

**A Review of
Temporary Accommodation
by
Housing & Community Safety Overview and Scrutiny Panel**

Temporary Accommodation Overview and Scrutiny Review

Report Outline

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1. Introduction and Background

The Housing and Community Safety Panel has undertaken a review looking at the provision of Temporary Accommodation in Bath and North East Somerset.

The Terms of Reference were agreed in summer 2006 and a steering group was established to set the direction of the review work.

The main focus of this review has been to look at the quality of the accommodation that is offered to people that present to Housing Services

1.1 Context

The Panel's review is being undertaken at the same time that the Council is carrying out a wider homelessness sector review which is looking at the breadth of services offered to homeless people in B&NES. The findings from the Panel's review will be shared with officers undertaking this broader work which is due to report later in 2007.

1.2 Purpose and Objectives

The Panel has undertaken a review to make recommendations to the Executive Member for Housing concerning improvements to the provision of temporary accommodation in Bath & North East Somerset.

The review did not consider:

- § the processes leading up to a time in temporary accommodation (the assessment stage) or;
- § housing/processes once people have left the temporary accommodation scheme, other than how the transition

(arrival/departure at temporary accommodation)affected the quality of the experience for the residents concerned.

The full terms of reference are attached at Annex 1.

1.3 Approach

The Panel has undertaken a number of activities to gather the evidence that has been used to support their recommendations.

On January 11th 2007, the Panel held a public contributor session and invited stakeholders to a meeting in the Guildhall to give the Panel their views and advice on this issue. The Panel received a presentation from the Head of Housing Services outlining the current situation in B&NES (the detail of which is attached in Annex 2). The Panel then heard from invited speakers from a range of organisations that work in the homelessness sector across the authority.

Members of the Panel visited two of the temporary accommodation schemes used by B&NES – Green Park House and Dartmouth Avenue Hostel.

Following some issues that had been raised at the contributor session on January 11th, the Panel decided to visit one of the Bed and Breakfast hotels that the authority uses which is located outside of B&NES.

In addition, the Panel Chair and O&S Project Officer met privately with a B&NES resident who had spent time in Bed and Breakfast accommodation and one of the temporary accommodation schemes.

2. Findings

2.1 Provision of Temporary Accommodation in B&NES

2.1.1 Housing Services provide a range of client and property focused housing services including the enforcement of housing standards, the inspection and licensing of houses in multiple occupation, financial assistance to undertake essential works repair for vulnerable residents, the allocation of affordable housing, housing advice and homelessness.

2.1.2 It is part of the homelessness service undertaken by the Housing Advice Team, and in particular the provision of temporary accommodation that this review aims to examine. The Council has a duty to provide temporary accommodation for people who are homeless, have a local connection, are in priority need for accommodation and who did not become homeless intentionally. People with a priority need include people with dependant children, pregnant women, and anyone who is vulnerable because of old age, mental illness, handicap or physical disability or other special reason. The Homelessness (Priority Need for Accommodation)(England) Order

2002 broadened the definition of priority need to include 16 and 17 year olds, care leavers and people who are vulnerable as a result of being in custody or threats of violence.

2.1.3 Temporary accommodation is a blanket term which can include:

- bed & breakfast accommodation,
- accommodation occupied on a licence e.g. hostel accommodation,
- accommodation occupied on an assured shorthold tenancy e.g. flat or house.

2.1.4 As these last two types of temporary accommodation are usually run in partnerships between the local authority and not-for-profit housing providers, they are referred to as temporary accommodation schemes. Bath & North East Somerset currently uses all of the above types of temporary accommodation. The temporary accommodation schemes that the Council uses are run through a partnership agreement with Bath Self Help Housing Association (BSHHA), part of the Somer Housing Group.

2.2 Temporary Accommodation currently being used in B&NES

2.2.1 B&NES Housing Services has priority access to a range of accommodation commissioned through Bath Self Help Housing Association.

2.2.2 The panel briefing attached at Annex 2 gives full details of the location of temporary accommodation that is used and the number of spaces that are available. This information was correct at the time of publication in December 2006.

2.2.3 The Green Park Hostel is due for closure in February 2006. This will reduce overall capacity by 21 units. However, given the recent reduction in the use of temporary accommodation Green Park has been operating with a number of voids. To ensure the efficient use of this accommodation these voids were recently released to allow their occupation by non-statutory homeless households. There are currently 6 units being used in this way, known as the SASH scheme. Hence the effective loss of this accommodation will be 15 units, thus bringing capacity down to a total of 54 units, 10 units above our 2010 target of 44 units. Housing Services is currently in discussions with BSHHA concerning commissioning a replacement scheme within Bath.

