

10 July 2018		ITEM: 6
Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee		
Service Review of Homelessness: Domestic Abuse and Mental Health presentations		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Key	
Report of: Lorrita Johnson, Housing Solutions Manager		
Accountable Assistant Director: Richard Birchett, Interim Assistant Director of Housing		
Accountable Director: Roger Harris, Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health		
This report is Public		

Executive Summary

At the request of the previous Chair of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee, a review has been undertaken of the experience of two separate cohorts of customers being dealt with by the Housing Solutions service – a) those becoming homeless or threatened with homelessness as a result of domestic violence and b) single applicants with mental health issues.

Prior to the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act in April this year the Housing Solutions service was focused on minimising the number of cases where a homelessness duty was found and reducing the overall number of presentations. The Housing Solutions Service has since been re-modelled to address homelessness prevention as much as providing accommodation for applicants to whom we owe a duty.

In 2017/18 the homelessness team assessed:

- 1,395 homelessness applications in 2017/18,
- 5 new applications per working day
- 235 homelessness applicants accepted a primary duty to provide safe, secure and suitable accommodation (long term settled accommodation)

It is important that the service works with customers in a way that is positive and non-judgemental, and creates a partnership between the customer and their case officer, with the shared objective of achieving the most appropriate resolution of the customer's housing issue. While this will often be homelessness prevention, there will also be cases – especially in relation to domestic abuse – where the viable

options for prevention are limited, and the service must prioritise the safety of the customer and their family without prolonging the casework and assessment stages.

The review of specific cases where domestic abuse and mental health were identified as either the reason for homelessness or an additional factor for vulnerability included those submitted to the corporate complaints team as well as those raised by Members through the Member Enquiries system.

This review was undertaken by analysing the following areas:

- An in-depth review of 18 specific cases;
- A review of members enquiries and complaints in the period 1st October 2017 to 31st December 2017;
- A telephone survey of 6 clients who had recently used the service;

In addition to the analysis of the outcome of the complaints both service users and partners and agencies working with us on homelessness were surveyed to elicit their experiences of working with the Housing Solutions teams.

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 Comment on and note the analysis of the specific cases

1.2 Comment on and note the common themes highlighted in the report

1.3 Comment on and note the improvements already underway with the homelessness service.

2. Introduction and Background

2.1 27 cases were reviewed dating from June 2015 to November 2017 where it was considered either domestic abuse or mental health was a significant cause of potential homelessness or homelessness and where it was considered that the applicant had not received a satisfactory service.

2.2 Of the 27 cases 18 were determined to involve some level of domestic abuse and 3 some mental health issues. The remaining 9 did not involve either domestic abuse or mental health issues. Of the 18 cases where domestic abuse was an issue 7 were first assessed in 2015, 6 in 2016 and 5 in 2017. All 18 cases were subject to a formal risk assessment with 9 found to be of low risk and 5 medium risk and 4 high.

3 The in-depth analysis of 18 cases

3.1 8 of the applicants had a social housing tenancy with Thurrock Council or a Registered Provider, either as a sole or joint tenant. These cases required a multi-agency approach in assessing the application and finding an appropriate solution. They required further assessment at the Managed Moves Panel and further action in line with the Allocations Policy.

- 3.2 The processing of cases ranged from 1 month to 2 years to complete and provide a housing resolution. The majority of cases which took the longest time to determine were those received in 2015/16.
- 3.3 The Housing Safeguarding team were involved in assessing all the applicants identified as having fled domestic abuse. This service aims to provide a high profile, frontline, proactive and reactive response to all aspects of Housing Domestic Abuse.

They act as an expert consultant to housing staff across the directorate in relation to domestic abuse and support housing officers in their assessment and interventions with families where domestic abuse is a dominant feature and assess the risk a client is subject to and deliver a service appropriate to the level.

