

REVIEW OF HOMELESSNESS OUT OF HOURS SERVICE

Cabinet - 10 December 2020

Report of: Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer - People & Places

Status: For Consideration

Also considered by: Housing and Health Advisory Committee - 24 November 2020

Key Decision: No

Executive Summary: This report provides a review of the pilot undertaken with Centra to provide the Council's homelessness out of hours service and considers future delivery options for the service.

This reports support the Key Aim of: District Council's Housing Strategy and related elements of the Community Plan.

Portfolio Holder: Cllr. Kevin Maskell

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Recommendation to Housing and Health Advisory Committee:

That Members consider the options for the Council's homelessness out-of-hours service and make a recommendation to Cabinet; and

Recommendation to Cabinet:

That, subject to comments from Housing and Health Advisory Committee, Members agree an option for the future delivery for the Council's homelessness out-of-hour service.

Reason for recommendation: The Council is required to deliver a dedicated service to customers facing homelessness outside standard office hours. This report provides Members with options for how the homelessness out-of-hours service is delivered.

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 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 however, due to the additional pressures of the Covid-19 response, it was agreed to extend the pilot to one year, 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 this Centra 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.
- 9 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 has cost the Council £195 per month (for up to a maximum of 180 calls).

Centra Pilot - Performance Details

- 10 The Council has piloted 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 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.
- 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	October 2019 - March 2020	April - October 2020	TOTALS
SDC Housing Advice Service			
No. of customer calls	2,846	3,512	6,358
No. of new customer cases	545	610	1,155
No. of TA placements	83	77	160
Centra OOH Service			
No. of calls	33	56	89
No. of TA placements	11	12	23

- 13 The majority of customer calls are received during weekdays. Over the twelve months, the Housing Advice and Homelessness Service has received and responded to 6,358 calls during weekdays, compared to 89 calls supported by Centra within the same period.
- 14 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 6,358 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.
- 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. 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. These happened during particular peak times for OOH services during severe cold weather when require placements increased. If

this service continues with Centra, Centra will provide a dedicated customer number for this Council, so that customers can go directly back to them with further queries. Both will also have access to a back-up contact with a senior housing officer from the Council to support them with complex queries.

- 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.
- 17 Overall, we have found the OOH pilot with Centra to be a success. It has released the pressure on existing Housing Advice 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.

Centra OOH Service Review - Customer Feedback

- 18 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.
- 19 Throughout the pilot officers have undertaken spot check reviews, 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, 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. (Note: Centra processes have been updated since this call, on occasions there is a need to ask for

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?
		evidence of priority need before placing, as per the legislation).
Customer 4	The service from out of hours was fine.	No
Customer 5	Yes, I was satisfied.	No
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
Customer 10	She was really happy with the service and that she had no problems getting through to anyone to get help.	No and that she felt it worked well for her and that she was able to get help.
Customer 11	Yes	No, happy with the service provided.
Customer 12	Yes, it was easy to deal with.	Nothing to change
Customer 13	Gave me advice over the phone and I contacted the council on Monday, yes it was fine.	Not really, it worked well for me.

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 14	The person was very helpful, thank you.	No
Customer 15	It was really good from start to finish.	Nothing to change.

- 20 Calls not answered for a further 10 customers contacted. Officers will continue to undertake spot checks and monitor customer feedback.
- 21 The Housing Advice and Homelessness team are supportive of continuing the pilot. Officers continue to strive to provide the best customer service to ensure the right support and advice is provided. The pilot has released the pressure on officers to concentrate fully during the day to support customers to the best of their ability and has supported their continued wellbeing by providing them with some much needed respite at the weekends.

Centra OOH Service Arrangements

- 22 The one year pilot with Centra is due to end on 16 October 2020, and it is recommended the Council enter into a two-year contract with Centra (Option B at paragraph 29), 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.
- 23 If Option B were agreed, a Centra contract would run from 17 October 2020 to 16 October 2022 with six monthly reviews of the service to ensure the service continues to respond to customer needs. This cost would be funded from the Council's core housing budget, which would normally be used to fund the additional OOH payment to staff.
- 24 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.
- 25 Key performance indicators would be agreed as part of the Centra Contract with regular reviews to ensure the service meets the needs of customers and the Council.
- 26 As part of the review, we have discussed with Centra having a dedicated customer telephone number to ensure that a customer can ring Centra

direct with any follow-up queries or questions. Centra have agreed that they would provide is as part of the contract going forward.

- 27 To ensure that Centra and CCTV operatives are supported, it is proposed that one senior housing officer from the Council provides back-up support and can be contacted for complex queries. This would support an ongoing high level of customer service, the out-of-hours payment for this officer have been included in the total annual costs under the key financial implications in this report.
- 28 Officers will continue to work with the Council's Customer Solutions team to review any future impact on the contract against proposals for 7am-7pm opening.

Other Options Considered and/or Rejected

- 29 Three options were considered:
- Option A - Do nothing. This is not an option, as the appointment of Centra was only on an initial pilot basis only. It was agreed that it would be reviewed and presented to Members for further consideration and decision.
 - Option B - To enter into a two year contract with Centra to continue delivering the Council's homelessness out-of-hours service, with regular monitoring of the service in place. One Council housing officer would provide a back-up contact for Centra and CCTV, to support them with complex questions. The total cost to the Council of this service would be £3,689 per annum.
 - Option C - 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 four housing 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 four existing housing officers employed by this Council would be on a rota basis for at least one or two weeks a month (as well as covering annual leave, vacancies and sickness cover). This would be at a cost to this Council, totalling in excess of £5,690 per annum.
- 30 Based on customer feedback, officers are satisfied that the Council and its customers have received a good-value and efficient service from Centra throughout the pilot period.
- 31 Providing the service externally would support the morale and wellbeing of Housing Advice Officers, 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.

32 The preferred option is B, because it delivers a cost-effective and efficient service for customers and the Council.

Key Implications

Financial

The budget to provide this service would come from existing housing budgets, with no additional financial burden to this Council. A two year contract with Centra would cost the Council £2,340 per annum, handling up to 180 calls per annum. This compares to the cost to this Council to provide the service in-house in excess of £5,690 per annum. There would also be a need for one Council Housing Officer to be paid the out-of-hours payment of £112.43 per month, to provide a back-up contact for Centra and CCTV, if support them with complex questions. The total cost of this service would be £3,689 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 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>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</p>

		<p>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.

Conclusions

Members are asked to consider the options and agree on how the Council's homelessness out-of-hours service will be delivered, to provide a dedicated service

Appendices

None

Background Papers

None

to customers facing homelessness outside standard office hours.

Sarah Robson

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