

Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Task & Finish Group

Findings of Task and Finish Group
commissioned by the Neighbourhoods and
Community Services Scrutiny Panel

October 2020 – January 2021

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Preface

In the summer of 2020, Slough Borough Council's Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel decided to investigate the growing issue of homelessness and rough sleeping in Slough. This was mainly due to concerns over the persistent nature of the problem in Slough and with the potential increase in the numbers, as more and more people were expected to lose their jobs because of COVID and the anticipated winding down of government support schemes. I am pleased to commend our report, which brings this inquiry to a close at this stage.

Due to the COVID restrictions, all the investigative work has been done via virtual meetings and conference calls.

We are very grateful to the Slough Borough Councillors and partner organisations (detailed on pages 11-12) who contributed to our work to date - whether through the virtual meetings or through submitting written evidence. We would like to extend our special thanks to Browns and their clients who were brave enough to take the time to share their stories and experiences with us.

Our investigations highlighted several areas of concerns around identification and reporting, current support provision in place, and overall engagement and communications. To address these and other issues, we have made several recommendations in the report below to the council leadership. It is our hope that all these will be endorsed by Slough Borough Council, and that an action programme is put in place to ensure progress in their implementation, which will greatly assist in addressing the key issues and drivers behind homelessness and rough sleeping in Slough.

Cllr Zaffar Ajaib
Chair
Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Task and Finish Group



Terms of reference

To investigate and make recommendations in relation to SBC's Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Prevention strategies, with specific reference to:

- Identification and reporting
- Support provision
- Engagement and communication

Membership

The task and finish group was chaired by Cllr Zaffar Ajaib, supported by the following members:

- Cllr Christine Hulme (Chair, Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel)
- Cllr Harjinder Minhas
- Cllr Waqas Sabah

Stuart Adnitt, Outreach Team Leader, Slough Borough Council also joined the Task and Finish group to provide officer support and assist the group in forming its recommendations.

Background

In the summer of 2020, the NCS Scrutiny Panel decided to investigate the issue of homelessness and rough sleeping in the borough. This was mainly driven by concerns over the persistent nature of the problem in Slough and the potential increase in numbers that was anticipated - with more people are expected to lose their jobs because of COVID and the anticipated winding down of the furlough scheme.

SBC has developed a Homelessness Prevention Strategy, which was updated in June 2019 and gives an overview of our existing services for the homeless and rough sleepers. It also outlines the initiatives the council has in place to prevent homelessness as well as the risks, challenges and opportunities the council have.

Summary of recommendations and proposed areas for consideration

The task and finish group feel that the council and partners should focus on the areas listed below over the next year. Within these areas, the group would also wish to propose a number of specific actions it feels will be most effective.

The rationale behind these recommendations is laid out in the Findings section.

Strategic Partnerships, Collaboration & Funding

- The Strategic Partnerships workstream of the Our Futures programme should consider establishing a new strategic board or group, bringing together the various organisations providing services to rough sleepers and homeless people in Slough, to:
 - co-ordinate strategy;
 - identify emerging issues early;
 - ensure accountability;
 - explore opportunities for additional funding; and
 - raise the profile of the issues
- As part of the localities strategy, SBC should also explore opportunities for these partners to operate alongside SBC teams, out of the new hubs and other SBC premises, building on other examples of the co-location of services currently being explored by the council.
- SBC should work with the Business Improvement District to explore the viability of an alternative giving scheme in Slough.

Communications

- The new Associate Director for Community should establish a plan for reviewing and enhancing external communications to improve awareness of where to get help, what type of support is available and how to apply for it, bearing in mind the challenges some clients face in regard to language, literacy and access to the internet.
- This plan should, ideally, include a public directory of services and named SBC contacts for partner organisations.

Commissioning, complex needs and supply

- SBC should form a task group of officers from the housing, benefits and commissioning teams to review the commissioning of accommodation for specific client groups with complex needs – and develop proposals.
- SBC should explore opportunities for using James Elliman Homes, section 106 payments, compulsory purchase orders and void stock to acquire accommodation for this group.

Health and mental health

- Collaboration between the Community Mental Health team and the Housing Team needs to be improved and an action plan established to reduce waiting times and improve referral processes.
- SBC should work with the CCG to investigate the viability of piloting the Health Outreach Liaison Team (HOLT) model in Slough, which has been effective in West Berkshire.

