

Scrutiny Question: How do YHN and NCC support people who are homeless and those at risk of being homeless?

As a consequence of a significant delay in receiving requested information from YHN on its prevention of homelessness activity SIFT members decided to progress by investigating NCC's activity only.

1. Why we chose to scrutinise this topic

In Newcastle the perception of many people is that homelessness is quite high because street begging is quite common, particularly in the centre of the city. SIFT members wanted to explore if the perception, which can increase stigma, is close to the reality.

2. Scope of the Review

SIFT set a clear scope for the scrutiny, which is:

- To identify how effective the service is in resolving service users' issues
- To explore how accessible the service is
- To ensure equality of opportunity to service users
- To recommend, where appropriate, changes to the service.

3. How we scrutinised this service area

During this scrutiny we completed a number of activities to gather evidence, these included:

- A briefing by the service lead
- Desktop review of relevant literature
- Benchmarking other organisations' service
- Reviewing the assessment interview questions
- Exploring relevant policies and complaints
- Assessing service user feedback
- Evaluating complaints and performance information
- Conducting a staff focus group.

4. Equality Impact Assessment

SIFT members considered the nine protected characteristics contained within the Equality Act 2010 to assess if any of them would be negatively impacted by carrying out this scrutiny topic. SIFT does not consider that any internal or external groups would be negatively impacted by the scrutiny.

5. Causes of Homelessness

SIFT members wanted to better understand the causes of homelessness before scrutinising the topic further so members looked at a number of research documents. According to research by homelessness charity Homelessness Link, relationship breakdown is the most commonly cited reason for homelessness. However, it is a complex issue with many potential causes. These can include:

- Leaving prison, the Armed Forces, or social care with no accommodation
- Escaping from domestic violence
- Mental or physical health problems
- Substance abuse
- Unemployment
- Poverty and low income.

Other research indicated that a lack of intervention in a child's early years to correct poor parenting, poor environment or to tackle inappropriate behaviour may also be a significant cause of homelessness in later life.

The research indicated that people who are homeless fall into three main categories:

- A. Rough sleepers: Rough sleepers live on the streets. This is the most visible form of homelessness.
- B. Statutorily homeless: Statutory homeless people are those who are at risk of homelessness, and who are also classified as 'vulnerable' under a specific set of conditions within legislation.
- C. Hidden homeless: These are people who do not have a home but have not informed their local authorities. Research by the charity Crisis carried out in 2018 indicated that about 62 percent of single homeless people are part of this 'hidden' community.

6. A Brief Outline of Homeless Legislation

SIFT reviewed the main legislation associated with homelessness to understand the Local Authority's duty in relation to the topic.

The Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977 placed a duty on local housing Authorities (Councils) to secure permanent accommodation for unintentionally (through no fault of their own) homeless people in priority need.

Priority need is defined as "a person who is vulnerable as a result of old age, mental illness or handicap or physical disability or other special reason, or with whom such a person resides or might reasonably be expected to reside." If an applicant is assisted by a family member then they may be found to be not vulnerable and ultimately not homeless, while alternatively if a family member refuses to provide support then that applicant may be found to be homeless.

In simple terms Priority need means people who are deemed as being vulnerable. Vulnerability is decided by asking the question about the person, “*when homeless [will be] less able to fend for himself than an ordinary homeless person so that injury or detriment to him will result where a less vulnerable man would be able to cope without harmful effects.*” In essence one person is compared to another.

The Housing Act 1996, Part 7 defines when a person is homeless and imposes duties on housing Authorities to provide help and assistance to people who are. The duty owed by a housing authority under section 193 is often referred to as “the main homelessness duty”. The duty is to secure, for those who are eligible, accommodation where applicants have priority need for it due to their circumstances and have not become homeless as a result of their own conduct (unintentionally homeless). Section 198 of Part 7 enables a housing authority to refer an applicant who is owed the main housing duty but does not have a local connection to their district, to another housing authority.

The Homelessness Act 2002 imposes a duty on housing Authorities to carry out a homelessness review, formulate and publish a homelessness strategy based on the result of the review. A homelessness strategy must be published at least every five years. The strategy is developed with the social services department of Authorities. Housing and social services departments must take into account the homelessness strategies in carrying out their services.

The Localism Act 2011 enabled Authorities (since 9 November 2012) to discharge their duty to homeless households by offering a suitable tenancy of private rented housing.

