Environment, Regeneration, Housing, Culture and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Homelessness and Rough Sleepers

March 2016

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Chairman’s Foreword and Acknowledgements

Councillor Lisa Preston
Chairman of the Scrutiny Task Group

Homelessness can happen to anyone and can have a devastating effect on people’s lives. It is a frightening and isolating experience and homeless people are often invisible, ignored and forgotten. At worst, homelessness can mean sleeping rough on the streets.

People become and stay homeless for a whole range of complex and overlapping reasons and solving homelessness is about much more than putting a roof over people’s heads. Anyone can become homeless, but there are certain individual factors which make it more likely, including relationship breakdown, young people leaving looked after care, leaving the Forces, release from prison or physical and mental health problems.

After years of declining trends, all forms of homelessness have risen due to the shortage of housing and ongoing effects of the economic recession combined with government policies – particularly reductions in entitlements to housing benefit and Local Housing Allowance and reduced investment by local authorities in homelessness services as a result of cuts in Government funding. Independent research carried out for Crisis and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation shows that homelessness is likely to increase further still.

Homeless people who are not successful in obtaining alternative accommodation, despite advice and assistance provided by the Council, or who do not approach us for assistance may find themselves sleeping rough.

It is widely recognised that homelessness is a highly complex issue and one that can best be reduced and managed through successful partnership working between related services. As part of the review, we have had the privilege of visiting various schemes and speaking to services users themselves and as such recognise the excellent work and dedication of those working to help homeless people rebuild their lives.

On behalf of the Task Group, I would like to thank all those who have taken the time to meet with us and in particular I would like to thank Samantha Murray the Council’s Housing Strategy and Policy Development Manager, whose support throughout the review has been invaluable.
1.0 Introduction and Terms of Reference

1.1 During the process of agreeing the Scrutiny Work Programme for 2015/2016 the Council’s Environment, Regeneration, Housing, Culture & Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Panel agreed to look at Homelessness and Rough Sleepers.

1.2 The aim of the review was to identify the impact that rough sleeping and homelessness has on local people and what local services are in place to alleviate it.

1.3 The terms of the review were as follows:

- To aim to better understand the Council’s statutory duties with regard to homelessness and rough sleeping.
- To clarify the extent of homelessness and rough sleeping in the borough and map the support services which are available to those who present as homeless.
- To understand how the Council reports on the levels of rough sleeping in the borough through the completion of a Rough Sleeping Count.
- To gain a better understanding of homelessness within a sub-regional context by examining provisions such as No Second Night Out, the Mainstay Service and the Sit Up Service Outreach provision.
- To examine the Council’s Cold Weather Provision.
- To consult with and gather views of service providers/support organisations and service users.
- To identify and understand the impact rough sleeping has on the health of the individual and the implications for their safety and the safety of the wider community.
- To identify if there are any particular hard to reach groups who are not accessing services.

2.0 Method of the Investigation

- We obtained background information from the Housing Strategy and Policy Development Manager.
- We undertook desktop research and examined statutory guidance.
- We visited the Salvation Army, YMCA, The Hope Centre, Pennington Lodge, Ravenhead Foyer, Sherdley Lodge and Bluebell Court.
We also received a presentation from the Whitechapel service in Liverpool.

We spoke to partners and service users.

We met with Dr Jean Sutton – a local GP who has experience of delivering services to people who are homeless and has worked with service users with complex needs for a number of years.

We met with Pam Rhys Davis – the Homelessness Nurse employed by Bridgewater who provides outreach services to people who are homeless and living within hostel settings.

3.0 Background

3.1 Homeless …what does it mean?

3.2 Anyone could become homeless….people may think that being homeless means sleeping rough, however, there are many other forms of homelessness - sleeping rough is homelessness at its worst. These include the many people living out of our sight, in bed & breakfasts, on friends or families sofas, squats or other unsafe places.

Rough Sleeping – the most severe manifestation of homelessness

3.3 Figures released in February 2016 by the Department for Communities and Local Government state that across England an estimated 3,569 people slept rough (Autumn Count 2015 figures), although true figures are likely to be much higher. This figure refers to those out on the streets and does not take into account all the other hidden homeless people mentioned in paragraph 3.2.

