

Homelessness Strategy Stakeholder Consultation Event

Notes from Workshop Sessions

Workshop 1 – How can we do more to prevent homelessness in the first place?

- Aligning strategies to cover all gaps
- Look at factors causing homelessness:
 - Reduction in income
 - Poor health (physical and mental) and inability to access health services (flexible service)
 - demand v supply
 - legislation
 - relationship breakdown
 - leaving care
 - leaving hostels/prison/hospitals
 - discharge from armed forces
 - loss of private rented
 - mortgage arrears

- Cross discipline training
- Information about available services
- Education about social sector/removing stigma: responsible journalism
- Services integrated/understanding of boundaries and constraints and priorities
- Sharing information/strong protocols
- Tenancy sustainment – housing management, court desks, floating support, care pathways
- Demonstrating value for money through monitoring outcomes and not duplicating work
- Recognising when someone becomes vulnerable and look holistically at the causes. Deal with whole issue by working together.
- Intentionality
- Eliminating revolving doors
- Changing the way services work – more flexibility
- Making schemes more effective i.e. mortgage rescue etc.
- More effective use of benefits – hb, dhp, promoting services available
- Empty property management – bringing back into use (including change of use for non-residential properties)
- Partnership with voluntary sector who can access funding
- Working with schools to raise profile and prevent and manage family breakdown

- Information for older people approaching retirement/losing jobs
- Cbl
- Realistic information to wider population to manage expectations
- Better use of customer feedback – asking whether what they have meets their needs on an ongoing basis
- Step up and step down accommodation for discharge from hospital
- Supported lodgings scheme and foyer
- Longer term view of customers wider needs and how they want to live (i.e. not limiting what type of property eligible for like not just 1 beds for single people)
- Encouraging community living and support that entails: investment in facilities, tenant/resident forums

Workshop 2 – How can the homelessness strategy contribute to the wider agenda of sustainable communities, social care, health and well-being?

- The strategy will focus on prevention therefore linking into social care, health and well-being and help to reduce the pressure on these services
- Early intervention through advice services i.e. workshop, benefits advice, financial awareness will help to prevent homelessness occurring
- It's about networking and working in partnerships to signpost ensuring service users reach the right people and get help
- The strategy needs to be readable and understandable. It also needs to meet the growth in diversity and equality. The service will need to be wide ranging and holistic (crystal clear and making sense)
- Interlinking the strategies to make housing accessible, however make sure that the strategies are not duplicated/repetitive
- Ensure low level support is in place so that the outcomes of the strategy can be understood
- Make the wider communities aware of the strategy i.e. rural areas
- Homelessness forum to be broadened to look at the operational aspects of the strategy
- Tenancy support to ensure tenancies can be sustained and people can be kept in their homes
- Educating housing organisations to provide tenancy support and tenants incentives
- Lets Rent scheme to help people gain access to private rented schemes

Workshop 3 – How can we improve the current housing needs service and ensure it is genuinely customer focused?

Gaps in current service

- Youth homelessness
- Mental health
- Geographic problem – services not always in Central Beds (in Bedford /Luton)
- Public transport is an issue, expensive and not frequent/direct routes
- Low cost housing in some areas is still expensive
- Strategy needs to be overarching, but does this mean it misses the detail?
- Communication with partners and service users – knowledge about what services are already available across the districts
- A matrix of services (directory) would be good including all stat and vol agencies and a description of what they can provide. Map everything in Central Beds so anyone could use the directory
- Look at the whole housing provision and whole housing need and then match strategically, not just small areas i.e. tenure. Such as sheltered accommodation and single applicant demand, change of use?
- Better training and awareness/communication between organisations, including how we can best support and complement each other
- Lack of ongoing floating support after tenancy started, or having a finite date when support could end regardless of what stage the individual is at
- No wet houses available, some clients need this before progressing to a dry house

Choice

- Choice is good but only if clients are informed and able to access well
- Confusion about what is now available (i.e. CBL)
- Who does what with which areas of service provision. There is a lack of process
- CBL is welcomed but concern about how vulnerable applicants will use the system effectively

Suggestions for improvement

- Improved consultation with service users to ensure services are adequate and relevant. A people's Panel could be introduced to assess new policy and changes to the council's provision
- Simplify advice literature and ensure that it covers all areas of housing and homelessness
- More training for housing staff on mental health issues and signposting effectively for further support
- More help for people in non-priority groups who are still vulnerable (even if not legislatively so)

- Access hard to reach groups by putting more resources into frontline voluntary agencies who usually see more of this client type first.
- Homelessness training for frontline agencies so they can advise better and give realistic information about the council
- Utilise the Compact between vol and stat agencies
- Have council drop-in centres for housing advice at schools, churches etc.
- Allow a variety of access methods to the service, do not insist on appointments at council building, especially for those reluctant to engage or those with disabilities. Email advice line and telephone interviews would be good.
- Council officers to provide awareness sessions about the realities of homelessness at schools, colleges, hostels, foyers etc.
- In crisis situations, give 'breathing space' before planning any long term housing options with clients, esp. those fleeing violence who may need to recover from immediate experiences before thinking any further.
- Reducing staff turnover, so that relationships can be built between agencies and continuity for strategic plans and projects
- Create directory of services, so even new staff know where to signpost and liaise.
- Ensure effective complaints and ME monitoring, so that the Council understands main or reoccurring themes and can address them.