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (not in use now) came into force on 3 April 2018. Authorities in England are now required to place more emphasis on the prevention and relief of homelessness for all eligible applicants. By focusing on improved prevention and relief at an earlier stage, it is hoped that fewer households will be owed a main homelessness duty and that local Authorities will reduce their use of temporary accommodation. The Act also removed the ‘Priority need’ category so that Authorities have a duty to assist all unintentionally homeless people.

This Act also included the ‘Duty to Refer.’ From 1 October 2018 named public bodies, such as the Probation Service, Job Centre, Social Services have a duty to refer users of their service who they have reason to believe are homeless to the local authority homelessness service.

Whilst conducting this scrutiny SIFT members became aware that domestic abuse victims who need to escape home will be provided with better support in safe accommodation from 1st October 2021. New regulations and guidance published that day set out the level of support councils are required to provide. These include:

- A clear expectation that expert specialist support is provided to victims in safe accommodation that best supports their needs, whether in refuges or other safe housing

- Guidance that states Bed and Breakfast accommodation or mixed homeless hostels are not the right place for victims to recover from abuse
- Councils will support victims to stay in their own homes, if the perpetrator has left and the home can be made safe.

Support for victims will include counselling for adults and children, advocacy with services such as GPs, social workers and welfare benefits, support with re-housing, and advice on staying safe. Some victims will need more specialist support, for example, interpreters, immigration advice, or mental ill health, drug or alcohol support.

7. Briefing by Service Lead

Catherine Hattam, NCC's Housing Assessment and Advice Manager and an officer from YHN delivered a briefing to SIFT members which informed us of NCC's procedures and the ways in which they endeavour to prevent homelessness.

It was explained that their Active Newcastle Inclusion Partnership aims to respond to the increased demand for advice, support and accommodation that has been created by the Welfare reforms and Localism Acts, via reduced resources. They built on their collective strength and investments, particularly Council housing, to better support residents to have the foundations for a stable LIFE:

- L – Somewhere to live
- I – An income
- F – Financial inclusion
- E – Employment.

Based on the Partnership's learning framework of: data, case studies, exception reports, complaints, research, reviews, forums, etc they use feedback loops to help understand the relationship between demand and supply, what works for residents and what system change is needed to improve the relationship between the local provision and residents.

Catherine explained that NCC's strategic approach to homelessness has moved from preventing and relieving homelessness to ending homelessness in the city. In 2019 NCC went into partnership with Crisis to end homelessness in Newcastle over the next 10 years. In 2020 Crisis agreed to invest £3m in a three year Housing First project in Newcastle.

Catherine went on to describe how Newcastle had won two prestigious awards for their work in preventing homelessness. Of particular note is that the Council has not used any bed and breakfast accommodation since 2006 and 24,000 cases of homelessness have been prevented since 2013 (recorded in 2019).

The Homelessness Team use a systematic approach to resolving cases which is person centred and seeks to resolve the client's issues through working in partnership with other agencies.

Examples of the Team's activities in 2021 include:

- 31,466 residents advised
- 4,110 cases of homelessness prevented
- 20,351 residents helped to secure additional funding of £25,611,181
- 2,773 residents received debt advice
- 985 non-emergency admittances to supported accommodation.

8. Desktop review of relevant literature

SIFT members reviewed the following documents to further understand the approach to preventing homelessness in Newcastle:

[Newcastle's Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy 2020-2025](#)
[Homelessness Commissioning Market Position Statement 2019](#)
www.newcastle.gov.uk/homelessnesspreventionforprofessionals
www.newcastle.gov.uk/financialinclusionforprofessionals

The documents set the scene for major strategic change, from making it everyone's business to prevent and relieve homelessness to ending homelessness in Newcastle.

9. Benchmarking other organisations' service

As with every scrutiny, we wanted to compare how the service runs, the use of language in documentation, etc, against other social housing providers. We chose to look at the following organisations:

- South Tyneside
- Leeds
- Manchester
- London
- Nottingham
- Northumberland
- York, North Yorkshire and East Riding.

Overall, all the above housing providers covered the same information, for example, they provided information on domestic violence, refugees and asylum seekers, contact numbers, email addresses and when they can provide help, providing a lot of information for those who are at risk of, or are experiencing, homelessness.

In the main the use of language on the sites was jargon free, easy to understand and website layouts easy to navigate. There was only one provider, where the tone of language used was negative (which is not Newcastle), in describing the use of temporary accommodation, which was related to bringing your own belongings into the temporary home, and the rules around pets. The sentence "temporary accommodation is not free" was used in bold and was very negative in tone. The site advises that you have to pay for this accommodation.