3.4 Being homeless is a devastating and lonely time in a person’s life, it presents all manner of issues including crime, physical dangers and of course, long lasting health problems. There is no one single reason why someone becomes homeless, it can range from breakdown in relationships, losing their job, mortgage or rent arrears, and then losing family and friends who support them and then finally losing their home.

3.5 Without a place to live and an address of your own, it becomes very difficult to get a job, access everyday services such as banks, medical services such as doctors and dentists and the longer a person is homeless the harder it becomes to rebuild their life.

3.6 The housing system and welfare assistance has traditionally helped people during unemployment, poverty and helped protect against homelessness. Throughout the review we have seen and listened to the perspectives of some of the accommodation and support providers that recent changes to welfare benefits have made these issues increasingly challenging for people facing these difficult times. The vast reductions in benefit budgets nationally, in turn equates to cuts to individuals and Councils alike. In addition, changes
to Housing Benefit entitlement for 18 – 21 year olds will only impact the situation further.

3.7 Homelessness is a worldwide issue, some countries and cities have a homeless crisis such as Los Angeles in America where recent figures show that approximately 44,500 people are without a home with 25,500 being located in the city itself, many sleeping rough in the city’s main streets and parks.

3.8 Although Los Angeles has an estimated population of 3.9 million, the numbers of homeless people are still staggering......these figures equate to a quarter of St Helens boroughs total population, all without a roof over their heads and nearer home, cities such as Manchester and Liverpool are seeing larger number of homelessness and rough sleepers year on year.

3.9 Liverpool saw an increase of 88% from 2014 to 2015 with 15 rough sleepers being identified in the Autumn 2015 rough sleepers count. Manchester saw a 63% increase on 2014 to 2015 numbers with 70 rough sleepers being identified on their 2015 count. St.Helens identified two rough sleepers, this was thought to be lower than actual numbers. (figures from www.Homeless.org.uk)

3.10 During 2014/15 a total of 6276 people accessed St.Helens Councils Housing Options Service and the Council accepted 102 as homeless.

3.11 Research undertaken by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation shows that there is sometimes an overlap between homelessness and other support needs such as mental health problems, drug and alcohol dependency, street activities such as shoplifting, begging and sex work, traumatic childhood experiences and experience of institutions such as prisons.

3.12 Some of the issues mentioned above become barriers to a homeless person receiving the correct support from services. Issues such as drug and alcohol dependency can make a person not want to comply with the conditions of a Hostel for instance, and therefore they will be asked to leave and the spiral starts again.

3.13 These issues and problems that people face need to be addressed in the first instance to enable people to breakdown those barriers that are stopping them getting their lives back together, finding a home and moving on.
4.0 Findings

4.1 There are many organisations, charities and Local Government agencies all working together to support people that find themselves homeless. Locally, The Salvation Army, YMCA and The Hope Centre all provide services and, of course, the Council. The Council delivers its housing and homelessness functions through direct service delivery at the Housing Options & Advice Service (based in the Millennium Centre) and contracts with a number of providers for the provision of accommodation and support through the Supporting People programme.

4.2 The Council has statutory duties set out within the Housing Act 1996 and Homelessness Act 2002. The Council has a legal obligation to take an application for assistance if a person presents as homeless and apply the set tests that are required by the legislation that are:

- Is the applicant eligible for assistance?
- Is the applicant in ‘priority need’?
- Is the applicant ‘intentionally homeless?’ (deliberate act or omission)
- Does the applicant have a local connection?

4.3 If the person meets all of the above criteria then the Council has a statutory duty to secure accommodation – temporary (whilst investigating) and permanent. If the answer is no then advice and assistance is given. In general because of the tests that are applied the Council is more likely to provide accommodation for families than for single people unless they are deemed vulnerable under the act.

4.4 The Council works closely with the other local organisations in helping to provide housing and continuous support for those that utilise the services provided. There is also a requirement to undertake a Rough Sleepers Count (or as a minimum an estimate of the numbers of people rough sleeping in the borough) annually which is reported to the Government.

4.5 Supporting People is a housing related funding stream managed at a local authority level but funded through Central Government grant to help people who are socially excluded to have a stable environment in which to access help and housing related support services to either achieve or maintain independent living.

