

## HERO Service

Improving the quality of housing and health across the district is a major priority for Sevenoaks District Council. We have recognised that good quality housing with zero or minimal B&B (only for short-term emergencies) combined with low eviction levels through preventative initiatives can result in reduced homelessness and increased wellbeing.

In 2009, the Council created the outreach HERO service (Housing, Energy, Retraining & Options); to help achieve sustainable wider social change in the District, alleviate homelessness issues and enable those on benefits to gain employment.

The Project works proactively, aiming to reach individuals at an early stage, maximising opportunities to prevent homelessness and delivering sustainable outcomes. The HERO Officers work to empower and support vulnerable individuals and households to plan their short, medium to long-term futures as well as crisis support.

We recognised that homelessness occurs not because of one single issue but because of a complex range of factors that are interwoven. HERO offers a personalised, holistic advice service covering a diverse range of areas:

- ✓ Housing problems;
- ✓ Saving money on fuel bills;
- ✓ Debt, rent or mortgage advice;
- ✓ Welfare benefits;
- ✓ Retraining and skills options;
- ✓ Getting back into work;
- ✓ Volunteering;
- ✓ Starting your own business
- ✓ Improving health & wellbeing.

The service also signposts to other specialist services including mental health services, grants, charity funding, legal advice and health and wellbeing services.

## Key Messages

- Housing, health and wellbeing are intrinsically linked - one always impacts the other.
- Peoples problems are often complex needing personalised and holistic advice and support over a period of time.
- The HERO project provides links to a range of local services and integrates into other work with Public Health, CCG's and the voluntary sector.

## Key Outcomes 2018/19

- HERO assisted over **616 clients** with benefits & debt (62%), housing (25%), training & employment (8%) and other advice (5%)
- HERO reduced debt or rent arrears by **£57,000 and cleared £97,000 debts overall.**
- Clients were supported to receive the correct welfare and benefit payments, with HERO client receiving over **£36,000 in backdated benefits**
- HERO has assisted clients with successful benefit appeals and changes, including PIP, DLA, Child Tax Credit and attendance allowance. One client was supported to access over **£25,000** from their pension.
- HERO closed around **45%** of cases with successful outcomes achieved.
- During the first quarter (April-June 2019), HERO received **107 referrals** and closed **59** existing cases. Benefits were maximised for customers by a total of **£1,805 per week**. We secured grants for customers of **£564 for crisis food deliveries, reduced debt in total by over £13,000** and made **51 referrals** to others.
- HERO has successfully re-housed and supported over **8 ex-armed forces** personnel, working with RBLI to the STEP-IN veterans support service.

## Key Achievements

- The service sustains very low use of emergency housing by reducing debt, negotiating payment plans with landlords to prevent homelessness at the earliest stage. This is particularly important due to the additional pressures on the housing team with legislation changes and welfare reform.
- HERO has a referral pathway and works with a range of local partners such as: Job Centre Plus; Training Providers; voluntary support groups; Housing Providers; private landlords, specialist Debt advisors; GP's; mental health nurses; probation service and Citizens Advice.
- This Council has integrated Housing and Health services and is upskilling upskilled HERO Officers talk about health and wellbeing.
- HERO Officers are working closely with GP and hospital services to reduce bed blocking. They support people to get home earlier through offering housing advice, arranging adaptations and carrying out financial and wellbeing assessments.

## Sevenoaks District Context

Sevenoaks lies at the very western edge of the Kent County and straddles the M25. We border London, Surrey and Sussex. We are a rural district made up of 93% Greenbelt and 60% Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty - so home building opportunities are limited and house process are up to 17 times higher than average wages as a result.

We comprise of four towns: Swanley in the North, Sevenoaks Town centrally, Westerham and Edenbridge towards the South.

Although, overall Sevenoaks is an affluent district (80% of our residents fall within the two least deprived quintiles) we have severe areas on deprivation, particularly concentrated in the towns of Swanley and Edenbridge, with other pockets of deprivation in our villages (10% of

our residents are among the most deprived quintiles in the country) creating major inequalities within the District.

There is no Job Centre in the District and there are many isolated rural areas making access to service difficult due to poor transport links.

## Key Challenges

Some of the challenges facing this District include:

- All age groups will rise over the next five years, with the largest being over 85's which is predicated to increase by over 16%;
- Increase in number of excess winter deaths, hip fractures, smoking related deaths and people living in fuel poverty;
- Increase in hospital admissions for under 18's relating to self harm and alcohol;
- Lack of affordable homes due to higher than average house prices, with entry level house prices 11 times earnings of younger households;
- Significant gap between Sevenoaks LHA rates and private rental rates making housing unaffordable for people on low or no income;
- Poor transport links to rural communities so taking services outreach to communities is a priority but resource intensive;
- Lack of local services within the District including a hospital, Job Centre, supported housing, hostels and respite care

## Customer quotes:

*"Your advice has changed my life, I cannot thank you enough!"*

*"So helpful, without this help we would've been in real trouble"*

*"Thanks for helping me claim back my benefit, I couldn't have done it without you!"*