

## **Appendix A - Homelessness**

### **1. Background**

Every year, perhaps 2,000 households in Rutland move, with some of these moves being due to choice (including, for our purposes, work) and others suddenly forced by circumstances. The latter might include family relationship breakdown (sometimes violent), a landlord or mortgage company wanting possession of the property, a lodger being asked to leave, someone with deteriorating health unable to access their home, or a house fire.

The household's financial resources – and the support available from family members - have a huge impact on whether people can resolve their accommodation crisis themselves or need to seek advice or assistance from the Council or our partners. This is echoed through our operational experience, that of Citizens Advice Rutland and academic research into homelessness in the East Midlands (University of Birmingham, 2007).

### **2. Objectives of the scheme**

The objective is to enable people to maintain their existing accommodation if appropriate or, if that is not possible, to them to find suitable accommodation that they can sustain. The level of assistance offered can depend upon the level of statutory duty the Council may owe to a particular household.

### **3. What support is available?**

Citizens Advice Rutland and the Council provide advice on rent and mortgage arrears, accessing benefits and financial assistance, applying for affordable housing through the Council's housing register (waiting list), on relationship breakdown and on tenants' rights.

The Council assesses applications for the Council's housing register (waiting list) through a points based process and nominates households with sufficient priority for housing association properties. There were 205 nominations to housing associations in 2015/16, of which approximately 50% led to tenancies. (Where this did not lead to a tenancy, this was often because the household was not interested in a particular property, or because the housing association did not consider either the applicant or the property to be suitable.)

The Council also, separately, assesses whether people qualify for rehousing under the homelessness legislation. Where it appears that the person may qualify, the Council may arrange temporary accommodation whilst the application is assessed and whilst long term accommodation is sought.

There is also a range of support for people who need it. Examples of this include:

- working closely with social care regarding people at risk;
- the Domestic Abuse Group works with United Against Violence and Abuse (UAVA) to provide advice and resettlement / safety support to both male and female survivors; this also includes where appropriate access to women's refuges in nearby areas;
- the Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC), which meets in Rutland and assesses high risk domestic abuse cases;
- liaison with the MoD and forces charities;
- housing-related support for people in temporary accommodation or who have been rehoused to help them to sustain their tenancy; this is currently provided principally by The Bridge with regard to homeless people; Spire Homes also have a housing support contract;
- the Rutland Food Bank;
- the Melton Furniture Project;
- the rent deposit scheme operated by the Council;
- Housing Benefit.

The support and advice services provided by Citizens Advice Rutland, The Bridge and Spire Homes are part of the Community Prevention and Wellness Services which are currently being recommissioned by the Council through a co-design tendering process to promote more integrated services.

Reasons for referral to housing support provided can include a wide range of issues. Examples include:

- assistance with setting up a new tenancy
- assistance whilst placed in temporary accommodation and transition to allocated tenancy
- assistance with benefit claims and applications
- homeless due to fleeing domestic violence
- risk of homelessness due to rent arrears.

Assistance provided to service users can be extensive but is focused on promoting independence. Detailed case studies cannot be shared for data protection reasons, but examples / outcomes include:

- working with service users in serious arrears or with benefit difficulties to successfully avoid eviction
- assisting service users to enrol on life skills courses
- working closely with Children's Services to support families they are working with where there may have been concerns
- assisting with obtaining practical items and getting utilities connected.

Although some of these tasks may be straightforward for some people, the service users in need of housing related support often struggle with these tasks because of their experiences or their level of skills and this approach has been very successful in avoiding tenancy breakdown and repeat homelessness.

#### **4. How do individuals access the scheme?**

Generally, if customers do not contact the Council initially, they contact Citizens Advice Rutland for advice. If necessary, after giving advice they will signpost people to the Council or if appropriate liaise directly with us. Customers can also approach the Housing Options team directly or be referred by another agency. In order to access the Council's housing register (waiting list) or the Council's homelessness services, the Council are approached by the customer or someone acting on their behalf.