4.6 The Council’s Supporting People contractual arrangements in St Helens are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Contract Value</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>YMCA</td>
<td>38 Bed Spaces in hostel and 62 Central Court</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salvation Army</td>
<td>48 units in contract – 60 in hostel including resettlement and ex-officer property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennington Lodge</td>
<td>20 units for homeless families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope Centre</td>
<td>Direct Access Service – Not funded through Supporting People</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bluebell Court</td>
<td>20 units for females who are homeless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHAP Sherdley House /162 Project</td>
<td>Emergency accommodation for young people at risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Violence Refuge</td>
<td>18 units of accommodation</td>
</tr>
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In total, the Council contracts with these providers through contracts worth £1.4m p/a to ensure that the provision of services are good quality and effective in assisting people to move on from homelessness into settled accommodation. This amount is taken from a budget of £6.1m for 2016/17 to deliver housing support to a number of vulnerable client groups in the borough.

4.7 With the exception of the Hope Centre, all of the above providers deliver accommodation based services and as such residents can claim Housing Benefit for rental costs. Supporting People contracts are paid per annum over 13 cycles and residents do not need to apply for these services separately. The Hope Centre provides day facilities such as breakfast, showers, laundry services, access to IT facilities and support as well as provision of the Food Bank and wider outreach work.

4.8 Mainstay

4.9 Over the past two years, the Council has worked with its sub-regional partners and other Merseyside authorities to develop and deliver a system called Mainstay, to ensure that all bedspaces for single homeless people are managed, co-ordinated and prioritised so that those in the most need get access to the available bedspaces first. In St Helens both the Salvation Army and the YMCA now allocate their bedspaces through this system.

4.10 This has ensured that service users only need to complete one assessment form and those who are verified as rough sleepers will receive priority for the next available bed-space. The Council can also take local connection into account.

4.11 The system enables the Council to run reports on exclusions, if people are refused access and also where people have moved on to. It also offers a perspective on the demand for these services – at the time of writing this report, there were 15 people waiting for a bedspace at the YMCA and 19 people waiting at Salvation Army.

4.12 Rough Sleepers Count November

4.13 An annual rough sleepers count is undertaken each Autumn by Local Authorities with the assistance of local services and charities and figures are collated and published by Central Government.

4.14 Over the past five years the national annual rough sleepers count has seen an increase year on year as demonstrated by figures from the House of Commons briefing paper ‘Rough Sleeping (England) published on 7th January 2016 (data to Nov 2014).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rough Sleeper Count Year</th>
<th>% increase in Rough Sleeper</th>
<th>Actual Number of rough Sleepers Counted in England</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autumn 2011</td>
<td>23% increase since 2010 count (1768)</td>
<td>2181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autumn 2012</td>
<td>6% increase since 2011 count</td>
<td>2309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autumn 2013</td>
<td>5% increase since 2012 count</td>
<td>2414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autumn 2014</td>
<td>14% increase since 2013 count</td>
<td>2744</td>
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| * Autumn 2015            | 30% increase since 2014 count    | 3569 *

*Autumn 2015 figure from Department for Communities and Local Government website February 2015

4.15 As part of the review, Members of the task group wanted to understand what the count was and how this happened so four elected members took part in the St Helens rough sleepers count. The date of this was kept confidential in advance of the count and groups of counters conducted two ‘sweeps’ of the town centre area at midnight and 2am. The area covered included known areas that people said that they were sleeping rough. On the evening, two people were found rough sleeping. One man, who was sleeping in a tent, has now engaged with the Housing Options Services and has now secured his own tenancy and is no longer living on the streets.

4.16 Agencies suggested that the finding of two rough sleepers was less than they expected, however the feedback received from experienced workers within the sector was that most entrenched rough sleepers hide away from visible areas as they are fearful of attack and do not disclose where they are sleeping.

4.17 No Second Night Out

4.18 St Helens Council is a signatory to the No Second Night Out ethos, which has been adopted at a sub-regional level since 2012. This ethos is that no-one should sleep rough for a second night and focuses services on engaging with people who are reported as rough sleeping and encouraging them to come into emergency services such as the Sit Up provision (a place of safety at the hostel overnight) or to use the Cold Weather Provision in winter months or extreme weather conditions.

4.19 Site Visit to The Hope Centre’s 103 Service

4.20 The task group visited the Hope Centre’s 103 Service located in the town centre. The service provides a drop-in facility for homeless people and people living in hostel accommodation. It’s open Monday to Friday 9am until 4pm and starts the day by providing a breakfast service, it also provides a lunch service with food used being donated by the foodbank and a few local businesses.

