and freedoms. Of particular relevance to homelessness is the power for local authorities to discharge their statutory homelessness duty through an offer of accommodation in the private rented sector without the applicant's consent (currently, local authorities can do this but the applicant has to agree). This is intended to reduce demand for social housing and tackle the perception that homelessness is used as a fast-track to a social housing tenancy. However, most private sector tenancies are let as six-month Assured Shorthold Tenancies so would not meet the 12-month requirement and many landlords could be unwilling to help due to welfare reforms (described below and at Annex 6).

The Act also gives Registered Providers of social housing (i.e. Housing Associations) the ability to offer 'fixed term tenancies' for new social housing tenants rather than the 'lifetime' tenancies that are currently offered. At the end of the fixed term, the household's circumstances will be reviewed and if they still need the accommodation, their tenancy can be renewed. However, if their circumstances have significantly improved, i.e. their income has increased perhaps through starting work, the tenancy might not be renewed. There were concerns that this reform posed a disincentive to work in this respect.

There is a requirement for the local authority to produce a Tenancy Strategy to guide Registered Providers as to the type of tenancies that should be offered locally, the length of the tenancies and the circumstances in which they should be offered and renewed. Halton has developed a first draft of this Strategy, which recommends that Providers continue to offer lifetime tenancies but also recognises that they may wish to make use of fixed term tenancies in order to make best use of their stock. The Strategy advises that the fixed term should be for a minimum of five years and is not suitable in some circumstances (i.e. for tenants above retirement age, those being asked to move due to re-development etc.). The Strategy also recommends that in most cases tenancies are renewed upon review, particularly where the

household contains children, anyone assessed as vulnerable or the property has been adapted for someone who is disabled and they still reside in the property.

Households whose tenancies are not renewed for whatever reason and are unable to purchase a property or secure private rented housing may find themselves homeless. Halton's Tenancy Strategy advises Providers to consider this when deciding whether a tenancy should be renewed to avoid the associated pressure on their own and the Council's services.

Welfare Reform Act 2012

The fourth and final meeting of the working group was held on 28th March 2012 and was attended by David Gray, Welfare Rights Manager, who summarised the changes to the welfare system and provided estimates as to the numbers that could be affected in Halton and how this could impact on homelessness. The table that directed discussions at the meeting is included at Annex 4 and provides further detail on each of the changes. However, below is a summary of those that are of most concern in relation to homelessness:

- Changes to Local Housing Allowance (LHA), most significantly the extension of the age threshold for the shared accommodation rate from 25 to 35. This will affect around 234 claimants in Halton, whose benefit entitlement will reduce from £91.15 to £53.54 per week. Private tenants will also be affected by plans to uprate LHA by the Consumer Price Index rather than the Retail Price Index currently used.
- Changes to Housing Benefit including the introduction of an under occupancy penalty for households whose homes are deemed to be too large for their needs. Touted as the 'Bedroom Tax', this change will have a very significant impact in Halton, where it is estimated that as many as 3,000 social housing tenants could lose benefits. The situation is compounded by a shortage of smaller properties in the borough to facilitate downsizing.
- The introduction of Universal Credit, which will see overall benefits capped at £26,000 for lone parents/couples with children and £18,000 for single people without children (in line with the average incomes of those in work). It is anticipated that only a small number of residents within Halton will be affected by this cap.
- Causing more concern is the fact that Housing Benefit (HB) is to be included in Universal Credit and the Government are keen to encourage individual financial responsibility, therefore, HB will no longer be paid direct to landlords.
- Replacement of Disability Living Allowance with a Personal Independent Payment (PIP) for those of working age. Halton, which has been selected as a pilot area for the scheme, has a disproportionate amount of disabled residents and the change to PIP will involve a reduction in the numbers of those receiving financial assistance.

Conclusions:

- There are clear challenges ahead due to housing and welfare reforms – already squeezed household budgets are to be further affected and this poses a real concern in relation to homelessness levels.

Recommendations:

- To respond to the challenges that lie ahead, joint working between Housing Solutions and Welfare Rights will be of most importance. Similarly, the Council should ensure ongoing dialogue with Registered Providers.

ANNEX 1

TOPIC BRIEF

| | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Topic Title: | Homelessness Services |
| Officer Lead: | Divisional Manager, Commissioning |
| Planned start date: | August 2011 |
| Target PPB Meeting: | November 2011 |

Topic description and scope:

An assessment of the Council's statutory duties and preventative role in relation to homelessness and a review of the services provided with a particular focus on temporary accommodation services.

Why this topic was chosen:

Councils have a range of duties to those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness in 28 days, at the very least they are obliged to provide advice and assistance on housing options and some households are owed the main homelessness duty, which is the provision of settled accommodation. Local authorities are also expected to implement services to prevent homelessness. More information on the local authority homelessness role, both statutory and preventative, can be found at Appendix 1.

To respond to the housing needs of those who are homeless, it is necessary to provide a range of temporary accommodation that can be accessed in emergencies until settled accommodation can be found. There are a number of temporary accommodation schemes operating in Halton.

It is good practice to periodically assess the effectiveness of services provided for those who are homeless and this review is part of that process. The results will also feed into the wider strategic review of homelessness and development of the borough's next Homelessness Strategy in 2012.

Key outputs and outcomes sought:

- An understanding of the local authority homelessness role and the services provided in Halton (see Supporting Information at Appendix 1).
- A review of the provision and effectiveness of temporary accommodation and other homelessness services in Halton with a view to identifying gaps in the service and potential efficiencies that can be made.
- Consider and make recommendations to the Healthy Halton PPB on how best to improve standards in the service.

Which of Halton's 5 strategic priorities this topic addresses and the key objectives and improvement targets it will help to achieve:

A Healthy Halton:

To remove barriers that disable people and contribute to poor health by working across partnerships to address the wider determinants of health such as unemployment, education and skills, housing, crime and environment.

A Safer Halton:

To tackle the problem of domestic abuse in all its forms, supporting the victims and their families and taking enforcement action against perpetrators.

Environment and Regeneration in Halton:

Provide sustainable, good quality, affordable and adaptable residential accommodation to meet the needs of all sections of society.

Nature of expected/desired PPB input:

Member led scrutiny review of homelessness services.

