

Scrutiny Management Board Report and Recommendations on Access to Affordable Housing

At the Scrutiny Management Board meeting on the 14th November 2014 the Committee received information on the implementation of the Choose Your Home Scheme and heard from the 4 main Registered Social Landlords in Telford and Wrekin. The Board were concerned that, while it was reported that the Choose Your Home scheme start up phase had worked well, there is a lack of communication between the different housing providers and the Council – a significant concern was that 3 of the Housing Providers reported difficulties in letting properties to eligible local people. It was reported that of the 363 properties let by these 3 RSLs none were let to people from Telford and Wrekin who were statutorily homeless and being supported by the Council and some properties were let to residents from outside Telford and Wrekin. The Board was also informed that in October 2014 the Council's Telford Housing Options number had received 1247 call of which 847 were handled and that 2 agency staff were being recruited to increase the capacity of this team to manage the calls.

Following the Committee Meeting on the 14th November the Chair of Scrutiny Management Board met with senior staff from Maninplace and the KIP Project that provide support and accommodation to the vulnerable and homeless. The Key points from this discussion were:

The demand for the services provided by Maninplace and KIP have increased significantly. The examples given were that from November to mid January the demand for the Bleak Midwinter Service was 68% higher than the previous year. It was also highlighted that of the 92 accommodation units that Maninplace manage 50% are taken by long term tenants. A high proportion of the people seeking accommodation are through Maninplace are aged 18-25 years. 45% of the clients between April and December 2014 were from this age group. The number of women seeking support has also increased and now account for 1 in 3 clients.

Both services find it very difficult to access social housing for their clients. In many cases the reason the individuals seek support is because they have drug or alcohol issues, chaotic lifestyles, have previous criminal convictions, mental health issues and financial difficulty / debt and therefore do not meet the criteria for social housing. If Maninplace is not able to provide its intensive housing managed accommodation directly the only option for their clients is to find accommodation in the private rented sector in houses of multiple occupation.

Mental health is a significant issue for people finding accommodation through Maninplace and KIP. The monitoring data showed that it was the most frequent secondary reason for someone becoming homeless. This would indicate that mental health issues are in many cases the underlying reason behind the primary issues such as family break down or financial problems. It was identified that there is a large gap in the service and accommodation for this client group.

The 100 hours of floating support that Maninplace has and is provided through the Thrive Partnership has enabled people to maintain tenancies albeit temporary accommodation.

The Board therefore agreed a number of recommendations to Cabinet and partners that will address this problem and some of the underlying causes:

- 1) A forum for the 4 major RSLs, Maninplace and similar providers, should be urgently established by the Council to oversee and co-ordinate demand and housing supply issues. The forum should ensure that the Council, RSLs and organisations such as Maninplace are communicating effectively to ensure the Council can discharge its statutory homelessness duty effectively and that local people in the most need are housed in the Borough. This will also be an opportunity to clarify roles and responsibilities of the different organisations to ensure that tenants / prospective tenants are able to register and that their progress through the system is monitored.
- 2) That the Council brokers discussions with the RSLs and Maninplace regarding the management of hard to let properties. This should include the option for the RSLs to lease hard to let properties to Maninplace who would manage this on a long term basis. The discussions about the working relationship between Maninplace and the RSLs should also consider extending the floating support provided through the Thrive Partnership to vulnerable tenants with the RLS.
- 3) The Council works with partner organisations to identify other suitable accommodation that can be let to and managed by Maninplace to extend the provision of accommodation to vulnerable people in the Borough.
- 4) That in line with co-operative values, the Council works with relevant organisations to ensure that local people have the skills to access online services to register their housing need and bid for properties. The Board recommends that information is easily available to the public on the Council's website and other channels that set out where there is:
 - unsupported on line access (including opening times)
 - supported on line access where staff / volunteers can support someone to complete the on line registration for housing (including opening times)
 - access to training to enable people to register and bid independently. (it was suggested that this could be linked to the ASL funding that the Council currently disperses)

The list of potential services and partner organisations identified were:

- Wrekin Housing Trust
- Sanctuary Housing
- Bournville Village Trust
- Bromford Housing
- First Point
- Libraries
- Community Centres

- Job Junctions
 - TCAT
 - CAB
 - Donnington Life Long Learning Centre
 - Maninplace
 - The Salvation Army KiP Project
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- 5) Where online services can be currently accessed through mobile devices this should be publicised to tenants / prospective tenants. The Local Authority and Registered Housing Associations should work together to ensure where possible all services should be easily accessible via mobile devices.
 - 6) That systems are in place to ensure that anyone in housing need is not deterred from registering and finding accommodation due to difficulty in providing the information required by the online registration systems.
 - 7) That the capacity of the Homelessness Service is monitored to ensure that the response rate for calls improves without resulting in resources being diverted from other homelessness services.
 - 8) That the Council negotiates access to the Homes Direct and the Wrekin Housing Trust system so that proxy bids can be made on behalf of people who are statutorily homeless or in unsuitable accommodation.
 - 9) The Council should consider extending the existing Bond Scheme to cover the initial cost of up to £70 made by private sector landlords. This facility should be available to individuals at short notice working through a third party who would otherwise be unable to find accommodation.