4.21 A small team of dedicated staff and volunteers operate the service which also provides a laundry service, showers and access to the internet. Each service
user is offered support and advice and can also be signposted/referred into other services by the team. The address can be used as a care of address so homeless people can receive essential post and can register with a GP.

4.22 The service works with approximately 350 people a year, they also provide food parcels for those who do not qualify for a food bank voucher. The staff stated that a lot of service users have been attending for several years. The service does not tolerate violent or abusive behaviour and has a no alcohol or drugs policy.

4.23 During the task groups visit 20 plus people attended to receive a breakfast and talk to the staff. Numbers vary on a daily basis and not all homeless people want to access the service. The majority of people there on this particular day were predominantly middle aged males.

4.24 Not all service users are rough sleepers, some stay at the YMCA, Salvation Army or other hostels but like to use this service as well. From talking to the service users it was evident that people’s reasons for being homeless varied greatly. People reported that they have very complex and chaotic lives and find it hard to adjust to what is expected to be a normal life.

4.25 From our discussions it was evident that service users think that there are many more people becoming homeless and sleeping rough than in past years. One man we spoke to had been living in a tent for the past six months and said he did not like it in the hostels.

4.26 We spoke to a young woman who had been a victim of domestic abuse and was now trying to rebuild her life and was living at one of the local hostels. She visits the 103 service a couple of times a week to talk to other people in her situation and to obtain support and guidance from the staff.

4.27 People said that the 103 service provided help and assistance and one man stated that he would not have been able to successfully give up drugs if it had not been for the help and support of the staff at the Hope Centre.

4.28 Site visit to YMCA

4.29 The task group visited the YMCA in St.Helens to talk to staff and service users and have a look around the facility. The building has 38 en-suite rooms in the hostel building and 62 self-contained flats for two people who share a bathroom and kitchen facilities in the next stage of the scheme at Central Court. Room charges are paid by Housing Benefit directly to the YMCA and then the resident pays a personal charge of £32 a week for a full board en-suite room or £7 per week for a self-catering flat. Residents can stay for up to two years. The service accepts both male and female residents over 18 years of age.

4.30 When a person presents as homeless at the YMCA staff undertake an assessment on the Mainstay system. This system should allocate the person to available and most suitable accommodation. We also heard from the YMCA that occasionally the police would bring people directly to them and bypass the official referral route.

4.31 Some people staying at the YMCA have complex lives and staff provide a variety of support and advice, from debt, drug and alcohol support to simple
training courses and events for life skills and medical and health services. The

task group visited the YMCA Foyer service to learn about the training and

support that is available to help residents gain confidence and take steps

back into employment.

4.32 Staff said that they are seeing more people with more complex needs using

the service. Benefit sanctions are increasing which can cause extreme

problems for people already in difficult situations. It was highlighted that on

some occasions the Police would drop people off directly at the YMCA. This

was not the correct referral route and often put pressure on the service itself.

4.33 The task group received a tour of the facilities and viewed the recently

renovated rooms that are all now en-suite together with the rooms with shared

bathroom facilities on the female corridor.

4.34 The newly renovated rooms and corridors were bright and airy, well

maintained by residents and clean. The older rooms again were tidy and

clean however, they were not as bright and welcoming. These rooms are due

to renovated in the near future.

4.35 Site Visit to Salvation Army – Salisbury Lifehouse

4.36 Salisbury Lifehouse has 48 individual en-suite rooms for 18 year old plus

males. There are also three ‘re-settlement’ areas, each housing three males

that are in the transitional stage from moving from the Lifehouse into

independent living.

4.37 Accommodation charges are paid directly to the Salvation Army from Housing

Benefit and then each resident pays a personal charge of £34 per week for

utilities, cleaning and food. Residents are allowed to stay for up to two years

although there are some exceptions to this. There are communal rooms, a

basic gym and a canteen where meals are served. The emergency ‘sit up’

service and cold weather provision is also operated from here. A room has

been provided to facilitate these services, including a television and sofas.

On-site staff manage this service.

4.38 Alcohol and drugs are not allowed on the premises, visitors are allowed to

visit in the communal family room but are not allowed in residents rooms.

Food donations are received from a local supermarket and from a few local

chain restaurants.