Workshop 4 – How can we work better with other agencies to provide an holistic service?

- Identify and understand processes of partners, how these can dove-tail and gaps
- Knowing our client groups/stakeholders
- Be able to drill down from strategy to policy – action on the ground
- Understand each other's drivers/priorities and bring them together (shared objectives)
- Not getting too caught by doing things the way we always have
- Recognising the wider needs – not just about homelessness

Working Together by;

- Theme based groups
- Locality based groups
- Shared action plans
- Evidence base for service planning, use all our core knowledge
- Support packages to vulnerable families, individuals to assist the best outcomes and sustain them
- Transparent decision-making
- Quality assurance-based contracts, providers agreement on principles understood by all

- Partnership for a needs further development, sustainable communities break into thematic groups
- Housing forum including landlords, tenants to identify key themes, aim to prevent problems and plan pro-actively

Housing forum= quarterly/bi-monthly?

LA

3rd sector community support

Police

D&A support

Health including mental health

Probation

Landlords in receipt of HB

Agents

Umbrella forum, and underneath have local fora/theme sub-groups

To inform, develop new responses, shared training, quality standards

Workshop 5 – How can we reduce youth homelessness and provide better support to this vulnerable client group?

- Mediation
- Supported Lodgings scheme
 - KEY: Education
 - KEY: Early identification – schools
 - KEY: Effective intervention/rolling programme
- 16 year old exclusions
- Link into career development sessions and teachers

Causes

- Teenage pregnancy – challenging perceptions (virtual baby project)
- Central Beds issues same as national
- Communication/Mediation
- Clear pathways – with range of options
- Youth Panel for Central Bedfordshire
- Lack of life skills for young people – should be included in options
- Provide incentives to work with the system
- Clear system for emergencies
- Link into offender services
- Link into community safety agenda
- Easy to criminalise young people
- Identify one person from each area to meet regularly to share youth agenda (SS, Hsg, YOT, Yth services, health)

- MAPPA/MARAC approach to young people having a pre-planned approach and developing good practice guide
- Shared ownership
- Re-educating staff
- Shadowing other departments
- Understanding roles and responsibility
- Crash pads – emergency placements (up to 2 days)
- Managing the safeguarding agenda
- Prevention v. removing young person
- Evaluation of other crash pad schemes
- Back office re-charging much simpler
- Ensure top level buy-in and attendance
- Joint commissioning of services
- Difficult because of large area of Central Beds
- Really tight forward thinking pathways (supported lodgings>hostel>move-on)
- Young people thrown out too early
- Greater use of 3rd sector – lack of in Central Beds
- Teenage parent pilot
- Mental health in young people – change in legislation
- Change in law – can no longer place young people into adult mental health services
- Moulding relevant support
- Stopping the ‘circle’ of homelessness for young people – assistance at point of contact – provide clear route for young people
- Ensuring really joined up with leaving care and aftercare services
- Educating parents – expectation/believe it’s a right to have a council property

Workshop 6 – How can we ensure we effectively reach a diverse range of client groups and provide a homelessness service that truly meets their individual and complex needs?

Consultation with diverse client groups

- Generally the service is perceived as being crisis provision – there is a low level of awareness that the service can help people who are not in a crisis, with housing options advice and homelessness prevention.
- Ways of promoting the service-:
 - Mainstream publicity.
 - Use partner organisations who are already engaged with and trusted by their service users to promote housing options and housing advice services.
 - The ‘Understanding Us’ project, run by Advocacy Alliance on behalf of Supporting People, has an ‘expert reference group’ which includes former rough-sleepers and homeless people.

They do outreach work with existing rough sleepers and could promote services to them.

- LGBT people are not hidden, they are everywhere, and lack of consultation is because agencies can't be bothered to do it.
- Reach people via the people and organisations they already trust and are engaged with, rather than starting from scratch to develop your own relationships with them.
- Gypsies and Travellers – cynicism and consultation fatigue – there has been lots of general consultation and research which isn't perceived to have come to anything. If you want to consult on something specific or tangible, or pass on information, use someone who they already know to raise it with them.

Provide advice and literature in a variety of formats, languages

- Consult with gay people on appropriate literature – don't use language that excludes / locks into an assumption that the reader is not gay.
- Strategy should seek to address the needs of people who complete sentences in Bedford prison and are released, NFA, to Bedford town centre, for timely housing options advice.
- Use of language – awareness training helps staff to use positive language about mental health, which doesn't offend people / make them feel unable to be open about their situation.
- Don't assume that there is no need for translated leaflets in Central Bedfordshire – the people who need them won't necessarily be visible to us or letting us know that they need written material in their own language. Also make the availability of interpretation services more visible.
- Talking books more useful to Gypsies and Travellers than using written material and putting a 'wagon wheel' on it. Use someone who the Gypsies and Travellers already know to deliver information to sites and explain what it is.