Preferred mode of operation:

Scrutiny working group of selected Members from Health Halton PPB involving representatives from relevant partner agencies and relevant Council officers:

- Desk-top review and performance analysis of current service provision.
- Literature review/examination of best practice in other local authority areas.
- Site visits to temporary accommodation schemes – YMCA, Belvedere, Halton Goals, Orchard House, Grangeway Court and Women’s Aid.

Agreed and signed by:

PPB chair

Officer

Date

Date

APPENDIX 1

Scrutiny Review of Homelessness Services Supporting Information

The Local Authority Homelessness Role – Statutory and Preventative

Communities and Local Government (CLG) define homelessness as ‘a lack of secure accommodation that can reasonably be occupied’.

The homelessness legislation is contained in Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002).

Councils have a range of duties to those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness (meaning they are at risk of becoming homeless within 28 days).

All households are entitled to receive advice and assistance from the Council and for those who are classified as statutory homeless (eligible for assistance, unintentionally homeless, in priority need and with a local connection) the Council must provide settled accommodation (if it is not immediately available, temporary accommodation must be provided in the meantime). This is known as the main homelessness duty.

The offer of a settled home, i.e. nomination for a housing association tenancy, brings the homelessness duty to an end.

In addition, those who are in priority need but intentionally homeless (i.e. homeless because they did, or failed to do, something that then caused homelessness) must be provided with temporary accommodation for a period that will allow them to find settled accommodation themselves.

To be classified as in priority need the household must contain dependent children or be vulnerable in some way (e.g. as a result of old age, disability, the threat of violence or being aged 16-17).

Ever since the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977, local authorities have been expected to prevent, as well as to respond to homelessness. The Homelessness Act 2002 further encouraged local authorities to be more proactive in tackling homelessness through the production of a Homelessness Strategy, which should be based on a review of homelessness in the local area. The review would increase an authority’s understanding of the causes of homelessness in the area, which would allow them to develop a range of measures to appropriately prevent homelessness.

Homelessness prevention focuses on identifying those at risk of homelessness and intervening as early as possible in order to facilitate the household remaining in their current home or making a planned move from one settled home to another.

Services in Halton

The **Council's Housing Solutions Service** (within the Communities Directorate) performs the local authority functions in relation to homelessness. Access to the Service is principally via the Council's Halton Direct Link (HDL) Service.

All those who present to the Service are offered an interview with a Housing Solutions Adviser where the possibilities for resolving their housing problem are explored, which may include making a statutory homeless application.

Those who are accepted as statutory homeless are given top priority on the Council's Housing Register, which is managed on the Council's behalf by Halton Housing Trust.

A range of **prevention services** are also provided through Housing Solutions for those who are at risk of homelessness, in addition, those who are not owed the main homelessness duty are also helped via this advice and assistance route. Some of the prevention services are detailed further below.

Mediation

Family breakdown is a primary cause of homelessness, often arising from problems between parents and adult children – this is particularly the case in Halton. Therefore, Housing Solutions work closely with families to re-establish relationships and enable the young person to continue living in the family home where this is appropriate.

Supported Lodgings (Nightstop)

A supported lodgings scheme has been developed, which enables young people to stay with a volunteer host family for an emergency period whilst more suitable short-term housing is found or until mediation leads to the young person returning to the family home.

Domestic Abuse Sanctuary Scheme

This scheme allows victims of domestic abuse to remain in their home by fitting enhanced security measures to deter the abusive partner (who will usually have been excluded from the property via an injunction).

Bond Guarantee Scheme

The BGS enables households to secure a private tenancy through a guarantee that the Council will pay the landlord up to £500 to cover any financial loss in lieu of a deposit should any problems arise in the first year of tenancy. This scheme offers an alternative route for those who are unable to access other forms of accommodation.

Mortgage support

The current economic climate has led to an increased number of people finding themselves in mortgage difficulty and Halton has been identified by CLG as a national 'hotspot' for repossessions. In response to this, Halton established a Repossessions Action Plan and Working Group to bring together the work of various agencies in the borough in preventing repossessions.

Housing Solutions has a dedicated Mortgage Rescue Adviser to help those who are facing repossession by providing advice on the help available, negotiating with mortgage lenders and attending court hearings.

Home Essentials Fund

Many homeless households are without the means to furnish a new home. The lack of furniture and essential equipment can make people reluctant to move from temporary accommodation and can contribute to abandonment of new tenancies. In Halton, this is particularly the case for younger people.

In an effort to help towards the cost of setting up a new home, the Council has established a Home Essentials Fund, which those aged 16-25 can access if they have become unintentionally homeless and have been provided temporary accommodation in one of the borough's hostels. The Council will purchase items (up to a total value of £300) from a set list on behalf of the customer to help towards the costs of fully furnishing their home.

Housing Solutions also advise or refer customers to other organisations for advice on a **wider range of tenancy sustainment** issues, to ensure early intervention in the homelessness risk process. Services to aid tenancy sustainment include:

- Provision of debt, welfare rights, benefit maximisation and budgeting advice via the Council's own Welfare Rights Service or referral onto organisations such as the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB);
- Outreach support to help those who abuse drugs/alcohol to develop the skills needed to manage a home;
- Long-term supported housing alongside community based and outreach support for those with mental health problems to enable them to settle in the community after discharge from hospital;
- Floating support around maintaining a home for key risk groups increasing their capacity to live independently and developing their money management abilities; and in addition
- Registered Providers of social housing also have their own early intervention mechanisms to support tenants falling into arrears.

Temporary Accommodation in Halton

Grangeway Court

There are 32 self-contained units and access is generally only for those accepted as statutory homeless and mainly for pregnant women or homeless families with dependent children.

Women's Aid

A domestic violence hostel is available for those escaping domestic violence and access is direct or by referral (there are 15 bed-spaces).

Hostels

There are four hostels in Halton providing a total of 121 bed-spaces, only 10 of which are in Widnes. YMCA and Belvedere offer support to those over the age of 18, with the other schemes being focused on those aged 16 to 25.

The *YMCA* is the largest hostel in Halton and is based in Runcorn; it has 66 units for single people.

Belvedere is based in Runcorn and offers accommodation for 23 people.

Halton Goals' main service is based in Runcorn and offers 22 units of accommodation; in addition the service supports four units of move on accommodation in Widnes.