Skills and strengths

- SBC and partners should consider how a strength-based model for supporting homeless people and rough sleepers might be developed, to help them lead their own recovery, gain confidence and improve their networks.
- There may be chances to work with One Slough to identify volunteering placements for clients or generate opportunities through Social Return on Investment.

Localities and customer services

- Once the new localities strategy has had an opportunity to bed in, SBC should evaluate how effective it has been in:
 - enabling homeless residents and rough sleepers to access support
 - helping customer services staff rapidly identify those at risk of homelessness and guide them to necessary support or action

Safety

- The council should review the recent incident of violence against a female rough sleeper (see findings), and consider whether further action, either by SBC or by partners, can be taken in future to protect vulnerable rough sleepers.

Findings

Strategic Partnerships, Collaboration & Funding

The lack of effective collaboration and co-ordination between different organisations in Slough was a theme which ran throughout many of the task and finish group's meetings - both with SBC officers and external organisations.

There is an informal forum currently in place. However, several of the charities, housing associations and other partners the group spoke to expressed concerns that this forum is not strategic enough in nature, and SBC officers raised apprehensions about its effectiveness.

The issue of homelessness and rough sleeping does not feature prominently in any of the statutory partnership boards that SBC currently participates in. Housing was listed as a key priority in the previous Slough Joint Wellbeing Strategy; however this was replaced in the 2020-2025 iteration.¹

The success of One Slough throughout the COVID 19 crisis presents an opportunity for re-setting partnership working in this area, and filling this identified gap.

The group felt that a new strategic board or group, with a single strategy, was needed in order to strengthen working relationships and ensure that there was sufficient leadership across different agencies. This might be looked at through the partnerships workstream of the Our Futures programme.

Such a group could also become a vehicle for sharing intelligence and data, identifying emerging issues and challenges to support prevention, and allowing for collaboration in the pursuit of future sources of much needed funding.

The Government is yet to respond to its consultation on structures that support partnership working and accountability in homelessness services.² By taking pre-emptive steps in this area, SBC and its partners might be better placed to respond to any future changes in this area of policy.

Accommodation and co-location was also raised as an issue for partnership working. The group was informed that there are several organisations operating in this field that are willing to provide services in SBC premises and community centres. However, under current policy, SBC would charge such groups. For example, it was reported to the Task and Finish Group, that one community group were asked to pay between £40,000 - £50,000 annually to use SBC's Britwell Hub. This was eventually reduced to £25,000 a year, however this level of charge might still be prohibitive for other organisations, and would mean that more time would need to be spent on fundraising, instead of in providing services.

SBC is currently exploring opportunities through the localities strategy for other partners, such as the NHS, to operate under the same roof. It may be fruitful for SBC to consider whether a similar approach might be taken for services provided to homeless and rough sleeper clients.

Finally, representatives of the Business Improvement District recommended that Slough explore the possibility of establishing an alternative giving scheme in the town centre, an approach which has been adopted by other local authorities nationally. It was estimated that such a scheme would require between £3,000 - £5,000 to set up, but could then enable residents to donate to local charities, instead of giving money to people on the streets.

¹ Slough Joint Wellbeing Strategy 2020-2025

² Tackling homelessness together <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/tackling-homelessness-together>

Communications

Throughout its investigations, the task and finish group were pleased to note the many initiatives and the range of activity undertaken by SBC teams in regards to homelessness and rough sleeping. There was however a consensus amongst communications officers, operational teams and external organisations that more could be done to raise awareness of this work.

Several witnesses expressed concerns that it can be very hard for people to find information on what support is available, and where and how this can be accessed. The group heard that these challenges can be exacerbated by a lack of access to the internet, or by language barriers. Some charities also expressed concerns that the closure of Landmark Place could present further challenges over the coming years.

In addition, in most meetings the Task and Finish group held with external organisations, the lack of a named contact at SBC was identified as an important issue. Those interviewed expressed frustrations at the difficulties this can cause when different agencies are referring clients between them, with the risk of people falling through the cracks and missing out on support.

For example, Trinity have reported difficulties in following up their clients' correspondence on housing benefits, and have flagged the potential risk of them missing their payments. The DWP also raised challenges in following up the result of referrals, in order to verify statements that their clients have made.

The task and finish group felt that these issues could be readily addressed through an updated directory of services and officers, that could be provided to all key partners, once the restructure was complete.

