

Social Issues Scrutiny Panel – 21 July 2008

Homelessness Informal Scrutiny Group – Conclusions

Report of Housing Options Manager

Contact: Diane Cooper (01962 848391) email dcooper@winchester.gov.uk

Purpose of the Report

To provide feedback to the Social Issues Scrutiny Panel on the findings and conclusions of the Homelessness Informal Scrutiny Group (ISG).

Links to the Corporate Strategy

Healthy and Inclusive Communities
Community Safety
Economic Prosperity

Executive Summary

The Social Scrutiny Panel meeting on 11 July 2007 resolved that a Homelessness Informal Scrutiny Group (ISG) be established comprising of Councillors Tait, Berry, Hammerton and Love and one TACT representative, Mr Rickman.

The Group's first meeting took place on 11 October 2007 and Councillor Tait was appointed as Chairman of the Scrutiny Review. Officers attending the meeting provided Members with a brief overview of the Homeless and Housing Advice service. This was primarily based on the findings of the Audit Commission report following their inspection of the service in December 2006.

The meeting focused on the scope to be covered by the scrutiny Group and the benefits of considering homelessness in a wider context. Members wished to obtain a better understanding of the formal processes around homelessness, the role supporting agencies could play, and more specifically what could be done for those clients falling outside of the statutory provisions. The latter most notably being those with chaotic lifestyles unable to either access or maintain occupancy of accommodation. It was recognised that the findings of the Informal Scrutiny Group would assist in informing the Council's emerging Homelessness Strategy.

It was agreed that officers would bring to the next meeting a practical flow chart demonstrating the formal/legislative homelessness process together with a range of statistical information. This assisted in providing the Group with an overview of the range of reasons for applicants approaching the City Council for assistance, the formal homelessness procedures and how the City Council met its statutory obligations. Some Members had already attended the consultation day hosted by the City Council on homelessness and private sector housing held on 12 October 2008 and had found this helpful in informing their considerations.

The ISG recognised that the City Council performed well in meeting its statutory duties and working in partnership with a range of agencies to meet the needs of clients approaching the service. The ISG therefore decided to focus their review on those clients with 'chaotic lifestyles' who might not be considered within the statutory

provisions and were often limited in either gaining access or engaging with services to assist them in securing and maintaining accommodation.

Whilst Winchester is reasonable well provided for in terms of supported housing projects operating in the district the ISG acknowledged that clients with chaotic lifestyles often find they are limited in accessing this type of accommodation. Due to the very nature of their lifestyles/behaviour some clients find themselves banned from a number of projects and subsequently meet resistance from other project providers when trying to secure accommodation. The ISG recognised that to consider the challenges facing this client Group they needed to take into account matters beyond the basic provision of accommodation. The nature/range of support provided, comprehensive advice, holding down a regular job or participating in voluntary work initiatives could all have a significant impact on individuals feeling part of an inclusive society. The ISG discussed what action it could take to obtain a wider picture of the challenges facing this client Group and how to better engage with them.

The Group concluded that the best source of information would be to speak directly with the clients themselves. The Trinity Centre was identified as a place where a range of clients with varying needs some of which related to accommodation attended on a regular basis. It was agreed that officers would liaise with the Trinity Centre and explore the potential for members of the ISG to undertake a pre arranged visit to the Centre. Notice of the intended visit was advertised at the Trinity Centre with an open invitation to those attending to discuss their concerns or share their experiences with members of the ISG on an informal basis.

The visit took place on 13 February 2008 and was well received by several clients who voluntarily engaged with members and officers, some on a one to one basis and some in an informal Group discussion. A wide range of issues were discussed and explored. Some clients had been banned from more than one housing project as a result of their behaviour and/or substance misuse reasons. As a result they were experiencing difficulties in finding another project to assist them. Some clients had previously held settled accommodation but for a range of reasons had lost their tenancies. There were also clients who advised they had accommodation but attended the Trinity Centre for a range of social and support reasons. The ISG members attending were also advised that some individuals considered to be 'street homeless' would not wish to explore and would find difficulty in living within a structured housing environment. There was a general consensus amongst clients that Winchester is an attractive place to live and does therefore attract a degree of transient homeless people.

The ISG held their final meeting on 18 March 2008 and conducted an overview of the findings of the Scrutiny review.

These were as follows:

- The Group agreed that the review had provided them with a better understanding of the issues related to homelessness and of the Council's and its partner organisations work and statutory obligations.
- The review had shown good service provision and commitment of officers.
- The ISG noted that the client Group they had focussed on generally had a number of support needs across a range of issues that may have contributed to them being unable to secure and maintain settled accommodation.

- With the current government emphasis on taking a broader approach in tackling housing issues and clients making a positive contribution to the local community the ISG recognised the importance of the Council's need to continue to improve its working protocols and partnerships across a range of agencies.
- The need met by the provision of a Night Shelter in the District was acknowledged as a valuable 'stepping stone' to assist some clients in eventually securing more settled accommodation. The review also recognised the need to make a distinction between street begging and homelessness. This together with the distinction between those clients considered to be vulnerably housed or statutorily homeless had led to confusion in the past.
- The Review identified the benefits obtained from meeting with clients attending the Trinity Centre. It was agreed that an improvement in service delivery for this client Group could be achieved by officers providing a monthly housing advice clinic at the Centre for those wishing to seek advice on a more informal basis (the clinic's aim being to compliment the Centre's service by providing comprehensive advice on accommodation options, benefits and support services). The range of enquiries covered and their outcomes would be monitored to inform service delivery and the emerging homelessness strategy.
- The review acknowledged the essential role that agencies and support services had to play in working in partnership with the City Council to best meet the needs of those clients with challenging/chaotic lifestyles. The need for effective joint working and the development of a range of working protocols has been a continuing theme throughout the development of the emerging Homelessness Strategy.

Recommendations

1. The findings of the Homelessness Informal Scrutiny Group are noted.
2. The outcomes from the monthly housing advice clinic held at the Trinity Centre be monitored after a period of 6 months
3. The emerging Homelessness Strategy includes the development of a range of partnership working protocols in its action plan.

Background Papers

None