Orchard House (Widnes) provides six accommodation units for young people with complex needs.

References

Halton's Homelessness Strategy 2009-2013 and Strategic Review 2008

Housing Act 1996, Part 7

Homelessness Code of Guidance 2006

Homelessness Prevention: A guide to good practice (2006)

ANNEX 2

METHODOLOGY DETAIL

a) First meeting of the working group – 16th November 2011

| Presentation(s) | Information provided |
|---|---|
| <p>The local authority homelessness role <i>Neil Morland, CLG Specialist Advisor</i></p> <p>Topics covered:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> National agenda and context; Homelessness law and the local authority duty to provide good quality housing advice; Declining levels of homelessness as a result of increased prevention focus; and Forthcoming challenges – Localism Bill, Housing Benefit reforms. | <p>Information Pack (produced by HBC), which covered the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Statistics relating to statutory homelessness levels and prevention of homelessness (including regional comparison); Details of the homelessness prevention services provided in Halton, including temporary accommodation; Information on the council's Housing Solutions Service; and Future challenges in light of forthcoming housing and welfare reforms. |

b) Second meeting of the working group – 13th December 2011

| Presentation(s) | Information provided |
|--|--|
| <p>Temporary accommodation – service provision and quality <i>Kath Howarth, Supporting People Development Manager</i> <i>Donna Ryan, Quality Assurance Manager</i></p> <p>Topics covered:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Service provision for homeless families, single homeless people and victims of domestic abuse; Information on service monitoring and quality assurance; and Details on performance and outcomes achieved by services. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Temporary accommodation presentation slides; Number of people accessing temporary accommodation schemes 2010; Graphs and tables relating to the Supporting People outcomes framework for temporary accommodation schemes (2010/11); and Confidential report to update on the Supporting People tender process, including proposed courses of action. <i>Also, circulated before the meeting, was the Allocation of Accommodation Procedures for the temporary accommodation schemes.</i> |

c) Visits to temporary accommodation schemes – January & March 2012

| Date | Location/activity | Group members |
|--|---|---|
| Monday 23 rd January 2012 (AM) | Grangeway Court <i>Discussions with staff/residents and tour of the premises</i> YMCA <i>Discussions with staff/residents and tour of the premises</i> | Councillor Sandra Baker Councillor Marie Wright Patricia Preston Joanne Sutton |
| Monday 23 rd January 2012 (AM) | Halton Goals <i>Discussions with staff/residents and tour of the premises</i> Belvedere <i>Discussions with staff/residents and tour of the premises</i> | Councillor Ellen Cargill Councillor Martha Lloyd-Jones Councillor Joan Lowe Natalie Johnson Angela McNamara |
| Tuesday 24 th January 2012 (PM) | Women's Refuge <i>Discussions with staff/residents and tour of the premises</i> | Councillor Sandra Baker Councillor Margaret Horabin Councillor Chris Loftus Councillor Shaun Osborne Councillor Marie Wright Patricia Preston Joanne Sutton |
| Tuesday 24 th January 2012 (PM) | Orchard House <i>Discussions with staff/residents and tour of the premises</i> | Councillor Sandra Baker Councillor Margaret Horabin Councillor Chris Loftus Councillor Marie Wright Patricia Preston |
| Friday 2 nd March 2012 (AM) | YMCA <i>Tour of the premises</i> Grangeway Court <i>Tour of the premises</i> | Councillor Martha Lloyd-Jones Councillor Chris Loftus Angela McNamara |
| Friday 2 nd March 2012 (AM) | Halton Goals <i>Tour of the premises</i> Belvedere <i>Tour of the premises</i> | Councillor Chris Loftus Councillor Shaun Osborne Councillor Marie Wright Angela McNamara |

d) Third meeting of the working group – 15th February 2012

| Presentation(s) | Information provided |
|--|--|
| <p>Housing Solutions Service <i>Patricia Preston, Principal Manager Housing Solutions</i></p> <p>Topics covered:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structure of the team; • Homelessness legislation; • Housing Solutions Adviser role; • Review/appeal processes; • Homelessness statistics – statutory and preventative, plus regional comparisons; • Strategic objectives and service improvements. <p>Review of Housing Solutions Service <i>Joanne Sutton, Principal Policy Officer (Housing)</i></p> <p>Topics covered:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Background to the review; • Findings and outcome of the review; • Action plan to address areas for improvement. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notes from the visits to temporary accommodation schemes, including action points and updates in this respect from the schemes; • Housing Solutions Service presentation slides; • Chronology of events relating to a Housing Solutions mortgage arrears advice case; • Report on the internal review of the Housing Solutions Service. |

e) Fourth and final meeting of the working group – 28th March 2012

| Presentation(s) | Information provided |
|--|---|
| <p>Welfare Reform Act 2012 <i>David Gray, Welfare Rights Manager</i></p> <p>Topics covered:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential impact of welfare reforms on homelessness levels. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welfare Reform table summarising the changes and the numbers that could be affected in Halton; • Utilisation figures for all temporary accommodation schemes plus age and gender breakdown for Halton Goals; • Update on the position in relation to the Supporting People tenders and the various options being considered; • First draft of this report for comments from Members. |