Bringing your own belongings into a temporary property is not allowed as they must be in compliance with the Fire Safety Standard. When placed into a temporary property, people are given items to meet this standard and they are not allowed to bring any of their own in. Which begs the question when faced with homelessness, where do you store your personal property and where will that money to cover the cost come from? Pets were another topic discussed by the same provider who had quite negative comments on its site. The site informs customers that pets are not allowed in any of the temporary accommodation provided, if you do bring your pet into the property, you will be removed.

10. Assessment interview questions

SIFT members reviewed the questions used by the NCC Homelessness Team in the initial assessment of people presenting as homeless. The questions are relevant and are intended to meet the requirements of the statutory framework.

11. Service user feedback

We looked at a number of quotes from users to establish if they were positive or negative in relation to the service. All of the feedback from service users was of a positive nature, the main theme being that stress levels were reduced for the customer because of the service being there for them.

12. Evaluating complaints and performance information

SIFT wanted to look at the number and types of complaints received about the Homelessness Prevention Service. On this occasion, there were no complaints around this service area received by YHN. One complaint was received by NCC, which was related to the outcome of the assessment and is still unresolved.

SIFT was informed the Homelessness Team does not have any key performance indicators.

13. Staff focus group

SIFT members wanted to gain an insight into how staff members delivered the homelessness prevention service so three members of the Housing Advice Centre participated in a Focus Group on Teams. Twelve questions were developed by members to enable SIFT to assess working practices. The main comments made by staff are recorded below.

Where do you normally see people? In your office or an alternative location? (If there is an alternative location, where would it be?)

In the current circumstances surrounding COVID we carry out initial assessments over the phone, the service is provided remotely from our homes. Before the pandemic we usually met clients at the Housing Advice Centre. There is a limited provision for rough sleepers at the Civic Centre. Clients can contact us by telephone or email, but we also see referrals from other agencies, for example the police, Job Centre, probation service and others.

During the first Lockdown the Housing Advice Centre in Pilgrim Street was decommissioned, once we return to normal working we will be based in the Central Library, which is much more accessible.

How do people contact you if they don't have a phone or any money?

Our Commissioned Services refer clients to us, such as the City Road Drop in, street level support and hostels, where people can access facilities, for example showers and laundry provision.

There was some concern during lockdown that the service would not be so accessible but no issues were encountered. Some charities will issue people with a mobile phone. People can access the service easily, but some people might struggle and we put measures in place to help.

There is a dedicated member of staff based at the Civic Centre, the Rough Sleeper Coordinator, who provides assistance to people who have no accommodation.

The Duty to Refer, which was introduced in 2018, placed a duty on specified public authorities to refer service users who they think may be homeless or threatened with homelessness to local authority homelessness teams. Referring bodies include prisons, probation service, Job Centres, social services authorities and emergency departments, etc.

At the start of the pandemic there was additional funding provided by government to get people into accommodation and off the streets. In Newcastle we look to get everyone who is homeless accommodated if they have a local connection. If they don't have a local connection and are not intentionally homeless, we provide funding to get them back to their home local authority area to get more assistance.

When interviewing people do you stick strictly to the questions contained in the computer program you use or do you broaden out the questioning area?

We have an informal discussion first to establish a positive relationship with the individual, build trust and gauge what their individual circumstances are and then we follow up with the formal assessment which is part of the statutory framework. We then put plans in place to help them and often bring in other agencies to support the plan.

Which category of homelessness do you encounter most frequently, for example street homeless, families et cetera?

Because we have the Rough Sleeper Coordinator in place: she will focus on the kind of people who have the kind of lifestyle which needs intensive support. No two days are the same for the Service; we can have all manner of weird and wonderful stories coming across to us. Probably, anecdotally the people we see the most are single males, but also families as well, it is really across the board. The school of thought at the moment is that there could be a ticking time bomb ahead once private landlords can get into court and evict residents again.

An issue which has been raised recently is that single persons in work are being made homeless and have nowhere to stay. We have had to use Clapham House more frequently. There are also issues for people who have had their right to remain status given; we have managed it quite well working with YHN and the asylum support officers.

A question about the payment to stay in hostels was made; staff explained that a Housing Benefit claim is made. There are 700 beds of accommodation for homeless people funded by Housing Benefit in Newcastle.

An issue around street begging was raised and the staff member said that street begging and homelessness should not be conflated.

Do you encounter many revolving door clients, that is those that keep coming back to use the service? If you do why do you think they keep coming back?

