

Alison Millar – Statement on behalf of DHI and Reach

Introduction

Zahra (not her real name) and her family were at significant risk of becoming homeless when she was referred to Reach. Reach is the DHI service which provides practical and emotional support to help people live independently and develop useful life skills. Zahra's landlord wanted to take back their home to sell, issuing a Section 21 no fault eviction notice.

As a Kurdish refugee family of 5, living in private rented accommodation in Bath, they were unsure what to do when they received the eviction notice. Having small children and little time to seek a suitable affordable alternative, the family were barely coping when they contacted DHI's REACH service.

REACH advisors were able to quickly assess the situation, promptly setting Zahra up on BANES' Homesearch site, where she was awarded a B Banding. The banding did not reflect the urgency and severity of Zahra's family situation and the REACH team advocated an A banding due to the close eviction date.

With the assistance of the team, Zahra was able to secure a new home before being evicted. With a high degree of legal housing knowledge and expertise, the team also applied successfully to court for an extension at her existing property while some essential repairs were made to her new accommodation.

The family were also supported by Reach to apply for funding for carpets and furniture, in changing Zahra's address for utilities and benefits, and in getting an extension on her daughter's Personal Independence Payments pending the Home Office decision on indefinite leave to remain.

The REACH team made sure Zahra knew her rights and the law and supported her at every step to secure safe and stable long-term accommodation.

Reach's support meant that the family were able to avoid having to move to temporary accommodation. This resulted in a significant financial saving to the council and minimised disruption to family life including schooling. The cost of temporary accommodation ranges from approximately £600 per week in Dartmouth Avenue (the local authority temporary accommodation) to approximately £1200 a week for a hotel if Dartmouth Avenue was full, which it generally is. Hotel accommodation would not necessarily be in B&NES causing additional disruption to an already vulnerable family.

None of this begins to touch on the long term costs which would have been incurred by society had the family been evicted. For instance, evidence shows that a child spending time brought up in temporary accommodation suffers lifelong disadvantages. They are significantly more likely to have poor health and educational achievements, more likely to experience mental ill health, substance misuse problems, and become an offender in later life. The REACH teams actions – in this and in an average of 900 cases a year - contribute to prevention of many longer-term issues, avoiding massive cost to both the individuals and to the local authority.

Across Bath and North East Somerset, many families are homeless or are facing homelessness right now. Many of these are working but cannot afford their mortgages or rents and are at risk of losing their homes. Children are struggling. Families teeter on the edge of keeping their lives together.

The UK has an unprecedented national housing emergency. Developing Health and Independence's REACH Service is working hard to address this so that nobody must face homelessness. It has itself restructured and remodelled using charitable funding over the past few years in order to be as efficient as possible.

As a registered charity, DHI applies and receives funding from a variety of Trusts and companies. The David Medlock charitable trust is currently funding DHI with a far reaching programme of digital transformation, a programme which is enabling services to offer earlier interventions and increase throughput. Not only would budget cuts in this area remove the service but they would mean the added value from fundraised income, company giving (including companies such as Touchstone and Merlin) will be lost, as well as the volunteer support and a placement of choice for social work students from Bath university.

It would be very difficult for the council to apply for additional funding, for example for clients in rent arrears or needing resettlement packages or to develop services from the range of charitable trusts available to DHI, since many that fund DHI, Reach or its clients, do not allow statutory services to apply for funds.

Finally Reach is a long established respected partnership service, pulling from the joint expertise of 3 respected organisations: DHI, Homegroup and Clean Slate. It is the go to agency for housing support for all the agencies in B&NES, including the Housing Options Team, who since the Housing Reduction Act 2018, use Reach extensively in executing some of their statutory duties including Personal Housing Plans which are critical to the prevention of homelessness.