

## Homelessness Project Advisory Group

18 December 2018

### Homelessness Service Overview

#### **1. Audit Report Recommendations**

The homelessness audit that was carried out earlier this year was completed in August and resulted in 23 recommendations, many of which had already been addressed by the time the report was released. Of the 23, 15 are fully completed, 5 are partially completed and 3 are outstanding.

One of the audit recommendations is discussed further in the Homelessness Reduction Act KPI section of this report.

We are meeting the Auditor on Friday 7<sup>th</sup> December to sign off the audit.

#### **2. Staffing**

There are currently six Housing Options Officers (HOO's) employed in the team, carrying a caseload of between 50 and 60 cases. This is slightly higher than many of our peers in other Local Authorities – Gravesham 30 cases per Officer and Ashford 20 cases per Officer.

In addition, during the course of this year we have employed two apprentices who are proving to be a huge benefit to the team as a whole. Their work is mainly around dealing with the huge administrative burden created by the Homelessness Reduction Act. A couple of examples are listed below:

- contacting applicants to gather further information before passing cases on to the Housing Options Officers and
- assisting the Accommodation and Income Recovery Officer in monitoring and chasing any debt.

Both apprenticeships are for two years and are due to end in February and October 2020.

This approach enables our HOO's to focus on the investigative and relief elements of their role.

Many of the audit recommendations referred to earlier, related to how we manage control of expenditure and maximise the recovery of monies owed to the Council.

As a result we have reconfigured the Support Officers roles and created a new Accommodation and Income Recovery Officer post. This has enabled us to bring back into the team some functions which were carried out by East Kent Services and Accountancy resulting in a more consistent way of working.

Despite the pressurized working environment staff morale remains generally good. This was helped by the fact that all our staff have fully grasped and embraced the legislative changes thereby helping achieve relatively smooth implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act. However, we are conscious that staff are working at full capacity and that issues such as staff absence or vacancies and 'one off' major incidents such as the HMO closure a few months ago are likely to create resilience problems al-be-it in the short term.

All staff guidance procedures are being simplified (flow chart format) in order to ensure clarity and consistency.

### **3. Duty to refer**

We have had a steady flow of referrals since the introduction of the duty to refer in October 2018. The main referrer is the DWP.

We have received referrals in various forms which caused duplication. Meetings have taken place with our key partners in order to explain the triage process and to encourage them to make their referrals via our website and our prescribed form.

A meeting recently took place with the housing options team and EKH's tenancy sustainment team to work with those failing to pay their rent to ensure referrals are made to the housing options team at a much earlier stage. This has been working much better but there is still a way to go in terms of accessing our discretionary housing payment fund and preventing evictions.

### **4. Homelessness Reduction Act KPI's**

We propose a change to some of the KPI's being reported to the PAG as the current KPI's do not reflect the new legislative requirements. We have had some teething problems with generating the reports but the systems teams are working hard to ensure we will be able to provide accurate and relevant information.

MHCLG has access to live case level data for each Local Authority in order to see the customer journey and they also see statistical information on the following areas:

- Number of triage cases
- Number of prevention cases
- Number of Relief cases
- Full duty owed
- Number of duty to refer cases

It is therefore proposed that we add these to the current KPI's we provide to the PAG.

Attached at **Appendix 1** are the figures relating to the above headings from September to date.

Audit has also made some recommendations in respect of KPI's they would like to see adopted by this Project Advisory Group:

## 5. Staff safety

There has been an increase in the number of customers who are verbally abusing and threatening our staff. This affects our Customer Services staff but also our Housing Options Officers.

Staff safety is of paramount importance and there are many initiatives in place to ensure staff safety is not compromised and that any identifiable risks are minimized. Where customers are known to be violent or unpredictable, staff are encouraged to:

- visit in pairs
- note the full address of the visit in their calendar and/or on the whiteboard
- ensure they are taking responsibility for their own safety
- ensure they are aware and confident that they can exit a telephone call or interview if things appear to be “getting out of hand”
- ensure they know that they can call for help
- ensure they speak about any incidents afterwards and they know how they can self refer to the workplace counselling service where appropriate
- an easy exit door has been installed at reception
- receptionist is relocated to the main reception area during the afternoons as an initial pilot

It can be difficult to assess when a customer is likely to become aggressive, threatening or violent. Our Health and Safety/Risk Assessment Officer is currently in discussion with Customer Services and Housing Options staff to determine whether additional safety measures are required.

Two nominated Officers have access to the Corporate Risk Register and the team are regularly encouraged to report verbal or physical near miss or actual incidents in order that they are recorded where appropriate.

We will continually review our approach, our policies and procedures and review best practice elsewhere to ensure we put things in place to ensure all our staff are safe whilst doing their job.

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