Referrals to the Housing Safeguarding team were made from a range of sources including:

- Homeless Team
- MARAC (Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference)
- ASB officers
- Women's Aid
- Allocations Team
- Self - referral
- Members Enquiry

- 3.4 In 2 cases customers were dissatisfied with the service delivered by the Customer Services Officers in the council's main reception. At the time these complaints were made the reception staff were only able to offer limited information to applicants and were only able to direct customers to use the onsite telephones to access the Contact Centre who in turn noted down queries and created contact slips for the relevant teams to follow up. This standard process could result in applicants waiting up to 48 hours before a member of the Housing Solutions team contacted them. This system is no longer used and we have a triage system in place to assist applicants when they present to the council.

Customers are initially seen and assessed by an officer who offers assistance and sign posting to other relevant teams/service. This reduces overall waiting times for customers and prioritises those presenting as homeless on the day.

- 3.5 Of the 18 cases outlined above 7 applicants either made a formal complaint or had an informal complaint recorded on their casework notes. The complaints from these customers were as follows;
- No contact from officers
 - Not happy with non-priority decision
 - Delay in relocating the applicant to alternative accommodation
 - Request for update

- No risk assessment
 - Delays in processing applications following completion of the Housing and Employment Destination (HED) - the online housing advice customer system
 - Accusation of gatekeeping
- 3.6 Further investigation of the complaints and evidence from the case recording database indicated that the most common cause for “no contact from officers” was the difficulty officers had in making contact rather than not attempting to make contact at all. When applicants only have a mobile phone with limited capability, for example, on pay as you go, officers may have left messages but these have not been picked up.
- 3.7 A non-priority decision was issued following a detailed assessment of the applicant’s circumstances and a risk assessment by the Housing Safeguarding team. The assessment forms part of the statutory process and the decision is subject to a further review on a point of law if requested by the applicant. In this case the applicant did not request a review.
- 3.8 The issue of risk assessments is addressed at Para. 3.3 Above.
- 3.9 The use of the HED was common practice and was used as a tool to provide advice to applicants threatened with homelessness prior to their homelessness. This was used as a means of empowering customers to resolve their homelessness and avoid the need to visit the office. The system was not particularly customer friendly and hasn’t been used since 6 November 2017.
- 3.10 The accusation of gatekeeping by an applicant was dealt with at stage 2 of the formal complaint process and was not founded. On 1 occasion however, it took 4 months for a formal notification of a decision (S184) to be made for an applicant in a Refuge. This delay is clearly unacceptable.
- 3.11 Of the 18 cases reviewed in 2.2 the outcome of homeless applications are as follows;
- Homeless duty accepted- 2
 - Reciprocal arrangement with another Borough - 1
 - Out of borough homeless application made and accepted-1
 - Non priority decision -1
 - Fled approached address and did not pursue application-1
 - Referral to Citizen Advice Bureau- 1
 - Offered sole tenancies through the Housing Register- 5
 - Remained in accommodation and refused assistance-1
 - Sanctuary scheme provided- 1
 - Temporary accommodation offered-1

Applications resulting in a homeless duty acceptance were awarded band 3 priority and able to bid for a property through the Housing Register.

- 3.12 Reciprocal agreements offer applicants the ability to retain their security of tenure and increase the areas of safety where they are unable to remain living in the borough. The process has been further developed with neighbouring boroughs such Havering, Chelmsford and Castlepoint to enhance the rehousing options of applicants fleeing from domestic abuse.
- 3.13 When issued with a Non-Priority decision applicants presenting who cite domestic violence as an issue are offered a referral to Refuge accommodation where they can access additional support to assist with rehousing.
- 3.14 It is recognised that applicants fleeing domestic abuse should not be further penalised by losing their homes and security of tenure. To this end applicants with Council secure tenancies are offered accommodation through the allocation policy with action taken against abusers to recover properties.
- 3.15 The majority of applicants with an enduring mental health condition and/or accessing the mental health secondary service were assisted with housing as they met the threshold for the homelessness assistance (Priority need criteria).
- 3.16 There were a sub group of applicants with milder forms of mental health diagnoses who were given advice and assistance but were not provided with housing directly by the authority. This was primarily due to the outcome of the assessment suggesting that they were able to manage their own affairs. The council's duty in this instance is to provide advice and assistance only however evidence from casework indicates that officers secured accommodation for these applicants rather than left them to source it themselves.