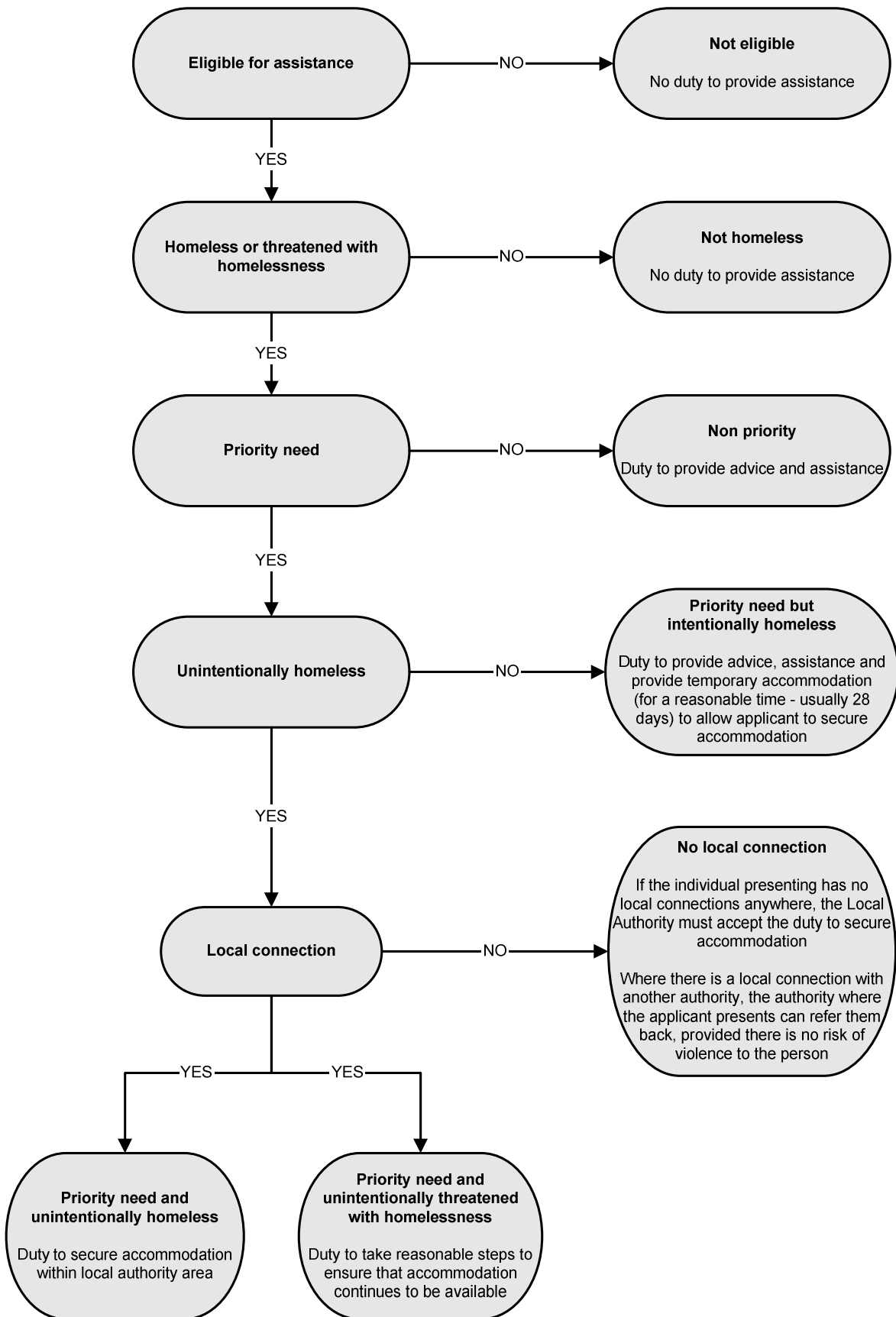
ANNEX 3

STATUTORY HOMELESS CRITERIA

| | |
|--|---|
| Eligibility | <p>A person is not eligible for housing assistance if he or she:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Is not considered to be habitually resident in the UK; ▪ Is not a British Citizen and/or does not have full rights to live in the UK due to immigration status. |
| Homeless or threatened with homelessness | <p>A person is homeless if he or she:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Has no accommodation in the UK or elsewhere that is available for his or her occupation and that he or she has a legal right to occupy; ▪ Has accommodation but cannot secure entry to it; ▪ Has accommodation but it is mobile (e.g. caravan or houseboat) and has nowhere to put it; ▪ Has accommodation but it would not be reasonable to continue to occupy it. <p>A person is threatened with homelessness if he or she:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Is likely to become homeless within the next 28 days. |
| Intentionality | <p>A person is considered intentionally homeless if he or she:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Deliberately did or did not do something which caused him or her to leave housing which he or she could have stayed in and it would have been reasonable to stay there. |
| Priority need | <p>A person is in priority need if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ They are pregnant or if dependent children live, or might reasonably be expected to live, with them; ▪ She or he has become homeless or is threatened with homelessness as result of fire, flood or other disaster; ▪ She or he is aged 16 or 17 and is not a 'relevant child' or a child in need who would be covered by the Children Act 1989 (except a person who is in full time education and whose term time accommodation is not available during a vacation – a 'relevant student'); ▪ She or he is aged under 21 and was looked after, accommodated or fostered between the ages of 16 and 18 (except a 'relevant student'); ▪ She or he is aged 21 or over and is vulnerable as a result of having been looked after, accommodated or fostered (except a 'relevant student'); ▪ She or he is vulnerable due to old age, mental illness, disability or other special reason; ▪ She or he is vulnerable as a result of having been a member of the armed forces; ▪ She or he is vulnerable as a result of serving a period of time in custody; ▪ She or he is vulnerable as a result of ceasing to occupy accommodation because of violence or harassment from another person or threats of violence from another person that are likely to be carried out. |
| Local connection | <p>A person has a local connection if he or she:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Has lived in the area by choice for a certain time (usually for the last six months or three of the last five years); ▪ Has a family connection in the area; ▪ Works in the area; ▪ Has a connection with the area for 'another special reason'; ▪ If any of these apply then a person has a local connection. |

ANNEX 4

LOCAL AUTHORITY HOMELESSNESS ASSISTANCE



ANNEX 5

NOTES FROM VISITS TO TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION SCHEMES

23rd January 2012

Grangeway Court

Present: Councillor Marie Wright, Councillor Sandra Baker, Patricia Preston, Joanne Sutton

The group was greeted by Angela Scott, Manager at Grangeway Court and the meeting was also attended by a Community Support Worker and Project Officer. The following questions were asked:

Q: How many units are there? Do all residents have keyworkers? If so, how many residents per key worker?

A: 32 units in total, all self-contained. All residents have keyworkers – the number of residents per key worker depends on the number of residents and key workers available.

Q: What is the average length of stay?

A: 16 year olds will stay until they are 18. Other than this the average length of stay is about 14 weeks.

Q: How often do staff meet with residents?

A: Catch up sessions are held with staff on a monthly basis and residents are able to drop into the office if they have any issues. Staff will also carry out a well-being check if they haven't seen a resident for a couple of days.

Q: Do staff ever go into the units?

A: Yes, to carry out regular Health and Safety checks.

Q: What issues do staff often encounter?

