

Report of: Housing Scrutiny Committee

To: Executive Board

Date: 16th January 2006

Item No:

Title of Report: Housing Vulnerable Young People Scrutiny Review

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of Report: To present to Executive Board the outcome of the Housing Scrutiny Committee review into Housing for Vulnerable Young People.

Key decision: Not applicable

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Ed Turner

Scrutiny Responsibility: Housing

Ward(s) affected: All

Report approved by: Housing Scrutiny Committee

Policy Framework: Not applicable

Recommendation(s):

The Housing Scrutiny Committee recommends that:

1. The City Council should investigate the possibility of establishing a foyer in Oxford to provide safe and affordable accommodation integrated with education, training and employment opportunities for vulnerable young people.
2. The City Council should investigate the possibility of establishing a night stop scheme, as already established in other districts in Oxfordshire, to provide emergency accommodation for homeless young people.
3. The Housing Scrutiny Committee should monitor the work carried out by Mediation in Action to prevent homelessness amongst young people in Oxford.

4. The City Council investigate the feasibility of installing greater security measures in all Council owned temporary accommodation hostels/houses and/or employing wardens to increase safety and reduce damage to properties.

5. Where possible private landlords who lease private sector lease (PSL) properties to the City Council should be encouraged to improve their security arrangements.

6. Temporary Accommodation Managers should be allowed enough time to help people settle in to temporary accommodation. An extra member of staff may be needed to do this.

7. The City Council should aim to improve its joint working in three areas – Options and Allocations, Temporary Accommodation Managers and other support workers and the City/County Council protocol.

8. Care leavers aged 18 or over no longer in full time education should be moved into settled accommodation once they leave the care of Oxfordshire County Council.

9. The City Council should continue to view young offenders on a case-by-case basis if they present as homeless and help them to find suitable accommodation where possible.

10. The City Council should endorse the principle of the Supporting People strategic review, that each district area in Oxfordshire has a high support needs accommodation service. However, this should not be at the expense of other support services in Oxford.

11. The City Council should continue to improve Housing Benefit administration.

12. The City Council continues to support the development of a supported lodging scheme for Oxford and extends the scheme if it is a success.

It should be noted that some of these recommendations need to be costed before they could be implemented. If the recommendations are approved a work programme for implementation will be developed with officers from Housing Services and Neighbourhood Renewal.

1. Introduction and Terms of Reference

2. The Housing Scrutiny Committee agreed on 23rd May 2005 to conduct a review into housing services for vulnerable young people. The Committee established a review group to examine this issue. The Councillors on the review group were Jean Fooks, Rae Humberstone and Tony Gray. The following terms of reference were agreed:

- The review should consider the range of services available for all young people that the Council has a responsibility to house under the Homelessness Act 2002.
- The review group will consider the services provided by agencies within Oxford that work with vulnerable young people, to see how they link up with Housing Services provided by Oxford City Council.
- The group will consider best practice elsewhere, both in terms of housing provision, e.g. a visit to a foyer scheme, and in terms of joined up, cross organisation working.
- The group will engage with young people to get their perspective on the services available in Oxford.
- The group will make recommendations on co-ordinated services and types of accommodation for young people, including the possibility of service re-configuration to address the imbalance of properties across age groups.

3. The review group has based its recommendations on information gathered at interviews with people working with young people on housing issues in Oxford, and from site visits to housing providers. The review group interviewed the following people:

- Graham Stratford, Acting Housing Services Business Manager
- Dennis Boobier, Housing Needs Manager
- Alex Morgan, Housing Options Team
- Jane Brogan, Dee Gabbidon, James Leathem, Temporary Accommodation Managers
- Cindy Fletcher, Social and Healthcare, Oxfordshire County Council
- Shelley Corfield, Jan Stokes Carter, Mediation in Action
- Barry Stacey, The Bridge Project

4. Site visits were held at Windmill House, a supported housing scheme for 16-25 year olds in Headington and at Goldings House, a foyer scheme run by Paradigm Housing Group in Hatfield.

