

HOMELESSNESS OUT OF HOURS SERVICE UPDATE

Cabinet - 7 July 2022

Report of: Sarah Robson. Deputy Chief Executive Chief Officer - People and Places

Status: For Decision

Also considered by:

- Housing & Health Advisory Committee - 6 June 2022

Key Decision: No

Executive Summary: The Council is required to deliver a dedicated service to customers facing homelessness outside standard office hours. This report provides an update on the current contract with Centra to deliver the Council's homelessness out of hours service.

This report supports the Key Aim of: the Council's Housing and Health Strategy.

Portfolio Holder: Cllr. Kevin Maskell

Contact Officer: Sharon Donald, Interim Head of Housing, x 7131

Recommendation to Housing and Health Advisory Committee:

That comments on the recommendation below are passed to Cabinet.

Recommendation to Cabinet:

That, subject to comments from Housing and Health Advisory Committee, Members approve an extension to the current contract with Centra for a further three years to deliver the Council's homelessness out of hours service.

Reason for Recommendation: The Council is required to deliver a dedicated service to customers facing homelessness outside standard office hours.

INTRODUCTION AND 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 Cabinet 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 however, due to the additional pressures of the Covid-19 response, it was agreed to extend the contract up to Spring 2022, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing and Health.
- 5 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 provide housing out-of-hours services for a large number of other local authorities and housing associations including West Kent Housing Association.

Council's Homelessness OOH Service

- 6 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.
- 7 It is important for people to have access to emergency housing support, as the Council continually strives to place the district's most vulnerable residents at the heart of what it does.
- 8 Prior to the Centra pilot, Housing Advice Officers were operating the service during the day and 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 were taking emergency homelessness calls 24/7 across an extended number of months each year.

- 9 For the Council’s Housing Advice Officers to provide this service, it costs the Council an additional £506.44 per month, as it is paid as an OOH payment in addition to monthly salary costs. The pilot has cost the Council £195 per month (for up to a maximum of 180 calls). On balance, for the last financial year Centra have call handle approximately like for like call since the pilot started.

SERVICE DETAILS

- 10 The Council contracts the OOH service with Centra, 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.
- 11 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 a customer needs an emergency accommodation placement. This ensures consistency in service for customers and customers calls are answered promptly with no waiting time.
- 12 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	1 Oct 2019 - 31 Oct 2020	1 Nov 2020 - 31 Oct 2021	1 Nov 2021- February 2022	TOTAL
SDC Housing Advice Service				
No. of customer calls	2846	3126	2955	8927
No. of new customer cases	1258	1066	227	2551
No. of TA placements	286	231	46	563
Centra OOH Service				
No. of calls	33	50	53	135
No. of TA placements	11	7	9	25

- 13 The majority of customer calls are received during weekdays during office hours. On an annual basis, the Housing Advice and Homelessness Service on average receives and responds to approximately 3,000 calls during weekdays, compared to an average of 9 calls supported by Centra within the same annual period.
- 14 The Housing Advice and Homelessness Service capacity is already under severe strain during the week to cope with increasing customer demand. The majority of the 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.
- 15 Officers meet 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. Centra continues to utilise our CCTV scripting so that they can assess whether the person needs a placement.
- 16 Centra provide a dedicated customer telephone number to ensure that a customer can ring Centra direct with any follow-up queries or questions.
- 17 The Council's senior housing officers continue to have contact with Centra operators advising 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 current housing legislation.
- 18 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.
- 19 The contract with Centra continues to be a success. It has released the pressure on existing housing officers to concentrate fully during the day to support customers to the best of their ability, as they have not had disturbed sleep during the night delivering the service 24/7. In addition, Centra has represented this Council to a high customer service standard and professionally at all times.
- 18 To ensure that customers have received a high standard of service, senior housing officers have continued to carry 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.

- 19 The Housing Advice and Homelessness team are fully supportive of continuing the contract with Centra. Officers continue to strive to provide the best customer service to ensure the right support and advice is provided.