#### **5. How do we prioritise who receives the support?**

##### *Citizen's Advice Rutland*

The advice from Citizens Advice Rutland is generally open access.

##### *The Council's homelessness prevention and homelessness duties*

The Housing Act 1996 Part 7 (as amended by subsequent legislation) sets out the duties of local authorities towards people who are homeless, or about to be made homeless. If someone is homeless or threatened with homelessness, the Council encourages them to seek advice and assistance as soon as possible to seek to prevent homelessness. Where necessary, the Council will carry out a homelessness investigation to see whether the Council has a duty to secure accommodation. The stages are set out in law and the Council also has regard to the Government's statutory Code of Guidance on Homelessness.

A Housing Options Officer will be assigned to the investigation and will be the point of contact. In brief, the Council has a duty to accommodate the household temporarily during the investigation if they have nowhere to live and Council believes they are likely to be in priority need. The statutory stages to the investigation are outlined in order below:

- whether the applicant is eligible for assistance – this is not the case if the applicant is from abroad & subject to immigration control, or is from abroad & not habitually resident in the UK, or is a British Citizen and not habitually resident in the UK;
- whether the applicant's household is homeless, or threatened with homelessness in the next 28 days;
- whether a member of the household is in a statutory priority need group (in brief, the main categories are pregnant women and families with children, 16/17 year olds and care leavers, people vulnerable for health reasons and people fleeing violence);
- whether the applicant became homeless intentionally (for instance, through giving up accommodation when they did not have to, or through not paying their rent when they could afford to do so);
- whether the applicant has a local connection with Rutland (or there are special circumstances, such as being a member of the Armed Services, not having a local connection anywhere, or fleeing violence).

Once the investigation is complete, a senior Officer will make a decision on the application. Where a household is in priority need, is unintentionally homeless and has a local connection, the 'full' homelessness duty applies. This requires the Council to arrange to accommodate the household in the medium term. This may involve the use of temporary accommodation until the household may be rehoused through the housing register. The housing register gives a high priority to many homeless households. Alternatively, the household may in future be made an offer of suitable 'qualifying' private rented accommodation which they would be required to accept.

#### *Prioritising accommodation through the housing register*

The Council prioritises housing let through the housing register by a points system depending on need. Households generally also require a local connection to join the housing register. Households who have been accepted as homeless through the 'full duty' receive a high number of points, but this is not a guarantee of rehousing. The housing register is also an effective means of preventing homelessness, as people receive points for insecure accommodation and may be rehoused before they can become homeless.

#### *Access to housing related support*

Referrals for housing related support are made largely by the Housing Options team, RCC social care and housing associations.

## **6. What is the overall budget?**

The budget for housing related support was £108,100 in 2016/17, to cover services by both Spire Homes and The Bridge. This will be incorporated within the broader Community Prevention and Wellness Services which start next year, which will continue to provide housing related support.

The budget for the Housing Options Service in 2016/17, excluding staff, was £123,000 for staffing (there are 5 members of staff, of whom one is full time) and £31,100 for other expenditure.

## **7. Facts & figures**

In 2015/16:

- there were 67 homelessness preventions recorded by the Housing Options team;
- 34 households were accepted as unintentionally homeless and in priority need;
- 19 households who made homelessness applications were not classed as homeless;
- eight were homeless but not in priority need;
- one household was in priority need but was classed as intentionally homeless.

There were 334 households on the housing register at 31 March 2016.

## **8. Possible questions / emerging issues**

The Council is developing the Housing and Homelessness Strategy 2017-22. Does the Panel have any initial views about anything that is not reflected in the current service?

The Rutland Housing Conference on 30 November 2015 wondered whether more could be done regarding mortgage arrears, or services for the occasional instances of rough sleeping in Rutland.

In October 2016, the Government announced its support for the Homelessness Reduction Bill. This will impose additional duties to Council's to seek to prevent homelessness, although much of this is similar to the Council's current preventative practices.