2.3 Reducing the number of households in Temporary Accommodation

2.3.1 In March 2005 the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) published its strategy for tackling homeless titled "Sustainable Communities: Settled Homes; Changing Lives". This strategy announced a target to reduce the number of households living in insecure temporary accommodation by half by 2010. This is

demanding target which will require strong corporate and political commitment if it is to be met.

2.3.2 The baseline for this reduction in B&NES was 31st December 2004 at which time there were 88 homeless households living in temporary accommodation in the area. The target for the authority therefore is to reduce this number to 44 by 2010.

2.3.3 Housing Services has developed an action plan to meet this target and is currently on track to deliver this. This action plan is included in the report attached at Annex 2.

2.4 Experience of living in Temporary Accommodation

2.4.1 There can be a lack of certainty about how long people will be in temporary accommodation making it difficult for them to put down roots and get certainty in their lives. This can have a disruptive effect that can impact on all areas of a person's life.

2.4.2 Households can experience difficulty in getting access to the services that they need and are entitled to use, such as local GPs, social services and education for school-age children.

2.4.3 The Government's Homelessness Strategy notes that "People... living in temporary accommodation are more likely to suffer from poor physical, mental and emotional health than the general population..."¹

2.5 Standards in and suitability of Temporary Accommodation

2.5.1 The Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities issued by the Department of Communities and Local Government, July 2006 lays down provisions on what should be the acceptable minimum standard for TA being used by housing authorities.

2.5.2 These provisions include consideration of:

- The needs, requirements and circumstances of each household
- Space and arrangement
- Health and safety considerations
- Affordability and;
- Location

2.5.3 The code states that it is important for Housing Authorities to consider what support services are needed for people in TA to help them maintain a reasonable quality of life. Access to healthcare, education, social services and education are all part of this.

¹ p25. 5.5 Sustainable Communities: Settled Homes; Changing Lives, ODPM, March 2005

2.6 Perception of Temporary Accommodation

- 2.6.1 The Panel heard evidence that there can be significant levels of anxiety amongst those who are in need of TA about what they can expect after having made contact with Housing Services.
- 2.6.2 Negative perceptions about the kind of accommodation that they might be offered, and in particular, a fear of being allocated Bed and Breakfast accommodation, has the potential to deter people from contacting Housing Services and receiving the help they are entitled to.
- 2.6.3 The Panel believes that clearer, up front information about the service that people can expect and the type of accommodation that they are being allocated would be one way of addressing this fear of the unknown. Therefore, the Panel recommends:

Recommendation 1:

That written information is made available to service users outlining what services they can expect from Housing Services and what the process is that they can expect upon being allocated temporary accommodation.

Recommendation 2:

That information packs are made available for service users entering temporary accommodation about the specific scheme or B&B they have been allocated. These packs should contain relevant information such as:

- A description and, where possible, photos of the accommodation they have been allocated
- A map with clear directions
- A list of phone numbers and contact details of key contacts within the Council such as the relevant Housing Officer, Case worker and B&B Move-On Officer
- Where relevant, details of organisations offering help and advice on issues which might affect the client, such as drug or alcohol dependencies

2.7 Accessing Temporary Accommodation

- 2.7.1 Residents in need of TA present to Housing Services and are assessed according to their need. If determined as qualifying for TA, residents might be placed immediately in B&B accommodation. A further assessment is then undertaken by BSHHA to determine whether or not they can enter a scheme such as Dartmouth House.
- 2.7.2 There have been occasions where there have been vacancies at Dartmouth House, and other BSHHA schemes, while people staying in B&Bs are awaiting an assessment of their suitability for a place at the hostel. There is a clear benefit in reducing the amount of time that

service users stay at B&B accommodation and accelerating their move into hostel accommodation if this is considered appropriate. The Panel therefore recommends:

Recommendation 3:

That BSHHA, working in partnership with Housing Services work to reduce the period of time that is needed to assess a service user's suitability for entry into their accommodation. This work might consider the opportunities for rationalising the assessment processes which are currently undertaken separately by Housing Services and BSHHA.