5. Context

6. Young people between 16 and 25 are among the most vulnerable of those in housing need in the city. At one time recently there were 24 vulnerable young people between 16 and 19 in temporary accommodation in Oxford, with no support.

7. At present there are approximately 1000 households in temporary accommodation in Oxford. 300 of these households are single people, the majority of them young. Of these, 100 - 150 are young males, the group that receives the least amount of support.
8. The majority of young people who are accepted as homeless by the City Council are housed in temporary accommodation for a time before they move on to a supported housing scheme or into private sector stock etc. Of the 238 homelessness acceptances by the City Council since April 2005, 47 were aged 16 and 17 years old. This has increased from 29 presentations (to the County Council Children and Families Team) between September 2004 and March 2005.
9. During the year April 2004 to April 2005, 37 young people from 16 to 19 presented at the Bridge direct access hostel as street homeless. The Bridge with 22 beds is consistently full, despite being considerably enlarged recently.
10. Demand for Housing Options interviews is high. In October 2005, interviews were being booked six weeks in advance. Although 2 slots a day are kept free for emergency appointments, these are always filled.
11. The Homelessness Act 2002 has had a big impact on the Housing Options Service. 16 and 17 year olds with no residence are automatically regarded as statutorily homeless. The number of referrals to the Housing Options team from Social and Healthcare initially increased, as responsibilities for young people changed. A protocol is being worked on between the Housing Options Team and Social and Healthcare so that roles and responsibilities can be clarified and to improve working relationships.
12. There is an increase in family evictions in the summer months, according to the Council's Housing Options Team. The anecdotal evidence for the cause of these evictions is that parents/guardians become exasperated with their children when they have left school, but before they have found a job or gone into further education. Measures that can be taken to try and stop this seasonal increase should be investigated.
13. Young offenders lose their place in temporary accommodation if they're sent to prison. This means that when they leave prison they are homeless and are likely to be deemed intentionally homeless and no longer the responsibility of the City Council. Clearly this could perpetuate the cycle of offending. According to the County Council, there are approximately 5 or 6 people affected by this in Oxford each year.
14. The City Council has started to work with Mediation in Action in family exclusion cases, to see if a resolution can be sought and

homelessness prevented. At present it is difficult to evaluate the success of this partnership. However, there seems to have been a reluctance to refer parental exclusions to Mediation in Action (MIA). At the time of the interview with officers from MIA (October 2005), they had only received 3 referrals in 6 months. The Options team have now been instructed to refer appropriate cases, as this is a low number of referrals compared to the number of home exclusions the team deals with.

15. It is clear that more needs to be done to prevent homelessness where possible and to ensure support is provided to prevent these young people from losing their tenancies, putting themselves at risk of drug and alcohol abuse, offending behaviour and street homelessness. Some of the young people have complex needs for which inadequate support is available. Despite this, the group found that there was a lot of good work already underway to improve services for young people.
16. **Accommodation**
17. The review group was informed that the majority of single households living in temporary accommodation in Oxford are under the age of 25 and that around 75% of temporary accommodation placements for single households are under 25's.
18. Various client groups are mixed together in self-contained temporary accommodation units. Different groups of people, e.g. families, young people, single parents can all be living in the same building. Lifestyle differences between groups have created problems in some locations. There can be positive aspects to mixing groups in one building. Often the stability of a family environment can curb people's behaviour. The Council's Temporary Accommodation Managers (TAM's) felt that a minority of young people living with a majority of families in a hostel or temporary accommodation unit was a good thing. Problems are caused when the reverse happens; a family is placed in a block with mainly young people, often leading to problems for that family. Placements are made based on availability because of the demand for temporary accommodation and so it is hard to avoid these situations developing.
19. Damage and vandalism in temporary accommodation units is common, and because of lease agreements on private sector properties the City Council has had to pick up the bill for repairs (although leases are currently being re-negotiated). In 2004/05, the Council spent £177,572 on repairs to PSL properties and in the first 6 months of 2005/06, the Council spent £53,743.
20. Whilst paying for damage to properties leased by the Council seems fair, issues arise where there is no proof as to who caused the damage, either because it wasn't witnessed or because security systems, such as CCTV, are broken or vandalised. New leases have been negotiated by the City Council to reduce liabilities in this area.