A: Most common problems are through alcohol, drug use, debt problems and parenting problems.

Q: Do they offer life skills training?

A: A variety of activities/training are offered including parenting skills, creative play, positive listening, relaxation and card making. These are mostly completed by Arena Project Officers but they do sometimes use external trainers.

Q: Does the support service continue after residents have moved on?

A: Yes, residents receive floating support after move on. This includes a visit to ensure appropriate child safety measures are installed in the new property e.g. child safety gates, kitchen cupboard locks etc.

Q: Is there a play worker attached to the scheme?

A: There isn't, but this is something that the staff would like to see. They are also keen to get a porta cabin set up on site so that there is a communal area where residents could congregate as the office meeting room is only small. Patricia suggested that it may be possible to redesign one of the units for use as a communal area.

Q: How successful are applications for Community Care grants?

A: Usually successful. Residents are directed to Halton Haven for furniture and Frank Buckle Trust for white goods.

Q: Are there any problems encountered as a result of the walkway through the area?

A: No, security gates are kept locked at night and residents are aware of time locked etc.

Q: What is the relationship with the local community?

A: There is a good relationship and members of the community will let the staff know if there are any issues arising on/from the estate. Community Police also regularly visit the area to offer support to residents on issues such as cyber bullying.

Meeting with resident

The group were joined by one of the residents who gave an insight into how she came to be living at Grangeway Court. She had been resident since November 2011 and had moved from London with her 13 year old son to be near her sister who lives in Widnes. She had been a caretaker in a block of flats in Tower Hamlets but had left due to anti-social behaviour from some of the residents, which brought on physical and mental health symptoms. She initially stayed with her sister but was unable to remain as her sister only has a one bedroom flat. She is hoping to secure a 2 bedroom property in the social rented sector but is finding it difficult to do so due to a shortage of 2 bedroom properties and former tenancy arrears from her London property. Patricia explained that if she is classed as statutorily homeless the arrears shouldn't be taken into account. Patricia investigated this further following the visits and found that the resident had been in contact with Housing Solutions for a period of six months and had been advised accordingly, however, circumstances prevented acceptance as statutory homeless.

The resident said that she found the support offered by the staff at Grangeway Court to be good and felt secure in the property. She found the experience at Grangeway offered her an opportunity to "draw breath" while she sorts herself out after such a bad experience in London.

The resident kindly allowed the group to visit her accommodation. This was a 2 space unit with a large living/bedroom area, separate bedroom, kitchen and shower room/toilet. Although the group felt that the accommodation was relatively spacious for hostel style accommodation, they found the unit and the communal area in this block to be in a poor state with areas of crumbling plaster. They felt that the whole block and the units could do with a lick of paint to brighten it up and to remove the marks left by adhesive materials on the walls.

The staff also showed the visitors a vacant one space unit in another part of the estate. This was significantly smaller than the other unit but was in a better state of repair and decoration.

Observations/conclusions

- The scheme is in dire need of decoration and general repair to walls etc.
- There is insufficient regular contact with residents – the office area is not inviting as it has a glass screen creating a "them and us" feeling with residents.
- There is currently no opportunity for residents to mix – there is a very small meeting room area in the office. It would benefit from a communal area where all residents could get together.

Halton YMCA

Present: Councillor Marie Wright, Councillor Sandra Baker, Patricia Preston, Joanne Sutton

Meeting with residents

There was an excellent turn out from residents (around 15 in total). Residents were asked about what they liked best about living at the YMCA and what they would change about it. The results are summarised below.

What residents like best

Most of the feedback was very positive. In particular residents stated that the quality of the rooms, the facilities, the support offered by staff and the staff themselves were all very good. The scheme also offered cheap accommodation and some of the residents said they were happy to stay there rather than move on. Some residents had stayed at the YMCA before the refurbishment was completed and felt that the accommodation was much improved, due to it now being self-contained.

What residents would change

The main issue raised was around rules and regulations in particular those related to visitors. Those residents with children/grandchildren were unable to have them visit due to strict safeguarding regulations which do not permit anyone under the age of 16 to enter the premises. Others were unhappy about the nightly curfew, the £3 charge for visitors to stay overnight and the fact that residents were not allowed to bring alcohol onto the premises (even when there is a major football tournament taking place). Other issues raised were noise levels from younger residents and the lack of recycling opportunities.

The group were then given the opportunity to tour the complex. This included one of the refurbished rooms, an externally accessed move on unit, the new music room and recording studio, gym and the residents' communal kitchen and dining area.

Conclusions/observations

Members of the contingent were very impressed with the quality of the accommodation and the facilities offered to residents. It was acknowledged that while the frustrations of residents relating to visitors etc. was understandable, there were valid reasons for taking a stringent approach to safeguarding children and restricting alcohol on the premises.

The only concern was that some of the residents did not appear to need the support of the YMCA (some had already had their own accommodation) and were therefore potentially taking the place of someone who does need the level of support offered. The improvements in the scheme could make it an even more attractive option to those seeking good quality, affordable accommodation, rather than those who are not yet equipped to hold down a tenancy and therefore require the life skills/tenancy sustainment training offered.

Questionnaires

Residents were given the opportunity to complete a questionnaire about their views on the service – 9 were completed, the results of which are summarised below (all respondents were white males under the age of 65, 5 stated they had no religion, 2 stated they were Christian and 2 did not answer the question):

| | |
|--|--|
| Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the support you receive? | Very satisfied – 5 Fairly satisfied – 4 |
| How well do you think the service meets your needs? | The service meets my needs very well – 4 The service meets most of my needs – 5 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Which of the following statements best describes how clean and comfortable the environment is? | The environment is as clean and comfortable as I want – 7 The environment is adequately clean and comfortable – 2 |
| Do you have a good variety of choice in the food and drink you get? | Yes – 4 No – 1 Not applicable – 4 |
| Are there activities available for you to take part in? | Yes – 9 |
| I can make private telephone calls any time I want | Strongly agree – 1 Agree – 2 Neither agree nor disagree – 3 Strongly disagree – 1 Not answered – 1 Referred to comments section – 1 |
| My right to private correspondence is observed at all times | Strongly agree – 2 Agree – 3 Neither agree nor disagree – 3 Referred to comments section – 1 |
| I am encouraged by the staff to maintain regular relationships with my family and friends and professional agencies | Agree – 3 Neither agree nor disagree – 4 Not answered – 1 Referred to comments section – 1 |
| Do the staff support you in way you want them to? | Always – 5 Sometimes – 3 Not answered – 1 |
| Are the staff polite and respectful with you? | Always – 8 Not answered – 1 |
| Do you feel comfortable approaching your staff with questions and requests? | Yes – 8 Not answered – 1 |
| Overall, do you feel that your human rights, such as privacy, have been considered by your staff at all times? | Yes – 8 Not answered – 1 |
| Do you feel that the support you receive allows you to live as independently as possible? | Yes – 8 Not answered – 1 |
| If you needed to make a complaint about the support you receive, would you know how to do it? | Yes – 8 Not answered – 1 |
| Other comments | My room is always tidy and I am very grateful and feel safe with my surroundings Staff will let us use the phone to contact family at their discretion |