2.8 Bed and Breakfast Accommodation

- 2.8.1 In recognition of the fact that "B&B accommodation is generally accepted as being the least acceptable form of temporary accommodation in which to house homeless people" and that B&Bs are "considered as particularly unsuitable accommodation for families with children"², the Government has set a target which stipulates that those with a priority needs should not be placed in such accommodation for longer than six weeks.
- 2.8.2 In Bath and North East Somerset Housing Services has its own, more stringent target, bringing this period down to a four-week upper- limit.
- 2.8.3 The length of time that people spend in B&B accommodation can have a significant impact on how well they are able to deal with the other issues that are impacting on their lives.
- 2.8.4 This review found evidence that the longer the time spent in B&B accommodation, the higher the risk becomes of people's personal circumstances deteriorating, thus taking longer for them to successfully address and resolve these issues.
- 2.8.5 If service users are found B&B accommodation located in area away from their network of family, friends and away from access to services that they rely upon, these feelings of isolation can be exacerbated.
- 2.8.6 Bed and Breakfast accommodation can also be limiting in terms of the facilities on offer to residents. For example, in the absence of a kitchen area or cooking facilities, instead of being able to prepare their own meals, residents have to rely on buying fast food and takeaways which are generally more expensive and less nutritious.
- 2.8.7 If service users are offered accommodation away from where they usually live, there may also be implications in terms of paying for transport to and from that TA. If additional funding is not available to service users and they cannot afford the cost of this transport, there is

² p129, para 16.28 Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities – ODPM, Revised 2005

the danger that people are unable to get access to the services they need and are entitled to.

- 2.8.8 The Panel heard evidence from contributors of examples in the past where individuals with alcohol dependency issues had been placed in B&Bs which had licensed bars on the premises. The Panel would like to comment that they believe this is an undesirable situation and that, wherever possible, Housing Services works to reduce the occurrences of this kind of situation.

2.9 Arriving at Bed and Breakfast Accommodation

- 2.9.1 Currently, when service users are allocated accommodation at a Bed and Breakfast, they are asked to make their own way to the property. There is no facility for clients to be accompanied to the B&B or to meet an officer from the Council there in order to help familiarise them with the new surroundings or to offer reassurance.

- 2.9.2 The Panel recognises the logistical issues this presents as clients may be directed to a Bed and Breakfast at short notice, out of usual office hours or at the weekend. Nonetheless, they recognise the considerable anxiety that service users may feel upon being asked to make their own way to temporary accommodation in unfamiliar surroundings. The Panel recommend that:

Recommendation 4:

That front-line staff investigate ways in which this additional service could be provided, exploring how existing housing staff and on-call officers can help to deliver this service.

2.10 B&B Provision outside B&NES Authority

- 2.10.1 On occasion, Housing Services is unable to place service users in accommodation within the B&NES boundary. Currently B&B accommodation in Chippenham (North Wiltshire District Council) and Willsbridge (South Gloucester Council) is used in these circumstances.

- 2.10.2 This can lead to additional problems as well as those associated with being removed from networks of family and friends. Access to local education, health and social services can be made even more difficult. Families with children of school age can be faced with the problem of what to do about sending their children to school.

- 2.10.3 The Government Code of Guidance recommends that when necessary, in the case of families with children being placed in housing in a neighbouring authority, there should be close liaison between the Housing authority and relevant neighbouring health, education and social services authorities to enable access to the services they are entitled to.

2.10.4 The Panel believes that where clients are being offered accommodation outside of the authority, in unfamiliar surroundings, they should be given additional information about this area and the services that are available to them. Therefore the Panel recommends that:

Recommendation 5:

If service users are being directed to B&B accommodation outside of B&NES authority, the information pack that they receive should include:

- Information and contact details for services provided locally in the neighbouring authority such as:
 - Doctor
 - Dentist
 - Benefits Office
 - Facilities for children
- Details of transport links and services between the B&B and Bath/towns in B&NES
- Information about what financial support may be available to help with transport costs.

2.10.5 During the course of the review, Panel members visited one of the B&B hotels that are used by the authority. There had been a number of issues raised with this particular B&B relating to unacceptable living standards and conditions. Panel members, while acknowledging that B&B accommodation is not ideal especially for those households with children, found the accommodation to be of an acceptable standard for meeting short-term housing needs.

2.10.6 The Panel understands the difficulties that B&NES has experienced in trying to find suitable local B&B accommodation. The high cost of providing such accommodation in Bath City Centre for example, along with the relatively few number of businesses that are prepared to work with the Council and their clients have combined to frustrate the authorities ability to house all those in need locally. The Panel Further work with housing partners to explore what further flexibility there is to make available short-term accommodation in B&NES.