21. Improving security may also lead to reduced costs in the long term and would be welcomed by the Temporary Accommodation Managers. Expenditure on CCTV, security locks or possibly a warden may lead to reduced damage costs, as well as a greater sense of security in temporary accommodation.
22. The group was informed that at times, people are placed in unsuitable accommodation because demand outstrips supply for supported accommodation. Whilst not ideal, accommodation at a hostel like the Bridge is often more suitable in the short term while a person's needs are identified.
23. There is a feeling that private landlords don't spend enough time explaining the conditions of the tenancy agreement when placing a client in their property. TAM's would like responsibilities re-enforced at the options interview, attending the interview if possible, or to attend more placements in private accommodation (if time was available). At present TAM's only carry out placements at OCC properties and around a dozen private properties where there is an agreement to do so. Firm guidance at the start of a tenancy may reduce problems further down the line.
24. The group was told on numerous occasions that there is a shortage of move on accommodation in Oxford. Clearly this has an impact throughout the housing sector in Oxford. Move on from temporary accommodation into Council properties can take years, move on from supported schemes into suitable accommodation (either social rented or private sector) can also be difficult. The work that Housing Services does to encourage people to access private sector accommodation (such as the Home Choice Scheme) is to be applauded. However, there is still a perception amongst some that the private sector isn't the answer to their housing problem.
25. For example, when visiting Windmill House, the group met with a resident who is on the verge of moving on. She wants to move into Council accommodation because she feels this is a better option for her than living in private accommodation. She's aware that the standard of accommodation may not be as good as in the private sector and she also knows that the waiting list for Council accommodation is long. But she feels that Council accommodation will be more secure. She has this opinion because her mother was evicted from a private flat. Assuming that the resident at Windmill House wasn't expressing a view only held by her, clearly this is an issue amongst people in the homelessness system.
26. One issue that was reported to the group was that there is a need for district based services so that clients are able to stay in the area they are from, if this is suitable. Lack of temporary accommodation and other services in parts of Oxfordshire and the wider region means that

young people are being placed in the city. For example, four young people from Wolverhampton were recently referred to the Bridge Project. Aylesbury Vale District Council also advertises the Bridge Project on its website. City Council officers have already started to take steps to encourage other district councils in the region to ensure there is a suitable supply of temporary accommodation in their area, and to make sure people are placed in areas close to their social and support networks, where appropriate.

27. There is also evidence that the most vulnerable and chaotic young people need to be provided with intensive accommodation-based projects that can provide better outcomes in relation to independent living skills and education, employment and training. As many as 30 people are in temporary accommodation with high level needs and inadequate support.
- 28. Support Services**
29. There are a variety of supported accommodation schemes in Oxford, such as Windmill House. However, demand for these services is extremely high and there is inevitably a waiting list. Using Windmill House as an example, referrals are made via a support agency, such as Connexions. However, prior to placement in a supported scheme, a young person may be living in a direct access hostel such as the Bridge, sofa surfing, living in temporary accommodation etc. Support at this stage can vary and floating support is essential.
30. The impact of the Supporting People strategic review into services for young people in Oxfordshire is still to be seen, but it is inevitable that young people's services will be affected by any cuts in Supporting People funding that have to be made.
31. The Supporting People budget is facing significant cut backs, but already steps are being taken to limit spending. A £360 Supporting People funding limit, per person, per week has been introduced by the local commissioning body, and any support costs above this will have to be funded from elsewhere. This could alter the support given to individual clients significantly. For example, many clients have multiple needs, but may not meet funding criteria from one particular funding stream to make up the shortfall caused by the cut in Supporting People funding.
32. There are mixed views on the support services in Oxford, some feel there are adequate services, others not. The issue for the TAM's is that clients can't be forced to accept the help and support that is available and that many young people don't want to engage with agencies. Accepting support can be seen as the last resort for some residents, for example, as an alternative to eviction.