There are some people who may not succeed in the traditional routes out of homelessness. Lack of positive intervention in the early years of a person's life may be a common factor.

One member of staff had been in the Service for a considerable amount of time and they stated that the first person they assisted as homeless in their job turns up on average every six to eight months in a very similar situation. We have tried a number of interventions but unfortunately for that person they have not worked. We try to put in place a holistic package to try to resolve people's issues, but people make their own individual choices which the team can't influence or control.

Some people cannot cope with the conventionality of being in the system, for example, paying rent, being in work, having to attend meetings, not everybody is comfortable with doing that so they withdraw from the system, or dip in and out of it. We always try to help and hope that this time we can make a difference. There are people who have spent a long time in the system, but there are successes, with our partnership with the Job Centre there are people who have found work and have moved on.

We are interested in the multi agency approach that the service uses could you tell us a little bit about that please?

We work with government agencies, for example the prison service and the DWP, also drug treatment and addiction services.

Is the funding you receive to run the service adequate? What would be the consequences if the funding was reduced?

It would be fairly disastrous for the Service if funding was reduced. It does feel sometimes as though we are under-funded in terms of staffing levels and resources available. We have to be very astute as officers about how we work and manage our caseloads.



How do you measure success and what does success look like?

It depends on the individual, for example if a street homeless person chooses accommodation after previously refusing it for 30 times, then that is success, also if we can prevent people from losing their tenancy. A real example of success was a woman at risk of eviction. We got her into a tenancy and then six months later she gained employment. Getting someone into drug treatment or into accommodation so that they are not returned to prison is also success.

The Service works in the way that the acronym LIFE supports, which means that someone has Somewhere to **live**, An **income**, **Financial** inclusion and **Employment**. We cover all of these with our clients.

What have you learnt from the success stories? Are any of the skills learnt transferable?

The Team share knowledge and pool it between members, for example, if a Team member finds a new route into housing that would be shared between Team members. We also share what works and what doesn't work on a mini level, for example, getting people into accommodation and on a macro level which helps get Newcastle to be recognised nationally as a leader in the work that we do and we have won two awards supporting this.

We are also lucky in that the Councillors in 2010/11 made a conscious choice to protect the Homelessness Services in Newcastle from the first round of austerity cuts. A number of the neighbouring authorities lost staff and resources and their commissioned accommodation. That did impact on us because people knew we still had the Services and resources.

How do you monitor the service? How do you know if you're achieving what you need to achieve?

We have exception reporting so that if people are being made homeless and social care did not make us aware of it, but then we subsequently did become aware we would feed that back to social care so that if the situation arose again, they would be proactive in informing us.

We look to offer other organisations training so that they gain an understanding of the issues relating to homelessness. We learn from the past and make sure the same issues do not happen in the future.

We also have platforms and forums to discuss cases and learn from them and have a quarterly review.

**What types of support do you offer those you've assisted in the longer term?
How long would you continue to support?**

We offer support on a case-by-case basis. Our involvement in relieving and preventing homelessness is quite short-term because as a Council we commission longer-term and on-going support from other agencies. Seeking accommodation would usually be the end of our involvement but we would ensure that the client has the on-going support they need from other agencies, for example if the person is rehoused in Council accommodation we would pass support to YHN.

What would you change if anything about the way you work currently?

There are pressures around workloads; it would help if there was a bigger team, if there was more time then we could offer more intensive support and a better Service. Something that was mentioned earlier about prevention, the earlier we know about a case the more we can do prevent crisis.

Summary

It was evident during the discussion that the Team members were very dedicated and felt quite strongly that they wanted to provide an effective, positive Service. They spoke empathetically about the client group and demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of the issues facing homeless people. They clearly know that the best way to deliver the Service is in partnership with the agencies which can offer differing elements of support to clients.

14. Conclusions

An exploration of NCC's and YHN's approach to preventing homelessness and supporting people who become homeless was somewhat curtailed as a consequence of a significant delay in YHN responding to a request for information about their specific service. SIFT members do feel that they have thoroughly scrutinised NCC's service and have gained a much better understanding of how the city is attempting to prevent homelessness.

The Active Inclusion Partnership approach acknowledges that a range of activities to assist people from becoming homeless is in place, for example, supporting people with debt advice, access to benefits, and targeting specialist advice and support to vulnerable groups.