CUSTOMER FEEDBACK

- 20 Throughout the past 12 months, officers have undertaken spot checks, contacting 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, they were helpful and found me somewhere to stay.	No.
Customer 2	Yes, the service was good.	No, the service was fine.
Customer 3	They found me somewhere quick, so I was happy.	No, nothing to change.
Customer 4	Yes, I was satisfied.	No
Customer 5	Yes, I was satisfied.	No, it was good.
Customer 6	Very good service. I felt like they wanted to help me.	They don't need to change anything.
Customer 7	Yes, they helped me to find somewhere and were very helpful.	No, it's a good service.
Customer 8	The man was very kind and helped me find somewhere to stay.	No.

- 22 All feedback was positive.

Other Options Considered and/or Rejected

- 29 Two options were considered:
- a. Option A - To extend the current contract with Centra for a further three years, with an annual break clause, to deliver the Council's homelessness out of hours service with regular monitoring of the service in place. The total cost to the Council of this service would be £3,689 per annum. This would ensure the residents of Sevenoaks District continue to receive the same high standards of service required for contacts of this nature.
 - b. Option B - To bring the service back in-house. It would be difficult to deliver this service in-house, additional work from the new legislation and more complex customers have already increased workloads and pressures on the service and team. The small team of two housing advice officers are working on high and complex caseloads during the day, with no capacity to take on this service outside of normal working hours. This may also have a negative impact on staff morale and mental wellbeing, service standards during the day and be a less attractive employment opportunity when trying to recruit new officers in the future. The two existing housing officers employed by this Council would be on a rota basis for at least two to three weeks a month (as well as covering annual leave, vacancies and sickness cover). In addition 95% of all housing staff are accessing weekly, fortnightly, monthly one to one clinical supervision due to the impact and trauma that the complexity of their caseload places upon them. The cost of providing the service in-house is in excess of £6,077.34 per annum.
- 30 The current contract with Centra is coming to a close and therefore, the preferred option is A, because it delivers a cost-effective and efficient service for customers and the Council.
- 31 It is recommended the Council enter into a longer-term contract with Centra to be reviewed every 3 years, subject to Member approval. This would ensure the residents of Sevenoaks District continue to receive the same high standards of service required for contacts of this nature.
- 32 Based on customer feedback, officers are satisfied that the Council and its customers have received a good-value and efficient service from Centra since 2019.
- 33 Providing the service externally would continue to support the morale and wellbeing of the housing team, who deal with difficult and complex customers daily. This would create a better work-life balance for staff, whilst not compromising the high standard of customer service.

KEY IMPLICATIONS

Financial

The budget to provide this service would come from existing housing budgets, with no additional financial burden to this Council. A contract with Centra would cost the Council £3,689 per annum, handling up to 180 calls per annum. The annual cost has been confirmed for a three year period. There would also be a need for a Council Housing Officer to be paid the emergency out-of-hours payment of approximately £112 per month, to provide a back-up contact for Centra and CCTV, only in the case of an emergency. This compares to the cost to this Council to provide the service in-house in excess of £6,077.34 per annum.

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 since October 2019 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>Senior officer contact details provided for any issues above and beyond a standard placement.</p>

Impact on customer service	Low	<p>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 SLA requirements	Low	<p>If Centra failed to deliver the service outlined in the Contract, 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>
GDPR and data sharing	Low	<p>A GDPR Compliant Data Sharing Agreement in place as part of the Contract, developed in partnership with our Legal Team.</p> <p>SDC access to the provider's online OOH portal and database to see details and recording of all calls, placements and advice given.</p>

Equality Assessment

The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users.

Working in partnership with Centra and outsourcing the OOH function has not impacted the Council's lawful responsibility, statutory homelessness duties or customer delivery

Net Zero Implications

The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the council's ambition to be Net Zero by 2030. There is no perceived impact

regarding either an increase or decrease in carbon emissions in the district, or supporting the resilience of the natural environment

CONCLUSIONS

The Council is required to deliver a dedicated service to customers facing homelessness outside standard office hours. The contract with Centra continues to be a success. It has released the pressure on existing housing officers to concentrate fully during the day to support customers to the best of their ability. In addition, Centra has represented this Council to a high customer service standard and professionally at all times. It is recommended the Council enters into a 3-year contract with Centra.

Appendices: None.

Background Papers: None.

Sarah Robson
Deputy Chief Executive
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