2.10.7 As a result of this shortage of accommodation that is available at very short notice can mean that service users can sometimes only be offered accommodation located in alternative areas. The Panel recommend:

Recommendation 6:

That service users who have been placed in emergency accommodation in a location away from their usual support networks or in an unfamiliar area are offered alternative, more convenient B&B accommodation as soon as it becomes available.

2.11 Temporary Accommodation Schemes

- 2.11.1 Panel members visited Green Park and Dartmouth Avenue TA schemes during the course of the review. These schemes offer the security, safe environment, support and stability that service users need to assist them on their way to securing more permanent accommodation. Both schemes were found to be well maintained and had undergone major refurbishments in 2004 and 2002 respectively.
- 2.11.2 Panel members were impressed by the level of service that is provided at Green Park for residents and were therefore concerned about the potential impacts that its closure may bring. Green Park provides for largely single clients with a varying range of support needs and in future these clients will instead be offered accommodation at other TA schemes such as Dartmouth House or individual properties that the authority has access to. Panel members believe close scrutiny of the provision of TA following Green Park's closure will be necessary to monitor any potential negative impacts that might arise.

2.12 Encouraging Feedback from Service Users

- 2.12.1 One of the objectives of the review was to consider ways in which non-threatening feedback processes can be introduced for existing and former residents of temporary accommodation schemes.
- 2.12.2 The review established that there is currently no formal procedure for gathering feedback from existing or former residents of temporary accommodation schemes. Ongoing feedback about the temporary accommodation that B&NES uses will provide Housing Services with information and evidence about what improvements can be made to the service on a long-term basis.
- 2.12.3 Gathering feedback from services can present challenges. People who have spent time in TA are often experiencing a very chaotic and stressful time in their life. They are understandably primarily concerned with their immediate needs and may not be inclined or able to comment on the services they are using. Fear of jeopardising their access to services may also be a factor in users being unwilling to report negative feedback.
- 2.12.4 Those that are no longer in TA may be unwilling to linger on the time that they have spent in TA and eager to move on and put their experience behind them.
- 2.12.5 A recent review by the Supporting People team (Aug 05) carried out several face to face interviews with users in Green Park and Dartmouth

House seeking their feedback on the sites and the services provided. Feedback from this exercise was largely positive and comments about the sites reflected the findings of the Panel when they visited Green Park and Dartmouth House – i.e. Good services provided in safe, acceptable surroundings, staffed by enthusiastic and experienced staff.

2.12.6 While recognising the difficulties in gathering this information, the Panel would like to recommend that:

Recommendation 7:

Exit surveys are developed in accordance with those recommended by SHELTER in their best practice guide ‘Involving Users in Supported Housing’³.

Recommendation 8:

That specifically service user feedback is actively sought from residents and staff at Dartmouth Avenue Hostel following the closure of Green Park Hostel to gauge any potential effects following the changes that are being introduced.

³ Involving Users in Supported Housing – A best practice guide, SHELTER 2005

3. Acknowledgements

- 3.1 The Panel would like to thank those who attended and contributed at the Panel's meeting on 11th January 2007, as well as those people who met Panel members on their visit to a temporary accommodation hostel, also in January.
- 3.2 The Panel would also like to thank members of the public who contacted them to make their views known by letter, email or in person.

4. Structures

Housing & Community Safety O&S Panel:	Cllr. Steve Hedges Cllr. Marie Brewer Cllr. Hilary Fraser Cllr. Les Kew Cllr. Sharon Ball
Review Steering Group	Cllr Steve Hedges Cllr Hilary Fraser Graham Sabourn Bethan Grant
Director:	Jane Ashman, Strategic Director Social & Housing Services
Service Manager:	Graham Sabourn, Group Manager (Housing & Health)
O&S Project Manager:	Bethan Grant
O&S Project Support	Lauren Rushen
Panel Administrator:	Mark Durnford

5. Glossary

B&NES – Bath and North East Somerset
HCS – Housing and Community Safety (Overview and Scrutiny Panel)
DCLG – Department for Communities and Local Government
ODPM – Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
TA – Temporary Accommodation
BSHHA – Bath Self Help Housing Association

6. Background Papers

1. Terms of Reference
2. Panel Briefing from Housing Services, December 2006
3. Minutes of Contributor Session – Thursday 11th January 2007
4. Site Visits Write-Up (circulated to Panel and available from O&S upon request).