Perceptions of homelessness in the City may be inaccurate: not everyone understands that begging on the street is not necessarily homelessness. Some people who are begging on the street do not live on the street, they have their own accommodation. A campaign launched in 2017, Small Change or Real Change? by Changing Lives, Northumbria Police and Newcastle City Council to make the public think twice before donating to street beggars. Charity Changing Lives stated that the vast majority of Newcastle's beggars are not genuinely homeless. SIFT members feel that some street beggars might be practicing this as a lifestyle choice, putting them at risk of criminal exploitation.



Members of NCC's Housing Advice Centre Team appear to be very effective in adapting to the stringency of the pandemic. Team members work from home and contact and counsel clients to assist them in overcoming a number of difficult circumstances. The Team access temporary accommodation for clients, signpost to appropriate agencies, for example, debt counselling and ensure that clients' cases are assessed in accordance with the legislation.

The Team do not use key performance indicators.

When worst aspects of the pandemic are over the Team will be based in the Central Library, which is a much more accessible venue from which to deliver the service than the Pilgrim Street base was.

When SIFT explored the reasons why people become homeless members realised that the subject is far too complex to be addressed by a single agency. A holistic approach to tackling the issues needs to be applied: the Active Inclusion Partnership in Newcastle appears to be very effective.

SIFT members feel that their report's recommendations should also address the failings in being able to scrutinise effectively because of the lack of appropriate response to their scrutiny questions.

This report was prepared by:

Ashleigh Fullwood
Albert Brydon
Andrew Perks
Debbie Playford
Paul Wharrier

Fiona Leslie
Liviu Popoviciu
Jana Williams
Kim Simmonds

Acknowledgements

Members of SIFT would like to thank the following people for their help and cooperation in compiling this report.

From Your Homes Newcastle

Emily Sinclair
James Williams
Kobir Ahmed
Nicholas Walton

From Newcastle City Council

Catherine Hattam
Fiona Dodsworth

From Engage Associates

Eileen Adams

And all of the tenants who took part in the scrutiny



Recommendation for the Homelessness Service	Management Response	Proposed Actions	Timescale	Responsibility
<p>1. The Advice Team should relocate to the Central Library as soon as is practicable.</p>	<p>We have relocated the service from Pilgrim Street to the Library. Our Directorate is committed to agile working and providing flexible responses to residents' circumstances. The majority of access will remain remote or will go to where the resident is including in supported accommodation or on the street. There will be no drop in function at the library this would be by appointment only.</p>	<p>Complete office set up</p> <p>Agree date for staff to return to provide face to face contact in line with NCC Public Health guidelines.</p>	<p>Spring/ Summer 2022</p>	<p>Housing Assessment and Advice Manager</p>
<p>2. The Team should promote the homelessness service in a more comprehensive way so that users and potential users know that a range of agencies are involved in assisting them.</p>	<p>The Active Inclusion Service publicise and promote the homeless service. We provide support to multi-agency staff and volunteers who work with disadvantaged residents but who are not specialists in housing. This includes providing resources to help identifying, talking to and responding to residents about these issues to become routine.</p>	<p>Continue to promote and publicise the homeless service detailed in the management response.</p> <p>Look for new opportunities to develop links with the library service and community hubs.</p> <p>Ensure the website is up to date and reviewed on a regular basis to ensure relevance.</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>	<p>Active Inclusion Unit</p>



Recommendation for Scrutiny improvement	Management Response	Proposed Actions	Timescale	Responsibility
<p>3. Both NCC and YHN need to comply with the contents of the Memorandum of Understanding, particularly observing the timescales agreed.</p>	<p>NCC and YHN agree with this Scrutiny improvement recommendation and recognise the importance of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and observing and meeting the timescales set out by SIFT.</p>	<p>NCC FHU and YHN Engagement Team will coordinate the distribution of the MoU to respective other departments involved in scrutiny activities going forward.</p>	<p>Immediate</p>	<p>Emily Sinclair (YHN) Fiona Dodsworth (NCC)</p>
<p>4. NCC and YHN staff involved in scrutiny exercises should approve and then comply with SIFT's Scoping Document.</p>	<p>NCC and YHN agree with this Scrutiny improvement recommendation and recognise the importance of complying with the scoping document set out by SIFT at the beginning of a Scrutiny activity.</p>	<p>NCC FHU and YHN Engagement Team have identified that they will support staff members from their respective organisations when they begin a Scrutiny activity and ensure that they understand and comply with the Scoping document and what it sets out.</p>	<p>Immediate</p>	<p>Emily Sinclair (YHN) Fiona Dodsworth (NCC)</p>