4 Review of members enquiries

- 4.1 A further review of complaints and Members enquiries data for the period 1 October – 31 December 2017 highlighted 57 cases where the complainant was dealt with by the Solutions team. The breakdown of complaints is detailed below;
- MP enquiries – 9
 - Cllr enquiries – 25
 - MEP enquiries – 11
 - Stage 1 complaints – 6 (of which 2 had an outcome of upheld)
 - Stage 2 complaints – 6 (of which 1 had escalated from a stage 1 complaint) and (of which 2 had an outcome of upheld)
 - Stage 3 complaints – 0
- 4.2 The complaints were filtered to identify any applications where domestic abuse or mental health were cited as reasons for homelessness and 3 cases

involved domestic abuse and 2 cases involved mental health issues. The breakdown of each case is as follows;

3 cases logged relating to domestic abuse/violence.

1- Housing duty accepted

1- Priority banding 2 awarded, and the resident included on the Accessible Housing Register.

1- Housing Options interview scheduled for resident to discuss their circumstances and explore housing options.

2 cases logged relating to mental health issues.

1- A housing needs assessment was undertaken; applicant was referred to the Open Door service. A shared accommodation was identified in the Tilbury area tenancy commenced soon afterwards.

1- A homelessness application taken and enquiries underway to confirm what duty is owed in providing longer term accommodation.

5. Survey of 6 clients

5.1 The council commissioned a telephone survey of customers who had previously fled domestic violence. 6 applicants were surveyed. The satisfaction surveys operated on a 5 point rating scale. Customers were asked to rate services provided by Housing as excellent, good, fair, poor and very poor and only ratings of excellent and good are considered as "satisfied" ratings. Occasionally the customer/client being surveyed declined to provide a rating for a particular question on the survey and where this occurs the survey is omitted from the calculation for the overall satisfaction rating (only for the particular question where a rating has not been given).

5.2 **Reception staff** – customers were asked to rate the service received from staff at the reception desk.
Rating: 1 Excellent, 1 Good, 1 Fair, 1 Very Poor. Overall satisfaction rate of **33.33%**

Customer comments:

- As I approached the desk, the receptionist was smiling and was really polite.
- They were always chatting with each other before they saw to me, particularly the two more elderly ladies, when you're in a rush and have kids with you that's annoying.
- We had to wait in the beginning because no one asked if we needed help but eventually someone came over.
- There was nothing spectacular they just did their job.

- The people at reception didn't seem to really want to help me even though I left messages.
- I rang and went in numerous times to try and get through to my allocated worker and was told at reception that they had been emailed. I didn't find out until I was rung by my caseworker three weeks later that they had never received any emails from them.

5.3 **Housing Staff-** when asked how they would rate the initial interaction with the Council officers who dealt with their case.

Rating: 4 Excellent, 2 Good. Overall satisfaction of **100%**

Customer Comments:

- When my key worker asked for any information, the Council officers provided it as quickly as they could.
- She talked me through everything and reassured me that I would get a house in this area. Just in general they reassured me.
- They were in touch with me every week to make sure that I was settled. They offered me counselling sessions and explained key information to me such as how long housing benefit would take to kick in and what I was and wasn't allowed to do in the temporary accommodation.
- As soon as I emailed them they rang me straight away to sort everything out.
- They listened to me, which not a lot of people do, and took into account my view of things.
- She explained herself very well and was very friendly.

5.4 **Quality of accommodation:** when asked to rate the quality of the accommodation provided.