33. Approximately 30 single young people in temporary accommodation in Oxford have been identified with high support needs. It was noted that at present they are not receiving the support they require. They receive almost daily visits from Temporary Accommodation Managers to ensure that their tenancy is being sustained, but there is a limit to the support that TAM's can offer. Due to their high caseload, there are a number of people in temporary accommodation that TAM's are unable to work with because of the demands on their time.
34. High support need clients need a scheme with a very high staff/resident ratio. In the current situation, where funding for support schemes is being reduced, developing a scheme of this sort would be unlikely unless funding is diverted from elsewhere.
35. The Supporting People strategic review proposes to re-model services in each of the Oxfordshire districts. The recommendations from the review included the following:
- There should be at least one high to medium level of support accommodation based service in each district area, with the existing services of this type that provide countywide access being protected.
 - In areas where there is currently no high to medium levels of support accommodation based services, some low to medium levels of support accommodation based services would be remodelled to enable them to support young people with high and chaotic needs.

36. City Council/County Council Relationships

37. The City and County Councils are working on a joint protocol to clarify responsibility for homeless young people. The Homelessness Act 2002 had a big impact on the Council's Housing Options Team, not least because homeless 16 and 17 year olds became the responsibility of the City Council to house. Presentations to the City Council have increased this year.
38. The County Council will assess all 16 and 17 year olds in housing need before they are referred to the City Council's Housing Options Team. 16 and 17 year old relevant care leavers will not be referred to Housing Options. If a care leaver is in full time education, the leaving care budget will pay for their accommodation up to the age of 25. Care leavers not in education are housed in Key Two housing, private accommodation or a supported scheme until they are 18. At this stage they become classified as former relevant care leavers and become priority need under the Homelessness Act 2002. This group becomes the responsibility of the City Council. The County Council would like care leavers who are not in education to move automatically into permanent accommodation.

39. Grey areas exist around responsibilities for 16 and 17 year olds who haven't come through the care system but claim homelessness. Normally this client group is supported by Supporting People, while Housing Benefit will pay their rent.
40. There could be delays in the assessment of 16 and 17 year olds by Social and Health Care, as they have to prioritise child protection cases. At the moment there is also a six-week waiting time for a Housing Options interview. These delays mean that for a time young people can fall out of the system or be forced to access services such as the Bridge or sofa surf. A night stop scheme has been developed in Cherwell, West Oxfordshire, South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse to meet the needs of people in this situation. Oxford is alone in the county in not having a night stop scheme.

41. Supported Lodgings

42. A supported lodgings scheme is being introduced in Oxford, joint funded by the City and County Councils. Supported lodgings offers young people the chance to live with a host family while receiving support and advice. To qualify for the scheme, the young person would have to be homeless. A development worker has been appointed to launch the scheme. Initial research and development has taken place and there are plans to recruit 15 potential "host" families have been recruited.
43. Among the benefits of a supported lodgings scheme is the fact that a young person lives in a stable family environment, rather than in temporary accommodation or a direct access hostel, which may not be suitable for their needs. The review group hopes the scheme in Oxford will be extended if the initial scheme proves successful.

44. Goldings House

45. Members of the review group visited Goldings House, a foyer scheme run by Paradigm Housing Group in Hatfield. The aim of the foyer is to provide young, single people between the ages of 16 and 25 with supported housing, training and information, advice and guidance to enable career progression and to promote life skills that lead to independent living.
46. The foyer has strict rules about training and work. All residents have to be in training or work for 75% of their time at the foyer. This challenges some of the residents and it was made clear that a foyer scheme doesn't suit all young people. The client group that would benefit most from such a scheme would have low-level needs. More chaotic young people may not be ready or able to live in such an environment.
47. The group that visited the foyer was extremely impressed with the facilities, staff and residents. The standard of accommodation was

good, whilst facilities such as the training kitchen, IT suite and café were popular and well used. The review group met three residents, all of whom were positive about the foyer and the services that it offered.