4.39 The centre offers a range of facilities including, life skills (Train to Gain),

medical and health services and works in partnership with a wide range of

organisations including weekly on site surgery by the homeless nurse and

Addaction. Crisis Skylight scheme works closely with both the Salvation Army

and the YMCA to enable the residents to extend their skills in areas such as

plastering, paving and decorating.

4.40 The task group received a tour of the facilities and viewed some of the rooms

that had been refurbished, like at the YMCA, they have recently been updated

with en-suite facilities. Prior to this the hostel had an ‘institutional’ feel to it.

The residents are very proud of their rooms and most keep them clean, tidy

and homely.
4.41 Staff stated again like the YMCA staff that they are seeing more people with more complex lives and increasing needs with drug, alcohol and mental health issues.

4.42 Sometimes when a person presents as homeless they may also have a pet such as a dog. There are some shelters that take pets (out of borough) and people are referred to these so they can be kept with their pet which is sometimes their best and only friend. Views are changing and the benefit of pets being therapeutic is becoming more apparent and hopefully in the near future more shelters will accept pets locally.

4.43 Site Visit to Pennington Lodge

4.44 Pennington Lodge was built in 2009 and officially opened in 2010. It has 20 flats, 10 one bedroom, seven two bedroom and three four bedroom flats. In total there are 83 single bed spaces. Each flat has a fully fitted kitchen and are simply furnished. The flats the task group viewed were clean and of a good standard. Two flats have been adapted for disabled use.

4.45 The service is aimed at homeless families and vulnerable adults that may not be suitable for other hostel accommodation. The facility is staffed 24/7 and operated by Your Housing Group.

4.46 When the centre was re built in 2009 it was identified that there was a requirement for larger flats to house larger families. The previous building had shared kitchen and bathroom facilities and was not ideal at all.

4.47 Again like the YMCA and Salvation Army Lifehouse, accommodation fees are paid directly to Your Housing Group via Housing Benefit and residents pay £9.51 per flat to cover utility charges, the flats are self-catering.

4.48 On average families stay for 12 weeks although if families are not ready to move on the staff work closely with them until they are ready for independent living. At the time of the site visit, Pennington Lodge had six flats vacant, staff stated that this quite often happens prior to Christmas as families will try and stick together, however, as quickly as Boxing Day all the flats could be full.

4.49 The corridors are bright and airy, there is a children’s play room full of equipment and a communal TV room with a small pool table for older children, games and a small library.

4.50 Each resident or family is allocated a key worker and support worker to assist them in enabling them to move on. Some families do return if their new accommodation has broken down, but staff do not encourage families to return for social visits.

4.51 Access into Pennington Lodge is managed by the Housing Options Service. If people just turn up at reception staff refer them to Housing Options or if out of hours to the police station where police will contact the EDT team on how to refer them into the correct accommodation.

4.52 The above three hostels are all funded by the Supported People grant from the Council, which pays for staffing and operational costs. It was evident from the site visits that residents are supported by competent and caring staff and assisted as much as possible to move on.
4.53 **Cornerstone GP Surgery**

4.54 Cornerstone GP Surgery is based in Fingerpost Medical Centre along with several other GP surgeries. One of the GP’s, Dr Jean Sutton is well known and respected for being passionate about working and helping homeless people therefore the task group agreed to visit the surgery to talk to her and her team.

4.55 Around 10 years ago Dr Sutton was asked to hold some clinical sessions for homeless people over the Christmas period, from this a clinic was held once a week at the local shelters which then grew to a team of staff, The Health for Homeless Team. This was an initiative funded by the Primary Care Trust, which evolved into the Lifestyles service.

4.56 For many years the team consisted of Dr Sutton, a Nurse and four support workers, however due to financial cuts and the reorganisation of primary care services, this has reduced and three much needed support workers have been lost.

4.57 Cornerstones Surgery independently holds a drop in surgery for homeless people every Wednesday morning and is regarded as a great asset to the homeless community, and even has donations on clothes and sleeping bags on site. Homeless people can register at Cornerstones Surgery, which has developed excellent multi-agency working relationships with other local health providers and hospital consultants.

4.58 Again, as we heard from previous services, Dr Sutton and her colleagues said that homeless people’s lives have become much more complex due to drug, alcohol and mental health problems.