While members did not feel they could make further specific recommendations in terms of communication priorities, the group felt that the new Associate Director for Community could work with the communications team to review all comms activities in this area, and develop an action plan for enhancing them.

Members also felt that a communications campaign on available services may be able to help tackle some of the stigma associated with homelessness, which research has shown can deter individuals from accessing support, such as healthcare.³

Commissioning, complex needs and supply

Housing officers informed the task and finish group that the current provision of housing is not enough to support those rough sleepers or homeless households with complex needs, and that more targeted support is needed once someone has been housed.

The group heard that there were difficulties in supporting clients with mental health challenges, those with issues around drugs or alcohol, those who have experienced trauma and ex-offenders.

The group were also informed that there was a particular challenge with the provision of accommodation for those aged 16-17.

A 'floating service' has recently been recommissioned by SBC, which seeks to ensure that people are supported to stay in their accommodation. However, the task and finish group heard that the current KPIs of this contract do not incentivise providers to focus on those with the most complex issues.

³ Big Issue, Homelessness stigma stops people accessing healthcare even when housed, January 2020

There was also recognition, from both commissioning and housing officers, that improved collaboration was necessary.

While it is anticipated that the Our Futures programme will remove historical silos and enable the development of more strategic approaches, the group felt that it might be necessary to form a task group of senior officers from across the housing, benefits and commissioning teams to review this area urgently and to develop an holistic approach, in light of the potential challenges in this area arising from COVID.

The task and finish group would like to see this task group explore creative solutions for acquiring supported accommodation for this group, such as using James Elliman Homes, section 106 payments, compulsory purchase orders and void stock.

Health and mental health

Throughout its investigations, the task and finish group frequently heard of the particular challenges homeless clients and rough sleepers experience in accessing mental health support. The group were informed that it is not uncommon for people to have to wait 18 months to see a specialist.

All of the clients of Browns that the group interviewed had experienced difficulties in getting the necessary support from the community mental health team, and several of the external organisations spoken to raised issues with the referral system.

The task and finish group were informed that there is supposed to a dedicated worker within the community mental health team to liaise with housing officers, but that this is not happening.

The group felt that urgent action needs to be taken to improve collaboration between SBCs housing teams and the community mental health team, and to reduce waiting times for access to these vital services.

In its meeting with the clinical support team, the task and finish group were informed of the Health Outreach Liaison Team (HOLT) model that has been adopted in West Berkshire, which has proved effective in providing mental and physical health support via regular clinics for those who struggle to access mainstream health services. It was agreed that it would be worth exploring the viability of piloting this approach in Slough, as a means of improving access to this type of support.

Skills and strengths

Throughout its interviews with clients, the task and finish group heard about the challenges former rough sleepers can face in rebuilding their lives and accessing work. Most were not ready to enter the labour market.

However, most people we spoke to had hobbies and interests that they would like to build on, which would help build their confidence and involve them in positive activity. For example, one man the group spoke to had a particular interest in gardening and would be keen to work on an allotment or in Slough's parks.

According research from Crisis, 61% of homeless service users classify as 'lonely', 'three times the proportion of over 52s in the UK, a group most associated with being most lonely in society', and 37% reported 'often' feeling isolated and lacking companionship.⁴ The group felt that generating opportunities for positive activity would provide clients with new support networks, while building their

⁴ Crisis, *'I was all on my own': experiences of loneliness and isolation amongst homeless people*, December 2015

self-esteem. According to Homeless Link, activities are also important in preventing the boredom that may lead people to turn back to the streets, or to alcohol or drugs.

The task and finish group would like to recommend that the council explores options for expanding strengths-based practice for our homeless and rough sleeper clients, building our interventions around the individual.

The group also felt that there may possibilities to build on SBC's work with One Slough to identify volunteering placements for clients, and to use commissioning to generate opportunities through Social Return on Investment.

In addition, Homeless Link are looking for local authority commissioning teams to be involved in the development of a new Strengths-Based Practice Toolkit, which may present an opportunity for the council.⁵

Localities and customer services

As discussed previously, the task and finish group heard concerns regarding the closure of Landmark Place, and fears that rough sleepers and those at risk of homelessness would now find it harder to access available support.

Specific concerns were raised around the possibility of security staff at locality hubs turning away those in need of urgent support who didn't have an appointment, or that the customer services staff operating out of hubs would not be able to recognise someone at risk of becoming homeless. However, the task and finish group were assured that training is being put in place to prevent this from happening.