48. There are three foyers in Oxfordshire, in Banbury, Witney and Abingdon. All of these schemes have had to adapt their services in order to receive funding from Supporting People. For example, the Banbury foyer takes in young people with high support needs and also has 4 emergency beds.
49. Whilst Supporting People believe that foyers are not “strategically relevant as they provide traditionally low to medium support” many of the people interviewed thought that a foyer would provide appropriate help and support for a large number of young people in Oxford. Although an earlier scheme in Oxford was dropped, the review group feels that this should be looked at again because of the potential benefits a foyer can bring to young people.

Recommendations

The review group recommendations are set out below. If the recommendations are approved a work programme for implementation will be developed with officers from Housing Services and Neighbourhood Renewal.

Recommendation 1

The City Council should investigate the possibility of establishing a foyer in Oxford to provide safe and affordable accommodation integrated with education, training and employment opportunities for vulnerable young people.

Before the Council commits to this project work should be done to:

- Assess the need for a foyer in Oxford.
- Clarify which client group the foyer should support
- Investigate possible sites
- Work with a Housing Association partner to develop such a scheme, and not try to do this alone.
- Open discussions with the Supporting People commissioning body to see if SP funding is likely to be forthcoming for such a scheme.

This work would be done by staff from the Housing Services and Neighbourhood Renewal Business Unit.

Recommendation 2

The City Council should investigate the possibility of establishing a night stop scheme, as already established in other districts in

Oxfordshire, to provide emergency accommodation for homeless young people.

The idea of a night stop scheme is to give young people a place to go for the night, if they are homeless but can't be assessed by the Children and Family Team at the County Council or the Housing Options team. Families are recruited to take part in schemes like this.

There are number of benefits to such a scheme. Short-term street homelessness may be prevented, especially if emergency accommodation such as the Bridge is full. It gives young people a "cooling off" period in a safe environment, at which stage Mediation in Action could be contacted to try and resolve the situation that lead to homelessness. A night stop scheme would also be cheaper then using PSL temporary accommodation to house the young person for a short period.

Recommendation 3

The Housing Scrutiny Committee should monitor the work carried out by Mediation in Action to prevent homelessness amongst young people in Oxford.

The review group would like the following information presented to the Housing Scrutiny Committee on a six monthly basis:

- The number of family/friend exclusions that lead to homelessness presentations.
- The number of referrals to Mediation in Action.
- The number of homelessness acceptances as a result of family/friend exclusions.
- The number of homelessness preventions as a result of mediation.

Recommendation 4

The City Council investigate the feasibility of installing greater security measures in all Council owned temporary accommodation hostels/houses and/or employing wardens to increase safety and reduce damage to properties.

Recommendation 5

Where possible private landlords who lease PSL properties to the City Council should be encouraged to improve their security arrangements.

For example, it would be helpful if security locks were fitted on doors rather than Yale locks.

Recommendation 6

Temporary Accommodation Managers should be allowed enough time to help people settle in to temporary accommodation. An extra member of staff may be needed to do this.

The review group was informed that TAM's try to accompany young people when they receive the keys to their property, as this is often a good time to explain in full their tenancy agreement and responsibilities. Many young people are living alone for the first time when they are in temporary accommodation and so guidance and advice at the beginning of the tenancy may prevent difficulties and breakdown of tenancy further down the line. At present, the caseload of TAM's prevents this from happening. The Council should consider whether it would be appropriate to employ an extra member of staff in this team.

Recommendation 7

The City Council should aim to improve its joint working in three areas – Options and Allocations, Temporary Accommodation Managers and other support workers and the City/County Council protocol.