4.59 Pam Rhys-Davies part of the Health for Homeless Team is the clinical nurse and attends various hostels and centres during the week to reach the homeless people of St.Helens including veterans and rough sleepers. Pam reported that homeless people age prematurely and illnesses affect people as though they were 20 years older so medical needs are often more advanced and complex. The average age of a death of a homeless person is just 47.

4.60 The team discussed that there is a gap in the rehabilitation system in that if someone is at the stage that they want to give up an addiction, there is normally a few weeks wait to be admitted into a rehabilitation centre. During this time if the person stays living amongst the chaos they are familiar with there is little chance they will stay away from their addiction following the required detox. This is particularly pertinent to people when they are released from prison.

4.61 Dr Sutton works very closely with a rehabilitation centre in the Lake District, however it’s very difficult during the admission process to keep the people with addictions in a safe place as described above. Dr Sutton reported that she would be willing to work with the Council on potential solutions to this issue moving forward.

4.62 **Site Visit to Ravenhead Foyer**

4.63 Ravenhead Foyer opened in 1997 and has 32 units for young people aged between 16 and 25 years old. The Foyer provides accommodation and support for young people in need of support for education, training and
employment and for those who are threatened with homelessness. It is operated by Your Housing Group and has 6 bedsits, 1 two bedroom flat and 25 one bedroom flats. Rent charges are paid direct by Housing Benefit and personal weekly charges are £5.07 for a bedsit, £6.05 for a one bedroom flat and £7.06 for the two bedroom flat. The flats are self-catering and there is currently a waiting list.

4.64 There are communal rooms and laundry facilities. Staff are on hand 24 hours a day and offer support, intensive training and social skills sessions to help the young people gain the life skills they require to move with their lives. The service is ‘direct access’ so young people can present at the reception area and apply to live there following a two tier interview process.

4.65 The ethos of the Ravenhead Foyer is that the young people are expected to attend college or training or be working. During their stay, they will learn the life skills required to live independently and build up resilience. There is also outreach support for up to another two years when a young person has moved on to ensure the support network remains in place during this transition.

4.66 Residents are allowed visitors and are allowed friends to stay over on a limited basis.

4.67 Staff commented as with the other service providers we have spoken to that young people have increasingly complex needs including mental health issues. Services provided by staff and partners ensure the best possible outcomes for residents. Staff also commented on how the service provision is ever changing due to the young people’s changing needs and changes in the benefits system.

4.68 The service ensures that the local community are involved in events such as coffee morning and celebration events.

4.69 Site Visit to Sherdley Lodge

4.70 The task group visited Sherdley Lodge which is emergency accommodation for 16 – 21 year olds, mainly catering for 16 – 18 year olds, both male and female delivered by SHAP. It has 10 bright and airy flats with basic kitchen and en-suite facilities. Residents receive breakfast and evening meal, packed lunches are provided for college students and personal charges are £36 per week. Accommodation charges are paid direct by Housing Benefits to the scheme and it is staffed 24/7.

4.71 The scheme is short term, up to 10 weeks, during this time intensive work is undertaken with the young person to find the next accommodation, which could be Ravenhead Foyer or Bluebell Court, sometimes bridges can be mended and the young person goes home.

4.72 Work is undertaken with the young person to enrol them on a college course or similar training scheme, open bank accounts and apply for any benefits to support them. A grant from Buttle UK can help with clothing or college equipment costs and is available to those in training or education and the staff help apply for this.
4.73 There is no waiting list for the scheme. Staff commented that there is a good range of supported living options in the borough with something to suit most people.

4.74 Staff also stated that young people’s needs have become increasingly more complex over the past few years, with drug, alcohol and mental health issues and in some cases Child Sexual Exploitation. Referrals had decreased due to the Bedroom Tax and parents wanting to try and keep young people at home. But if there are underlying issues this can only be sustained for so long and now there seems to be an increasing demand for the service due to breakdown of relationships.

4.75 Staff discussed that the multi-agency working in St.Helens is very good and that there are good working relationships between all the schemes in the borough. They also commented that the standard of accommodation makes a difference in that if the flats are modern, clean and bright it makes the residents aspire for better things.

4.76 One area they raised as their concern was Mental Health services in particular especially the transition between children’s and adult services.

4.77 Site Visit to Bluebell Court

4.78 The task group visited Bluebell Court which is a purpose built 20 unit facility for single females managed by Great Places Housing Group. All the flats are self-contained within a central court yard. Housing Benefit fund the accommodation charges and residents pay their own utility and food bills. There is a daily breakfast club for college students.

