

REVIEW OF HOMELESSNESS OUT OF HOURS SERVICE

Housing and Health Advisory Committee - 9 June 2020

Report of Chief Officer People and Places

Status For Consideration

Key Decision No

Executive Summary: This report provides an update on the pilot undertaken with Centra to provide the Council's homelessness out of hours service and the review of this service.

This report supports the Key Aim of the District Council's Housing Strategy and related elements of the Community Plan.

Portfolio Holder Cllr. Robert Piper

Contact Officer(s) Hayley Brooks Ext. 7272

Recommendation to Housing and Health Advisory Committee: For Members to note the customer feedback supplied to date regarding the pilot with Centra to provide the Council's homelessness Out-Of-Hours service.

Reason for recommendation: To help shape and provide input into the customer feedback being gathered as part of the Council's pilot with Centra.

Background

- 1 As a Local Housing Authority, this Council has a duty to provide a housing and homelessness advice service to people at risk of homelessness. This service includes an out of hours (OOH) service for people who are made homeless outside office hours, to assist them to find immediate emergency accommodation.
- 2 Since the changes to housing legislation through the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act, the work of the Council's Housing Advice Team has increased, with the need to support more people, for longer periods of time and help people with very complex needs and vulnerabilities.
- 3 All councils nationally are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit to posts as there is such a high demand for experienced housing staff to cope with

the additional workload demand and customer contact, including the out of hours period.

- 4 As a result, SMT approved a request to work with Centra to handle the Council's homelessness Out of Hours service, which commenced on 17 October 2019. The appointment was based on a 6 month pilot, which was extended for a further two months. It was due to be reviewed on 17 April 2020. However, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing and Health, as a result of the response to Covid-19, which has placed additional pressures on the housing advice service, it was agreed to allow the pilot to be extended for a full year period to 16 October 2020.

Introduction

- 5 The Council's homelessness Out of Hours telephone service provides an essential emergency contact for anyone who is going to be imminently homeless and need to contact the Council out of core business hours, during evenings, weekends and bank holidays.
- 6 Prior to this Pilot, Housing Advice Officers who were operating the service during the day were also taking OOH calls on a rota basis, outside the Council's office hours. This presented a significant challenge to officers, particularly during periods of vacant posts, sickness and covering annual leave. On occasions, two officers were covering these hours continuously, meaning officers are having to take emergency homelessness calls 24/7 across an extended number of months each year.
- 7 Centra is a not for profit organisation, providing a range of high quality face-to-face support services, telecare monitoring and call handling services to over 200,000 customers across the UK each year. Centra provides a Housing Out of Hours services for a large number of other local authorities and housing associations including West Kent Housing Association.
- 8 For the Council's Housing Advice Officers to provide this service, it costs the Council an additional £474.20 per month, as it is paid as an OOH payment in addition to monthly salary costs. The pilot costs the Council £241.70 per month (for up to a maximum of 180 calls a year).

Performance

- 9 The Council is piloting the Centra service, but continues to maintain the majority of our housing service in-house, most importantly during weekdays when we see the highest levels of customer contact.
- 10 The OOH service still enables customers to telephone the Council's main office number, which is answered by the Council's CCTV operators who take the details and contact Centra if the customer's needs an emergency accommodation placement. This ensures consistency in service for customers and customers calls are answered promptly with no waiting time.

- 11 The table below illustrates the customer contacts to the Council’s Housing Advice and Homelessness Service, compared to the service provided by Centra during out of hours.

Service	Oct-Dec 19	Jan-Mar 20	Apr-Jun 20 (to 7 May 20)	TOTALS
SDC Housing Advice Service				
No. of customer calls	1,197	1,649	961	3,807
No. of new customer cases	210	335	110	655
No. of TA placements	32	51	42	125
Centra OOH				
No. of calls	15	18	15	48
No. of TA placements	5	6	4	15

- 12 The majority of customer calls are received during weekdays. In the past eight months, the Housing Advice and Homelessness Service has received and responded to 3,807 calls during weekdays, compared to 48 calls supported by Centra within the same period.
- 13 The Housing Advice and Homelessness Service capacity is already under severe strain during the week to cope with existing customer demand. The majority of the 3,807 customer calls handled by the team are incredibly complex, supporting vulnerable people with mental health, addiction, other disability, age or illness issues, as well as those who have been released from prison or are victims of domestic abuse. Officers always strive to provide the best customer service to ensure the right support and advice is provided. However, due to the nature of these calls and customer needs, they do have a huge strain and impact on the team’s own wellbeing and the weekends provide some respite.
- 14 The Council has access to Centra’s OOH online portal, which shows all call logs and actions taken for each call, accommodation placement details and customer outcomes. This is checked by the Council’s Housing Advice Team every morning and all customers who present through OOH are allocated with a Housing Advice Officer who contacts them to take a full homelessness application.
- 15 As part of the pilot, officers have met regularly with Centra and the Council’s CCTV Manager to provide updates, review calls and make adjustments to scripting and information to assist both teams dealing with OOH calls. There have been five calls where it is taken over 20 minutes for our CCTV operatives to get through to Centra. A Member of the Housing and Health Advisory Committee also raised this concern following a visit to our CCTV centre. To resolve this, we have updated CCTV scripting so they can assess whether the person needs a placement and Centra have provided an alternative contractor telephone numbers for our use to get direct updates on existing calls. Centra are also reviewing their staffing levels to reduce waiting times. These happened during particular peak times for OOH services during severe cold weather when require placements increased.