Halton Goals

Present: Councillor Ellen Cargill, Councillor Joan Lowe, Councillor Martha Lloyd-Jones, Angela McNamara, Natalie Johnson

The group were greeted by Brian Parsons, the Scheme Manager, and the Deputy Manager, Kevin. There was some general discussion around the provision – there are 26

units, 4 of which are in Widnes for those who are low-risk and have low levels of support need.

Halton Goals accommodates those aged 16 to 25, with a tendency towards those at the younger end of the scale due to the fact that other hostels in the borough accommodate those up to the age of 69. Residents are able to stay for up to two years and this is usually the case if they enter the scheme age 16. Those entering at 18 will generally be moved on sooner.

Floating support is provided for up to six weeks (although it often continues for longer than this where necessary) and is very helpful in terms of resolving issues with utility companies and grants etc. SHAP is also engaged to provide support but sometimes it is found to be not as successful because of the lack of an established relationship.

The scheme has good relationships with the local housing associations and also increasingly of late with private landlords, which are becoming a more realistic option for many residents in light of welfare reforms.

The weekly clinics from Housing Solutions were discussed and it was stressed that they were extremely helpful, particularly in terms of reinforcing the consequences of licence breaches, helping to prevent 'hostel hopping' and making move-on more successful. In addition, residents can be signposted to reputable private landlords who are accredited with the council.

Residents become involved with their local community, recently this has involved 'Respect Week', which was helpful in tackling the stigma associated with the scheme locally. There has also been involvement with the local community group but the group has been experiencing some issues recently and is not currently operational. Residents have also done some fundraising for the Halton Haven furniture shop, which is an extremely useful service for many residents at move-on.

Residents receive life-skills training and are encouraged/assisted to enter employment/training and to this end the scheme has good links with Connexions. It was noted that multi-agency working is good and has improved in the last couple of years.

The Safeguarding Policy was discussed and it was noted that Dawn Read, Scheme Manager at Belvedere, is the CIC 'champion'. All staff receive regular training, often via e-learning, and also make use of the training offered by the council. Residents are kept informed of any policy changes etc. through the regular resident meetings.

Open discussion with residents

The group were joined by 5 residents (2 male and 3 female) who had been resident at Halton Goals for varying lengths of time (between 3 weeks and over 1 year) – a number of questions were asked by the group:

Q: Do you like living here?

A: Yes, can be lonely when you first move in but once you make friends it is a lot better. Resident meetings and activities offer the opportunity to meet people.

Q: Do you feel safe and supported?

A: Feel very safe, CCTV helps with this. There is always support when you need it, levels vary between staff – some 'go the extra mile' but all staff will provide some support.

Q: Do you have access to a computer?

A: Yes, throughout the day they are to be used for college work/searching for employment and during the evening they can be used for social purposes. Sites are restricted.

Q: What is the provision in terms of food?

A: Cater for yourself, food is not provided. Close group so all 'chip in'. Sometimes there are issues with having communal fridges, there is a lockable one near the offices, which some residents make use of but this can mean having quite a walk from your room to the fridge.

Q: What items do you have in your room?

A: Bed, wardrobe, chest of drawers, sometimes other things such as tables etc. Shared kitchen, bathroom and laundry facilities, apart from in the move-on units, which are like self-contained flats (have their own front door but are within the scheme).

Q: Are there any curfews?

A: Not if you are out but if you are on the premises you must be in your own room by midnight. There is a register to record who is on/off site for fire safety purposes. Not allowed to be out every night.

Q: Are there any issues as a result of shared facilities?

A: Sometimes residents from other houses use your kitchen and make a mess of it then it is your responsibility to clean it and when this happens often you get fed up of doing it and leave it sometimes but then you get a warning for your kitchen being unclean/tidy.

Q: Do you have any input into the rules?

A: There is a feeling that residents are simply informed about rule changes but would 'kick-off' if they didn't like it (i.e. at residents meetings). Also feel that some members of staff are 'more on their level' and provide more feedback and explanation about rules. On one occasion, some residents had asked for the number for Head Office and the staff had given it to them although they had also said that any problems could be raised and dealt with by on-site staff. The group said they had used the feedback/complaint forms that are made available in the office area.

Q: Do you work or attend college?

A: All residents present attended college and really enjoyed it. However, there have been issues with previous colleges due to the travel expenses (being unable to afford due to delays in receiving EMA) and being unable to attend because of appointments at the Job Centre.

Q: Do you access medical facilities?

A: One of the residents had a dentist in Widnes, as that's where she used to live but doesn't go anymore due to issues getting there and also because she doesn't like the dentist. The group felt that it was their own responsibility to sort their access to medical services, although it was raised during weekly sessions with Key Worker.

Q: Do you receive a 'welcome pack' when you move in that details local dentists, colleges etc.?

A: The group didn't recollect receiving anything like that.

Q: What are the rules in connection with visitors?

A: They have to present photo ID the first time they visit and then they are recorded as a known visitor. They can visit between the hours of 1pm and 11pm and must remain in the residents' room at all times or the communal area (i.e. they can't be together in another residents' room). Those in the move-on units can have overnight visitors. The group were unhappy with the arrangement as it means that if two residents who are close friends each have a visitor, they cannot socialise together as they each must be in their own rooms with their visitor. This has been brought up at residents meetings and the reason given by staff is that it prevents any issues 'kicking-off' but the residents said there is CCTV, which means any issues would be spotted and could be dealt with straight away. It was acknowledging that the residents and their visitors could all be together in the communal area but this didn't really feel private due to office doors being open – residents said they couldn't talk the same as they would be able to if they were allowed in their room. There is a feeling that there is a lack of trust from staff and it doesn't feel like home due to issues such as this.