4.79 The service provides support for females only aged over 16 year olds, however the majority of service users are young females. The scheme can also provide grants for clothing and household equipment. The standard of accommodation is good and staff said that residents take pride in their flat which helps build their aspirations.

4.80 Average length of stay is between 6 and 12 months, however, residents can stay for up to two years. There is a good support network for residents and for a period of time when they have moved on into independent living.

4.81 There is a waiting list for the service and people are referred into the service via housing options or other local schemes. The scheme also takes self referrals.

4.82 It is staffed 24/7 with support sessions provided on a need basis. Staff commented that the more prevention services there are the less rough sleepers there should be in the future.

4.83 It was clear that again the borough’s services and schemes communicate with each other to obtain the best results for residents and that peer mentoring is often used at Bluebell Court. Again the staff said that the needs of young people are becoming more complex with mental health needs and drug and alcohol abuse.
4.84 The Whitechapel Centre – Liverpool

4.85 The task group members met with David Carter, Chief Executive of The Whitechapel Centre to find out more about the service and discuss the issue of homelessness at a sub-regional level.

4.86 The Whitechapel Centre has been established since 1975 in Liverpool and became an independent charity in 1991, working with some of the most vulnerable people in the community. Their mission hasn’t changed over the past 40 years but services have, to meet the changing needs of the service users;

To prevent and resolve homelessness, social exclusion and housing poverty by providing practical, realistic, tailored support so that each person can find a route out of homelessness, maintain a home and achieve their individual potential.

4.87 The Centre provides various services including cold weather provision, rough sleeper / street drinker outreach teams, ‘no second night out’, homeless resolution, hospital discharge, learning and enablement advice, resettlement support along with hostels, day centres, breakfast and meal services, all free to service users and some provided by treasured volunteers.

4.88 In 2014/2015 the Whitechapel Centre helped just over 2600 individuals, including supporting them into right accommodation, advice and support to prevent homelessness and responded to 484 different calls reporting rough sleeping. In the past four years these figures have increased by 42%. Support needs range from mental health problems (71%), drug misuse (61%), alcohol misuse (58%) and 50% having offending histories.

4.89 Outreach workers spend the majority of their time out on the streets working with people to gain their trust to enable help and advice to be given. They assist with problems they have and help find suitable accommodation where the person can live and feel safe.

4.90 It was discussed that changes to Welfare Reform have had the biggest effect on homelessness over the past few years and more recently people being sanctioned with regards to benefits and of course, the lack of employment.

4.91 The Whitechapel Centre is committed to helping people through a wide variety of services based on the individual person’s needs and requirements. Peoples needs have changed over the decades and services have been tailored to meet these changing demands with a most recent issue being legal highs and the devastating effects they can have on lives.

4.92 The Centre provides a valuable service to the cities vulnerable people, no one chooses to be homeless and the centre is there to help these people in their most desperate times.

4.93 The Centre is currently delivering a pilot Intensive Support Scheme to a small number of the most entrenched and hard to reach individuals in St Helens, as part of a wider scheme. Members will await the outcomes of this scheme with interest.
5.0 Conclusions

5.1 Homelessness is legally defined, and protections are given in England to certain people who are homeless. Under the legal definition, a person is considered homeless if they have no home in the UK or anywhere else in the world available to occupy. This includes people facing eviction, those living in temporary accommodation, squatters, rough sleepers, people at risk of violence, those housed in property potentially damaging to their health, and those who cannot afford their current accommodation.

5.2 In England, not all homeless people who meet the legal definition of homelessness will be provided with housing. Under the 1996 Housing Act, local authorities have a statutory duty to secure accommodation for households deemed to be homeless, eligible and in ‘priority need’. Most commonly, ‘priority need’ applies to adults with dependent children and/or an individual who would be considered vulnerable as defined by the Act.

5.3 The majority of single homeless people or homeless couples without children do not meet these criteria. Many single homeless people in St Helens reside in hostels, shelters and temporary accommodation whilst some people who are homeless live temporarily in squats, on the floors or sofas of friends and families, or sleep rough in concealed locations. These ‘hidden’ homeless people tend to be absent from both official statistics and public perception, but without support they comprise some of the most vulnerable members of society.