The review group believes that services for homeless people will be improved if the same person handled the options and allocations process, where possible.

The TAM's are limited in the service that they are able to offer, because of their high caseloads. If it is not possible to employ more TAM's, could arrangements be developed with other support workers to ensure that young people in temporary accommodation receive the holistic support they need? It would be beneficial for young people in temporary accommodation to have one person helping them with advice and support, and not large numbers of people.

The City and County Council have a joint protocol in place setting out responsibilities for young people, although during the review tensions between the two organisations were apparent. Since the review group reported to Housing Scrutiny Committee there has been progress to iron out some difficulties.

The City and County Council have agreed to move towards a more rigorous "joint assessment" of 16 and 17 year olds who present as homeless. Joint training of City and County staff will also take place, whilst a City Council options officer will be available to work with Social and Health Care on homelessness presentations involving 16 and 17 year olds. In addition, the County Council have changed their "duty" system so more staff resources are available for homelessness prevention work.

Other measures such as alternative accommodation options and mediation will be explored to reduce the number of homelessness presentations in this group. The new arrangements will be reviewed in 3 months (from end of

November 2005) and outcomes should be reported to Housing Scrutiny Committee in March 2005.

Recommendation 8

Care leavers aged 18 or over no longer in full time education should be moved into settled accommodation once they leave the care of Oxfordshire County Council.

Care leavers, like other young people, can apply to the City Council's housing list. The review group would have liked 18 year-old care leavers housed automatically by the City Council, but this isn't possible under the Council's current allocations policy, and in some cases there may be good reason for individuals not being independently housed when they leave care.

Therefore, the Housing Scrutiny Committee proposes that all steps are taken to ensure that care leavers are helped into settled accommodation once they leave the care of Oxfordshire County Council. Ideally, the process of looking for accommodation should begin some time before they leave care, so the transition to independent living is as simple as possible. The County Council should be encouraged to look at other sources of accommodation for care leavers, not just local authority housing. The private sector and RSL's may have a role to play here.

Recommendation 9

The City Council should continue to view young offenders on a case-by-case basis if they present as homeless and help them to find suitable accommodation where possible.

One of the issues brought to the attention of the review group during their work concerned young offenders. Housing options officers have to follow the Homelessness Act 1996 when assessing offenders released from prison that present themselves as homeless. As a result of this legislation, in the vast majority of cases the offender will be deemed intentionally homeless and the City Council won't have a responsibility to house them.

The review group had concerns about this legislation as it was felt that deeming an offender intentionally homeless would not help break the cycle of offending. A small number of young people in Oxford in temporary accommodation spend a period of time in custody each year (approximately 5 or 6 in total). When they are released they may return to Oxford where the likelihood is that they will be classed as intentionally homeless. If possible, suitable housing should be provided for this group.

Recommendation 10

The City Council should endorse the principle of the Supporting People strategic review, that each district area in Oxfordshire has a high

support needs accommodation service. However, this should not be at the expense of other support services in Oxford.

It is clear that some chaotic young people are not receiving adequate support in Oxford. Placing an individual in temporary accommodation, even with floating support is not an adequate way to help clients with multiple problems.

Recommendation 11

The City Council should continue to improve Housing Benefit administration.

The review group learned that there are problems with the Council's Housing Benefit administration and administration at the Job Centre. Forms are misplaced or lost, resulting in delays in payment causing problems and distress for vulnerable people. A support worker at Windmill House brought these issues to the group's attention.

Recommendations 12

The City Council should continue to support the development of a supported lodgings scheme for Oxford and extends the scheme if it is a success.

As set out in paragraph 42 above, the City Council and County Council are setting up a supported lodging scheme for homeless young people in Oxford. The Housing Scrutiny Committee supports this development and would like to see the scheme extended if it proves to be a success.

Name and contact details of author:

Andrew Davies (Scrutiny Officer), on behalf of the Housing Vulnerable Young People Review Group
01865 252433
adavies@oxford.gov.uk