Rating: 3 Excellent, 1 Good, 1 Fair. Overall satisfaction **80%**

Customer Comments:

- It was just generally very good.
- I was put in a refuge and have now been offered a two bedroom house. The quality of it is excellent because it's a brand new house.
- Before we were in the temporary accommodation we had been living in a caravan with no heating or anything. To come into a fully furnished three bedroom house that we could make our own was excellent. I felt as though I didn't deserve it, I couldn't have asked for a better place.

- The property on the whole is good but there is quite a lot of damp in the property.
- There are a few problems with the boiler and the windows. It could have been in better repair.

5.5 Empathy of staff- when asked to rate the empathy shown by the caseworker dealing with their application.

Rating: Excellent 4, Fair 2. Overall satisfaction **67%**

- When she asked if I had any questions and I said 'not at the minute', she made it clear that if I had any questions I could get my key worker to email her directly or I could ring her myself.
- They went over and above what they needed to do. They took into account that where we were, we had mould everywhere and I had just come out of hospital due to this causing an infection in my throat. They gave me someone to talk for me and wrote things down for me as I couldn't speak due to the throat infection. They gave me their personal contact details at the council so I could contact them day and night.
- She was really helpful and seemed to really care about my situation.
- I don't think that they really took enough into consideration, they listened to me but they didn't really understand if that makes sense. A lot of the time people go in there just for accommodation but sometimes people need help as well and I don't think they really listen to the fact I needed help. They need to take that into consideration.
- There was empathy but you could tell when someone has done it a lot, you could tell it was her job and she wasn't taking any of it personally which I understand as it's probably the only way you could cope with the job.

5.6 Overall satisfaction of the service- 100%

Customer comments

- They were all smiling and friendly. At first I didn't feel very comfortable and was upset but they gave me tissues and did their best to make me feel comfortable. They made it clear to me that they were there to help me.
- In general it was from start to finish a very smooth process. Everything was dealt with promptly. I put in my application on the 21st of April and my appointment was the 28th April and everything was resolved in six weeks start to finish. They kept me up to date with everything regarding my case and sent me letters and informed me that I'd been accepted with the home list. The officer was in contact with my support worker at the refuge at all times as well.

- My caseworker helped me and explained everything to me. The council also got another sofa for the property and another wardrobe as there wasn't much furniture when I arrived here.
- Anytime I've ever emailed or called her she's always got back to me and explained everything that I needed her to, she made me feel as though it was okay to contact her and anything she told me that she would do, she did.
- Initially, my workers would ring me up, tell me what information they needed and would work around me. It needs to be easier to get through to your allocated workers rather than having to go through the council.
- They're not currently even responding to my emails and I'm still in the process of trying to get accommodation

5.7 Customer feedback on how the Council could improve their services in the future

- For me, it was fine as it was.
- I think for people that are going through domestic violence sometimes you feel anxious and need to be reassured, and it's not always easy to get through to someone to do this.
- I think when they make appointments with you they could come to the refuge instead of you having to go to them.
- If they think someone is at risk, I think they should act on that rather than just leave them in a vulnerable property.
- They could improve interaction with their customers and actually follow through with what they say they're going to do and send email to caseworkers. There are problems with when you make a complaint about the receptionists at the desk they then don't want to speak to you when you come in. They could make it easier to get through and talk to the people that you need to speak to.
- They could improve the service at the reception desk, to me they seemed like they weren't really bothered and weren't very empathetic.

6. Feedback from partner agencies

6.1 The review included canvassing the opinions of partner agencies who work with the Solutions and Safeguarding teams when assisting applicants who are victims of Domestic Abuse or who have Mental Health issues. We contacted the following agencies:

- Thurrock Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC)

- Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)
- Children's Services / Adult Social Care
- Changing Pathways, the third sector provider commissioned by Thurrock to provide support to women experiencing domestic violence
- National Women's Aid
- Grays Hall- Community Mental Health Team central team providing services customers with secondary mental health diagnoses.

6.2 A survey was conducted these partners to obtain feedback on the experience with the housing service. Overall the feedback was positive with many echoing that the relationship was positive with improved communication between services to assist vulnerable residents. In relation to contacting the teams all the partner agencies were aware of the relevant team managers to contact in Allocations, Homelessness and Housing Safeguarding.