5.4 Housing supply has not kept pace with demand for many decades. In total just over 140,000 new houses were supplied in 2013-14 well below the estimated 250,000 required to keep up with demand. The welfare and housing systems have traditionally acted as a buffer between unemployment, poverty and homelessness. Government reforms, particularly cuts to Housing Benefit are eroding this safety net. Homelessness has risen and the housing shortage combined with welfare changes means that all forms of homelessness are likely to increase further despite signs of a recovering economy.

5.5 Whilst the Supporting People programme currently funds all of the accommodation based services in the borough, the actual programme budget available is reducing annually due to a reduction in the amount received from Central Government. Whilst services have been sustained during this time there is currently no additional funding available from the programme to support providers in meeting the wide range of needs of service users who often present to services as vulnerable and with complex needs. Providers have responded to this by working with the Council to remodel the services to focus on those who most require the support, however with further reductions anticipated and uncertainty about future national funding of rents for supported accommodation, it is a challenging time for the sector.

5.6 Changes to the conditionality and sanctions regime, Local Welfare Assistance, the Shared Accommodation rate and Local Housing Allowance are having a substantial impact on people who are homeless and those agencies which support them. During the timescale of this Task Group, the supported housing sector have raised serious concerns regarding the future
viability of the sector if the Government moves forward with its plans to remove the exemptions for specialist housing and to cap rents to Local Housing Allowance levels. At both a national and local level, this could have serious consequences, with many schemes becoming financially unviable. The Government has announced that it will make a decision on this matter in the Spring of 2016 and the Environmental, Regeneration, Housing, Culture and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Panel will be monitoring this situation at a local level.

5.7 Various advice and volunteer organisations in the borough are advising a high number of people on welfare benefits issues, mostly because claims are suspended without people knowing why, a change in a person's fit-to-work assessment and because of benefit sanctions.

5.8 Benefit sanctions for homeless people were a concern for all service providers we visited as well as delays in receiving Housing Benefit or delays due to changes in circumstances. In addition to this all accommodation projects were holding rent arrears from current clients.

5.9 The major changes that homelessness services identified included a decrease in provision for homeless people; limited suitable move-on accommodation; more service users with complex needs; and landlords not accepting tenants on Housing Benefit.

5.10 On reviewing this area and talking to service providers and users we found that a gap in services for homeless people in St Helens was the availability of affordable and/or suitable accommodation as well as suitable move-on accommodation for people with multiple or complex needs; lack of supported housing for people with pets and limited access to the private rented sector. Improvements in access to mental healthcare and services for substance misuse were also required.

5.11 We were pleased to hear and witness first-hand the excellent work already being undertaken in the borough by the homelessness service providers, namely the YMCA, Salvation Army, Pennington Lodge, Bluebell Court, SHAP Sherdley House, the Hope Centre and the commitment of Dr Jean Sutton and Pam Ryhs-Jones at Cornerstones Surgery. All are doing their very best day and night to assist homeless people in St Helens to access shelter and appropriate support services. Many of those we spoke to go far beyond the call of duty.

5.12 Since the writing of this report the Government has announced in the budget released on 16th March 2016 that extra funding will be made available to assist with homelessness. Nationally, £100 million will be used to help people move on from emergency hostels and refuges and £10 million will also be made available to support schemes like No Second Night Out.
6.0 Recommendations

1. That the cold weather provision and sit up service continue to be funded and operate in the borough as the emergency provision to prevent rough sleeping in the borough.

2. That partnership working between agencies continue to be improved and all agencies working with homeless people are made aware of the correct referral routes into services.

3. That any reductions to the Supporting People Grant be at an absolute minimum to allow these crucial services to continue to provide help to the most vulnerable in our borough.

4. That further work be undertaken around the growing issue of legal highs and that Public Health and the CCG explore what services are provided in the borough.

5. That the Environmental, Regeneration, Housing, Culture and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Panel receive regular updates on the structural changes being made at a national level that could impact the viability of these important schemes such as the implementation of the LHA cap to specialist accommodation.

6. That a multi-agency group address the recently emerging issues of begging and apparent rough sleeping in the town centre and report back to Panel on progress made.

7. That the Environmental, Regeneration, Housing, Culture and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Panel receive regular updates on the levels of rough sleepers and associated issues in the town centre.
# Homelessness and Rough Sleepers

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