Tour of Halton Goals

The residents gave the group a tour of the rooms/facilities. The following points were noted:

- There were some couches and other rubbish outside, which the residents explained had been there since the summer. There was concern as this presents a fire hazard. Following the visits, this has been fed back to the provider and they will be sending through a response to explain, which will be available at the next meeting.
- Residents reported that their boiler had been broken for one week recently. Again, this has been fed back to the provider following the visits and they have explained that it is a recurring fault – further explanation will be provided with the response referred to above.
- Smoke alarms are checked and there are regular drills.
- Rooms are checked for cleanliness etc. on a weekly basis.
- The shared kitchen area did not have a dining table/chairs, which means it is not possible for friends to cook and then eat together.
- Residents confirmed that they have to buy their own crockery and cooking materials etc. They felt it would be useful for the scheme to have certain items available to borrow, as they can be expensive to buy for cooking one meal if you just want to try a certain recipe.
- Residents also said that buying healthy food can be difficult to afford. They found a course that was held at the church really useful as you paid £1 each day for a week and you learnt to cook a meal and then took it with you.

Belvedere

Present: Councillor Ellen Cargill, Councillor Joan Lowe, Councillor Martha Lloyd-Jones, Angela McNamara, Natalie Johnson

Open discussion with residents

The group were greeted by Dawn Read, Scheme Manager, and taken to the 'training room' where they were greeted by 6 residents.

One of the residents had previously been living in a flat provided by HHT but had problems relating to anti-social behaviour from neighbours. He suffers with mental health problems, which worsened as a result of this and he felt that he didn't receive any help or support from HHT. He was signposted to Belvedere by Housing Solutions. He was very frightened when first entering the scheme and also feared he would lose his job at B&Q due to having time off because of the problems at the flat. However, he reported that the staff at

Belvedere had been brilliant and had provided him with support and encouragement and he has now been promoted to Team Leader and feels well in terms of his mental health. He reported that everyday the staff ask how he is and when he was new, they all knew his name and he felt very welcomed and safe. He felt that housing association should give more thought to where they place people, especially when they have other issues to deal with (i.e. mental health).

Another resident was keen to get a flat in West Bank in Widnes and was asking when he would be offered one. Angela explained the process and the implications of restricting interest to one area given the numbers waiting for housing. It was confirmed that those who are homeless are placed in the top category in terms of the waiting list for social housing.

There was some discussion around the welfare reforms, particularly the shared room rate being increased to those aged under 35. This applied to one of the residents present and she explained that she was not willing to share and would therefore have to wait until a 1-bed property became available or explore options in the private rented sector. She explained that she found living at Belvedere brilliant – she feels safe and genuinely cared about by the staff.

Another resident then shared her story with the group – she had experienced drug problems for many years and had been in and out of prison. The support she had received whilst being resident at Belvedere had enabled her to find a job, re-build relationships with family, stay off drugs and complete her community order. She felt that there was always someone to turn to at Belvedere no matter what she was feeling. Belvedere had also referred her for Cognitive Behavioural Therapy with an outside agency and she felt that all agencies communicate well with each other and are aware of residents' background.

Some issues were raised with regards to the policies relating to visitors. The fact that they are required to present photo ID has meant that one resident cannot have her daughters visit as they do not have any ID (however, the residents' rep has spoken to the staff about this and they may be able to take a picture and then they would be able to visit). Also, the fact that children can't go into rooms was raised but it was explained that this was due to safeguarding and the legal responsibilities of the scheme.

The residents were asked if they felt they had any input into policies, they said they felt their opinions were listened to and taken on board where possible.

The residents become involved with their local community, for example, with the carnival and they did some fundraising and went on a trip to Alton Towers.

Tour of Belvedere

The residents' representative escorted the group on a tour of premises/facilities. There are 25 rooms. Some have their own bathroom and kitchen, some are shared. It was felt that more washers and dryers would be beneficial. Cleaning is each resident's own responsibility. Rooms are checked weekly. There are regular fire alarm tests and fire drills. There are 2 members of staff on the premises at night time – one sleeping and one on duty. Belvedere also has an 'e-bed' (emergency), which is kept separate from the other rooms. Furniture is provided in the rooms but at move-one you have to get your own – Halton Haven's furniture shop has been particularly helpful.

24th January 2012

Women's Refuge

Present: Councillor Shaun Osborne, Councillor Marie Wright, Councillor Chris Loftus, Councillor Margaret Horabin, Councillor Sandra Baker, Patricia Preston, Joanne Sutton

The visit began with a general discussion with the Manager of the Unit, Frances, the Chair Christine (?) and some of the staff.

Councillors explained the purpose of the visit and the fact that the visit formed part of a wider scrutiny review of Homelessness that included visits to all temporary accommodation schemes. A number of issues were raised as part of the discussion. Staff had seen a change in the client base in terms of the number of clients and ages. It was acknowledged that due to rising unemployment the pressures on the service are likely to increase.

Staff would like to see the building remodelled to provide self-contained units for each family with a communal living area for families to use if they wanted to rather than families having to share living rooms, kitchens and bathrooms as they do at present. It was recognised that this would reduce the number of units available in the scheme (from 15 to about 8 or 9).

The issue of dispersed accommodation was discussed. Staff felt that this wouldn't work as they would not be able to provide the same level of support that they currently do to equip the women to live independently and ensure that they are receiving all benefits they are entitled to. Security of the accommodation could also be an issue with dispersed units and women could be more vulnerable. Patricia explained that dispersed accommodation can work provided it is managed well.

The payment of Rent Direct to landlords will have an impact on the ability to move women on to independent accommodation due to the increased risk of rent arrears.

Councillors asked a variety of questions as outlined below.

Q: What is the average length of stay?

A: 12 – 14 weeks

Q: What does it cost per unit?

A: Families are entitled to £219 HB. Costs are £10.50 per week for each woman and £1 per week for each child (check this)

Q: What is the capacity of the scheme?