7. Summary of Service Improvements

- Decommissioning of the HED system replacing with the new triage system which offers a quicker processing and prioritisation of homelessness applications
- The new allocations process offering specialist support- separating out the assessment and increasing accommodation finding for applicants
- The new phone recording arrangements in place for continual service improvement and training for staff
- The Housing Safeguarding Team service experts working closely with the homelessness officers to provide the support and assistance for survivors of domestic abuse, which often goes beyond just meeting their housing needs.

8 Future Service Delivery

8.1 The Homelessness Reduction Act created new legal obligations on the authority which are broadly in line with the new service delivery approach and we are actively considering greater specialisation at the casework stage. In this context this report provides a timely opportunity to assess how far the current service provides applicants, including those presenting with specific issues such as fleeing Domestic Abuse or with mental health issues, with a customised service.

8.2 Consideration will be given establishing a dedicated lead officer to offer the specialist support to identify and implement a comprehensive pathway of housing options for single applicants with a strong focus on meeting the needs of those with an identified mental health condition and victims of domestic abuse.

8.3 There is ongoing commitment to increase knowledge and understanding of mental health disorders/conditions which would help officers when

undertaking assessments and help establish the cause of the applicant's homelessness. The Housing Solutions Manager is working closely with colleagues to look at all ways to improve the services we provide for applicants who have mental health issues.

- 8.4 The Local Government Association, LGA, recently conducted a Peer Review of Mental Health. Whilst this was indirectly related to Housing, the team met with some housing staff and there was a universal message that the existing mental health support was very limited and thresholds for accessing secondary care services were too high. Following on from the review, there is ongoing work making the mental health services more accessible and better integrated with the local authority.
- 8.5 Where appropriate the service uses Now Medical Ltd, a private consultancy staffed by qualified clinicians including mental health practitioners, to provide an independent assessment of whether an applicant meets the vulnerability test set by case law. This enables the service to make the overall composite assessment taking into account both the views of the applicant's own GP, consultant, etc. and the views of an independent medical adviser, along with all the other relevant information on file bearing on vulnerability. This approach is endorsed in the Code of Guidance and has been found valid in multiple Court cases as a means for authorities to balance all the medical considerations relevant to an application.
- 8.6 However, as part of the ongoing review the Service is considering the future use of NowMedical.

9. Reasons for Recommendation

- 9.1 Dealing with vulnerable applicants presenting as homeless or threatened with homelessness is always challenging. Where those applicants have specific needs, such as fleeing violence or mental health issues, it is doubly important that we get our services right. The review of previous cases has highlighted where changes needed to be made and in a number of areas the service has changed and improved. The outcome of the Peer Review into Mental Health and the ongoing work with implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act will contribute to overall service improvements. It is anticipated that an increased partnership and joint working arrangements between the Mental Health and Housing services would provide the platform for providing the specialist support and assistance required for this particular group of applicants.

10. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

Detailed within the main body of the report

11. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

Detailed within the main body of the report

12. Implications

12.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Julie Curtis**
HRA and Development Accountant

There are no direct financial implications as a result of this report. Any impact on the costs associated with the service will be closely monitored and forecast using the recently established finance model.

12.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Chima Obichukwu**
Housing Solicitor

It is expected that the service would need to be familiar and competent with the new duties in a relatively short time frame, effective training delivered to staff to be legally compliant and provide a robust service limiting successful lawful challenges.

12.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Natalie Warren**
Strategic Lead: Community Development and Equalities

Victims of domestic violence include people with a range of protected characteristics and people with mental health issues are also covered by the Equalities Act. The review has provided an opportunity to consider the needs of customers with protected characteristics and the Community and Equality Impact Assessment for the service will be reviewed to ensure that future service delivery considers the Homelessness Reduction Act as well as customer experience.

13. Background papers used in preparing the report (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

None

14. Appendices to the report

None

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