Members of the task and finish group also felt that it will be important for the opening hours for the new community hubs, and any out of office services created, to be developed in a way which allows rough sleepers, many of whom have chaotic lives, to easily access services.

The task and finish group understands that it is too early to assess how effectively the localities approach will support homeless and rough sleeper clients in accessing services. However, the group felt that it will be important that this be properly evaluated after a suitable period, to ensure these vulnerable groups are rapidly supported.

Safety

In January, the Task and Finish Group were informed of a report from Slough Homeless Our Concern (SHOC) that a young homeless woman had been seriously assaulted on the streets, after her application for emergency accommodation was delayed over a weekend.

While it would not be appropriate to raise specifics in this report, without the opportunity for officers to comment on the case, SHOC also raised concerns around further instances when other potentially-vulnerable single women were not provided with same-day accommodation.

The task and finish group would like to recommend that SBC officers investigate the facts behind such incidences and ensure that all is being done, by both SBC and partners, to ensure the safety of rough sleepers, as far as is practicable.

⁵ Homeless Link, *Stepping Forward with Strengths-Based Practice*, October 2020
<https://www.homeless.org.uk/connect/blogs/2020/oct/26/stepping-forward-with-strengths-based-practice>

List of Meetings and Events

The following meetings were held by the Task & Finish Group:

Date	Meeting
09.10.2020	Slough Borough Council Housing Officers
13.10.2020	Slough Borough Council Parks and Open Spaces Team
13.10.2020	Slough Borough Council Resilience and Enforcement Team
19.10.2020	Slough Borough Council Commissioning Team
20.10.2020	Slough Borough Council Communications Team
26.10.2020	Slough Business Improvement District
27.10.2020	Department for Work and Pensions
28.10.2020	Homelessness Clinical Support Team
28.10.2020	Slough Charities
03.11.2020	One Slough (Ketan Gandhi)
05.11.2020	Thames Valley Police
10.11.2020	One Slough (Ketan Gandhi)
12.11.2020	Housing Associations
20.11.2020	Britwell Hub Officers

The Task and Finish Group also held a series of interviews with clients from Browns throughout November 2020.

Acknowledgements

The Task & Finish Group would like to note its special thanks to all the clients who spoke to the group throughout its investigations. The group also wishes to thank the following contributors and witnesses, whose input helped form its recommendations:

Slough Borough Council:

Stuart Adnitt	Outreach Team Leader
Ian Blake	Resilience & Enforcement Team Manger
Helen Buckland	Risk and Exploitation Co-ordinator
Ketan Gandhi	Associate Director, Place Regulation & One Slough
Debra Gilbert	Temporary Accommodation Manager
Ian Judd	Parks Officer
Amanda Kuwana	Housing Needs Officer
Gerald Pleace	Parks & Open Spaces Manager
Ray Prosper	Customer Service Officer
Julie Render	Housing Demand Manager
Difaf Sharba	Policy Insight Analyst
Jane Senior	Associate Director, People Strategy and Commissioning
Anne Stavrou	Allocations Team Manager
Victoria Tutty	Commissioning Project Manager

External Organisations:

Yasmin Baig	Shelter
Sharon Ballantyne	NHS East Berkshire CCG
Valerie Bruce	L&Q Group
Craig Buckby	Slough Business Improvement Trust
Alan Buckley	Berkshire Healthcare NHS Trust
Seb Byrne	Berkshire Healthcare NHS Trust
Shin Dhothar	Slough Outreach
Simon Dorney	A2Dominion
Charlotte Dubisson	Paradigm Housing
Angeline Gore	Browns
Steve Hedley	Slough Homeless Our Concern (SHOC)
Rebecca Hewitt	NHS East Berkshire CCG
Jeremy Hutchings	L&Q Group
Hanna Irfan	Catalyst Housing
Sobia Khan	Browns
Jessica Lath	Browns
Tracy Lupton	Paradigm Housing
Mandy McGuire"	Slough Homeless Our Concern (SHOC)
Lisa Meader	Browns
Inspector Neil Misselbrook	Thames Valley Police
John Power	The London and Slough Run
Nick Robert	Windsor Homeless Project
Andrea Rose	Department for Work and Pensions
Dr Kamaljeet Samra	Clarence Medical Centre and East Berkshire Out of Hours service
Claudete Sirqueira	LookAhead
Mike Wooldridge	NHS East Berkshire CCG