A: The scheme can accommodate 15 women including 2 single women and up to 43 children.

Q: Is there an emergency "crash" (or waking) room e.g. where there is a comfortable chair where someone can sleep in for the night if there are no rooms available?

A: No, but rooms are usually always available.

Q: Is there a play worker attached to the scheme?

A: Yes

Councillors were then given a tour of the scheme which included visiting one of the bed spaces, the communal living area and kitchen, children's play area and a sitting room for older teenagers where they are able to study.

The opportunities for remodelling were noted due to the amount of unused space.

The Councillors were then given the opportunity to talk directly to two residents. In general they were very happy with the support offered at the unit. One resident who lived on the upper floor requested a water cooler be placed on that floor as if her son wants a drink in the middle of the night she has to go downstairs.

Orchard House

Present: Councillor Marie Wright, Councillor Margaret Horabin, Councillor Chris Loftus, Councillor Sandra Baker, Patricia Preston

Councillors had a general talk with residents and were given a tour by one of them. They also talked to members of staff. There were no issues identified.

Action points arising from the visits

Discussions to take place with Quality Assurance Team regarding the condition of units in Grangeway Court.

Contact the Grange Community Centre to see what opportunities exist for residents of Grangeway Court to mix with other residents.

A working party to be established to discuss options available to ensure that only residents who need support are able to access the schemes.

A welcome pack to be produced for Halton Goals (and other schemes as necessary) detailing local amenities and services.

Quality assurance team to follow up with Halton Goals issues regarding rubbish outside the scheme and broken boiler.

Discuss with Quality Assurance Team the lack of support around healthy eating/meal planning in Halton Goals.

A working party to be set up to consider alternative forms of provision for victims of Domestic Violence e.g. dispersed accommodation and consider options to remodel the existing accommodation.

Discuss with Quality Assurance Team the lack of access to drinking water on the top floor of Women's refuge.

ANNEX 6: POTENTIAL IMPACT OF WELFARE REFORM ON HOMELESSNESS

| Provision | Detail | Timescale for change | Possible impacts | Approximately how many people affected |
|--|---|----------------------|---|---|
| Shared accommodation Local Housing Allowance (LHA) room rate changes | Extension from under the age of 25 to under the age of 35 of LHA rate restriction. Lower shared accommodation rate to be paid in place of 1 bedroom rate. Access to children is not taken into account. | January 2012 | The weekly reduction in HB for those in one bed accommodation will be from £91.15 per week to £53.54 per week (April 2012 figures). Tenants will have an increased rental shortfall to meet, leading to possible arrears and potential homelessness. | 234 households |
| Under-occupancy penalty ('bedroom tax') | A size criteria will be used to restrict Housing Benefit (HB) for social landlords to 1 bedroom for each person or couple living as part of the household, except for children under 16 of same gender who are expected to share, any children under 10 can share, overnight carers under certain circumstances. Applies only to those households of 'working age'. Those under-occupying their social housing property by one-bedroom to lose 14% of their HB and those under-occupying by two or more bedrooms to lose 25%. | April 2013 | DWP estimates that 670,000 social tenants will be affected nationally. Tenants will lose an average of £12 per week if have one 'spare' bedroom and £22 per week average for two 'spare bedrooms'. Disproportionately affects the North West. There is an inadequate supply of smaller accommodation to meet the needs of all those who will be affected, but innovative local schemes have been suggested. Tenants will have to make up the difference in rent, leading to arrears and potential homelessness. Statutory authorities are keen to point out that further detail around the regulations on this is due out in May 2012 that may address many unanswered questions. | Strategic Housing Market Assessment 2011 suggests this may affect: 2,311 under-occupying by 1 bedroom 725 under-occupying by two bedrooms 92 under-occupying by 3 bedrooms |
| Introduction of Universal Credit | 1. Benefits to be 'capped' in line with the average working family/ single person earnings. This is expected to be set at | April 2013 | 1. If benefits exceed these thresholds, HB will be 'capped'. In the social sector this coupled with potential rent increases under the Affordable Rent regime will mean tenants have to use more of their disposable income towards housing costs. This | 55 cases identified by Housing Benefit as to be potentially 'capped' |

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| | <p>£26,000 a year for lone parents and couples with children. It is expected to be around £18,000 for single people without children.</p> <p>2. HB to be paid direct to tenants (including for social landlords).</p> | | <p>presents the risk that tenants will not pay their rent and fall into arrears, leading to potential homelessness. Large effect especially in London.</p> <p>2. Under Universal Credit most working age claimants of HB will no longer be able to choose direct HB payments to their landlord. They will receive HB payments individually with the stated reason of encouraging responsibility and easing the transition into work. Some 'vulnerable' claimants of HB will be able to have direct payments to their landlord but the criteria for this is not yet known. Clearly if tenants who cannot cope with receiving HB payments do not use this money to pay their rent, then arrears and a potential homelessness situation could follow.</p> | |
| Uprating Local Housing Allowance (LHA) in line with Consumer Price Index | LHA to be inflation-linked to the Consumer Price Index as opposed to the Retail Price Index. | April 2013 | Rents have historically risen at a higher rate than the CPI. Tenants will have to make up the shortfall between LHA and rent charged, which poses the same problem outlined above. | |
| Council tax benefit reforms | Localised schemes to be implemented. | April 2013 | 10% cut in scheme funding and 'localisation' of benefit schemes. | |
| Wider welfare benefit reforms | <p>Significantly including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disability Living Allowance being changed to a Personal Independence Payment (PIP) for those of working age with a regional pilot scheme from April 2013; Ongoing reform of Incapacity Benefit with existing claimants being assessed against the harsher criteria for | | <p>Halton has a disproportionate amount of disabled residents and the change to PIP will involve a reduction in the numbers of those receiving financial assistance. Changes in the wider benefit system will have the effect of reducing household income and lead to issues of affordability and the potential for rent arrears/mortgage difficulty and therefore homelessness.</p> | |

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| | <p>Employment Support Allowance;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Limiting payments of Employment Support Allowance (contribution based) to 12 months only;• Numerous detailed changes to Working Tax Credit;• Crisis Loans/ Community Care Grants replaced by localised measures under local authority schemes – potential effects unknown. | | | |
|--|---|--|--|--|