- 16 The Council’s senior housing officers have also had contact with Centra operators during this period, to advise them on issues above and beyond a standard placement, mainly where there is an issue with an existing placement and they are being asked to leave. Managers have always found Centra very helpful, professional and have provided clear and accurate advice to customers, based on the legislation.

Customer Feedback

- 17 To ensure that customers have received a high standard of service, senior housing officers have carried out a number of mystery shopper calls to the service. These calls were dealt with quickly with accurate information provided, whilst demonstrating empathy and consideration for the difficult housing circumstances.
- 18 Throughout the pilot officers have undertaken spot checks, contacting a customers who have accessed the OOH service to obtain their feedback on the service:

Customer	Q.1: Were you satisfied with the service you received?	Q.2: Is there anything you would want us to change about this service?
Customer 1	Yes, very happy about service received.	No, slight delay moving (was a TWBC placement taken over by SDC) but no complaint about this.
Customer 2	Yes, perfectly happy.	No, everything went smoothly.
Customer 3	I was looking for somewhere to stay, but they couldn’t get somewhere (due to lack of evidence to back up the request). I was told to pack up and be ready to move, but then it didn’t happen.	They (Centra) shouldn’t have said they would look for somewhere, just to then say they couldn’t help. I spoke with Council officers the following week, who assisted me. <i>(Note: Centra processes have been updated since this call, on occasions there is a need to ask for evidence of priority need before placing, as per the legislation).</i>
Customer 4	The service from out of hours was fine.	No
Customer 5	Yes, I was satisfied.	No

Customer	Q.1: Were you satisfied with the service you received?	Q.2: Is there anything you would want us to change about this service?
Customer 6	I am really satisfied with the service. Centra were really helpful. The speed of the response was quick and I felt like they wanted to help me.	They don't need to change anything.
Customer 7	Yes I was satisfied.	Nothing to change.
Customer 8	Yes, the man I spoke to was amazing, he was really helpful and the process was really quick.	Nothing to change, it was a really good service.
Customer 9	Staff at Centra were helpful, got me through to who I needed to and didn't keep me waiting.	No, nothing to change

Calls not answered for a further 5 customers contacted. Officers will continue to undertake spot checks and monitor customer feedback.

Conclusion

- 19 Based on customer feedback to date, officers are satisfied that the Council and its customers are receiving a good-value, efficient service from Centra during the pilot period.
- 20 Customer feedback will continue to be monitored and collated. A final 12-month review of the pilot will be presented to the Housing and Health Advisory Committee and Cabinet in September and October 2020 respectively to decide on the way forward.

Key Implications

Resource (non financial)

None.

Financial

None.

Legal Implications and Risk Assessment Statement

This Council has a legal duty to provide a 24/7 homelessness service, which includes an emergency OOH service for people made homeless outside office hours,

who are statutory homeless and in priority need between 17.00-09.00 (under part VII of the Housing Act 1996).

Risk	Risk level	Measures to balance risk
Increase in emergency accommodation placements	Low	<p>The service during the pilot has not seen an increase in placements.</p> <p>Placements monitored as part of the Contract. Service Specification clear on requirements of the Section 188 duty to provide temporary accommodation if a customer is eligible, homeless and in priority need.</p> <p>OOH Operators have a strict script in place detailing requirements to prevent unnecessary placements being made.</p> <p>Approved list of Kent housing providers agreed in advance.</p> <p>Manager contact details provided for any issues above and beyond a standard placement.</p>
Impact on customer service	Low	<p>The pilot has a contract in place with regular reviews with the provider, during which any issues raised would be discussed with the Provider and processes amended.</p> <p>If the service was not meeting the high levels required for our customers, we could consider another external provider or bring the service back to the council, at break clause intervals or at the end of the contract period.</p> <p>Customer feedback would gathered as part of the service monitoring arrangements.</p> <p>All OOH calls would be recorded and can be accessed by SDC, to ensure customer service standards are high.</p>
Failure to deliver the contract requirements	Low	<p>If Centra failed to deliver the service outlined in the contract for the pilot period, service standards would be discussed with the provider and process adjustments made. If no improvement, contract review and break clauses within the Contract would be actioned.</p> <p>Regular monitoring meetings with the provider, performance measured set out in the Contract with reviewed at regular intervals.</p>