Staff training and awareness on equalities and diversity

- LGBT people fear using housing advice and homelessness services – they are afraid that they won't be taken seriously if they report housing issues which are raised by their sexuality; and they are afraid of encountering prejudice and hostility from council officers (Peter was speaking generally about experience of several different housing and homelessness services – it wasn't intended as a specific accusation, but at the same time neither was he excluding our services from this situation.)

- Coming out (as gay or as a trans-person) can be the start of a process of relationship / family breakdown, losing employment and accommodation, and needing to seek help from mental health services as a secondary issue.
- People may feel uncomfortable disclosing their sexuality to services – it makes it easier for people if services can avoid using language that assumes the person is hetero-sexual – use language which doesn't set-up any assumptions but has equal applicability to same and opposite sex relationships.
- If it might be relevant to the matter in hand, ask the person if they are gay –don't make them have to introduce the subject.
- Services seem to be affected by a failure to appreciate the continuing vulnerability of gay people to abuse, harassment and violence.
- Gay migrants may be particularly vulnerable – they may have left their country of origin because of homophobia and have an on-going fear of authority, of disclosing their sexuality or engaging with services, and are vulnerable to being placed in inappropriate services with people of the same nationality who may be hostile because of their sexuality.
- Staff training and awareness needs to include all services – those provided by the council but also those it procures - ie Bromford, hostel services.
- EIA of services also needed.
- Assessment of 'priority need' is a sore point for B Proud and mental health services – awareness training and jointly agreed ways of working between agencies necessary, to ensure that value judgements / negative attitudes / lack of understanding of issues, don't inform decisions about whether or not a person gets help.
- Need to be aware that the experience of homelessness itself is traumatic, makes people vulnerable to discrimination and disadvantage, needs to be taken into account in contact with them.
- Mental health awareness – experience of training housing advice staff on this is that there are preconceived ideas about mental health – how people with mental health problems will present themselves and what their needs will be.

Understanding and responding to individual and complex needs

- Lots of people have complex needs and/or their situation is a complex one, and fully understanding the situation and its root causes is important in providing the service which the person needs.
- Peter gave an example of a young gay man who is a Traveller – he has applied as homeless but the assessment didn't get to an understanding of the situation he was in, and the implications for him of staying in his current accommodation, and therefore he didn't get an appropriate response.
- Not always easy to get all the information needed to properly assess the person's situation – there may be things they don't want to disclose or find very hard to talk about – particularly if they are not confident that

they are going to get a sympathetic response; or they may get really fed-up of explaining their circumstances to several different agencies. At the same time, there has to be a good reason for needing to know, and it has to be explained to / understood by the client. For example, do they understand how assessing 'priority need' works?

- One way of addressing this would be to have multi-agency assessment – other relevant agencies and advocate present at housing interviews for example, so client only has to tell their story once; there is an automatic multi-agency perspective on what the response should be; and the client doesn't have to take the initiative in having someone who can advocate for them involved in the meeting.

Lack of specific service provision

- There is a lack of safe, supported housing provision locally for LGBT people – if they went into a local hostel they would feel they had to keep their sexuality secret – a gay man was recently thrown out of a hostel in Bedford– and the only provision where they can be 'out' safely is in London – The Albert Kennedy Trust for 16-17 yr olds in London, or Stonewall Housing for older people, or Centrepoint in London – but sometimes going to London is inappropriate for someone vulnerable, and in any case local services are needed.
- There is only one service in the country catering to male victims of same-sex domestic violence.
- Need a service locally capable of catering to openly LGBT people.

Outreach sessions, drop-in clinics

- Rough sleepers tend to gravitate to Bedford and Luton where they won't be as visible. Advocacy alliance – via the 'Understanding Us' project, and the police (community support officers – ie Mark Everett) can be used to make contact with these people.
- Venues for out-reach sessions and drop-in clinic:-
 - Citizones – use events / displays, for example, to attract people in. The Ampthill Citizone is 'like a clinic'.
 - Regular Saturday-night transgender meeting.
 - The 'wellbeing' festival in October, promoting positive images of mental health services and users, in an informal way (Gail Denning is contact).
 - CMHT buildings.
 - Find out where the local psychiatrist refers transgender people to, and produce packs to distribute there.
 - Speak to Police Community Support Officers – Dave Rollins, Pc Emma Nichol, Mark Everett.
 - Find the people who are already out there, in amongst people, and use them to promote services – health visitors, (Stephanie Bennett

for example), the G&T liaison officers, district nurses, A&E staff, police (Mark Everett), 'Understanding Us', Barnaby McConnell.