



To:
Councillor Andrea Lewis
Cabinet Member for Homes and Energy

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Date 05 July 2018
Dyddiad:

Summary: This is a letter from the Homelessness Working Group to the Cabinet Member for Homes and Energy following the meeting of the Working Group on 12 June 2018.

Dear Cllr Lewis

The Homelessness Scrutiny Working Group met on 14 May when two sessions were held to take evidence from representatives of relevant organisations on what the Council can do to help homelessness in Swansea and in particular the Council's activities to manage homelessness, the current position, performance of relevant services, and challenges. The evidence gathered from this meeting was used to prepare questions to put to you and relevant officers at the second meeting of the Working Group on 12 June.

We would like to thank representatives from Swansea Homeless Sanctuary, Shelter Cymru, Crisis, Wallich Dinas Fechan, Caer Las, Zac's Place, Matthew's House, and the homelessness nurse for participating in the first meeting and you, Alex Williams, Jane Harries, Steve Porter, Anita Evans, Peter Fields from the Council and Gareth Bartley and Malcolm Jones of ABMU for attending the second meeting and answering questions. We appreciate everyone's engagement and input.

This letter provides you with feedback from these meetings.

At the meeting on 12 June you gave a short introduction on the Council's work on homelessness, stating that the Council will be working closely with a range of partners to develop the Homelessness Strategy. You informed Members that not all of the issues fall within your portfolio but that you will ensure that any conclusions and recommendations are passed on to the relevant Cabinet Member.

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY / TROSOLWG A CHRAFFU

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Whilst the Working Group found the meetings informative and interesting, a number of important issues were raised and discussed. The bullet points are evidence we heard in the first session.

Accommodation

- It is felt that there is a lack of specialist accommodation for people with complex needs (people with multiple conditions such as substance misuse and LD, or substance misuse and mental ill health, Alcohol related brain injury, etc.).
- The Wallich argue that a specialist residential project is needed as a priority for those clients who have become homeless due to the issues surrounding their mental health and/or substance misuse. These individuals are often very chaotic, and their needs deemed too high for a standard hostel.
- There is an increasing number of homeless people with complex/multiple needs including mental health. Many of these individuals don't have basic life skills and need continuous support over a long period of time. Often this support is not available. No one takes responsibility in the council or health board to assess and meet their needs.

We heard the Council has identified there is a need for greater specialist support; however, it is difficult to provide for all circumstances. The Strategy will look at this to try and deal with the most entrenched rough sleepers, and you hope that the development of housing first will start to address this issue. The working group believe that it is important that this lack of specialist accommodation is addressed as part of the work on the strategy and would like more information on what is planned.

- Concern that wet houses are no longer meeting the needs of alcoholics with many becoming incontinent and ending up blocking beds in hospitals. Is this model fit for purpose? Should we be looking at specialist 'wet residential care homes', employing care staff at our current wet projects or opening a Managed Alcohol programme?

We were told that Social Services do not think that this issue causes bed blocking in hospitals and that there are only a small number of people involved but that it can have a large impact on provision. Alcoholics in this group need to have a bespoke package. They are offered provision but do not always accept it. We heard the council is looking at reducing the number of evictions and better recording them so they can look at the causes. We would be grateful for more detail as to what this involves and the timescale for such measures to be put in place.

- Further gaps include hostels that take women, under 18s and under 21s and provision for EU citizens or people with no recourse to public funds. Shelter dealt with 100 of the latter category last year.
- Very little emergency accommodation for homeless couples. Private renting is the only route other than living on the street. Hostels and supported accommodation providers are very reluctant to accommodate couples in the same project.

The Working Group heard that the Homelessness Strategy will try to deal with all gaps in provision with this approach. We would like more information on specific proposals for these groups.

On the issue of 'no recourse to public funds' we were told that this is a real challenge for housing as these people fall outside the criteria for eligibility to council housing. The voluntary sector will be involved to assist with housing people from outside the UK who don't meet the criteria for council housing. This could be a bigger problem when we leave the EU. We would like some reassurance that the housing strategy will seek to address this problem.

- It is important that Swansea learns from any good practice being used by Councils elsewhere in relation to the Housing First approach. Are the witnesses aware of any?

The Working Group heard that Wales is not the first country to use this approach. It is being used in Scandinavia and there are mixed reviews of its success. It has also been introduced in Dublin. Officers have learnt is that it cannot be introduced on a piecemeal basis.

- There is concern that homeless people are not fully benefitting from housing association accommodation.

The Working Group heard that housing associations are part of the 'move on strategy'. They also house people themselves directly. As part of the strategy the Council is looking at strengthening the agreement with them. Housing First will also include private housing. We were reassured on this point.

- Caer Las argue that there are long waiting lists for access to move-on panel. There needs to be options from providers for bespoke packages for individuals.

The witnesses at the meeting did not believe that this was a problem. Nevertheless, as the perception exists we would like a more detailed assurance that Caer Las' concerns have been heard and that a dialogue has been opened up with them to deal with any issues they have identified.

- Concern about potential changes to legislation with the abolition of priority need and intentionality. This will have a major impact on temporary accommodation and provision of supported housing. How will the Council cope with this?

The Working Group heard that it will be very difficult and will come at a cost to Swansea. However, in Swansea we have quite good provision. It was stated that Shelter Cymru is keen to be involved with the abolition of priority need and intentionality.

- The Working Group felt Swansea needs a seamless way for people to access provision following concerns raised with us by some groups that they were unable to direct clients to suitable provision at certain times during the week.

The Working Group was informed that Housing Options is our 'Front Door'. A gap in provision has been identified on weekends and working with Wallich has helped to

close this gap. We heard the Council is looking at providing information to businesses so they know how to direct people to help. The challenging part is getting people to engage. We would like more information on what is planned and how this is being addressed in the draft housing strategy.

- There is concern about support for people with learning difficulties who have moved into housing.

We were informed that if people are assessed to have a social care need then social services could potentially support them. It is looked at on an individual basis. We would like more information as to how this group fit into the housing first project and what further support will be available for them once this is underway.

- Concern that some people who have moved into housing have issues with budgeting.

We heard that there is a tenancy support unit for council house tenants who can help them to manage their finances. We also heard that as part of the homelessness strategy, the Council is looking at providing transitional support and homes being ready for tenants to move in. There is a possibility that this could begin before the strategy is in place. We would like to take you up on your offer to provide more information on what is provided to social housing tenants and would be grateful if this could also encompass tenants of RSLs as well.

- Concern about how we identify the needs of people who do not have mental health issues but have never owned or rented a house before and do not know what to do.

We were informed that there is a procedure in place and that there are a number of ways that issues are picked up. People's needs are assessed and if needed they are referred to tenancy support services. We would like more information on what work is carried out to identify these vulnerable tenants, how that work is recorded and what actions are taken to put support in place. How are those actions monitored and what evaluation takes place of outcomes?

Social Service and safeguarding issues

- The thresholds for homeless and vulnerable adults being accepted for social services involvement are too high. Agencies work with some of the most complex and challenging individuals and yet it is almost impossible to get additional specialist support for them especially if they have not been in the system before.

Social Services stated that the mental health team is a secondary care service so there will be a gap in provision and confirmed that there is difficulty in accessing support for lower level need. We would like details on actions being put in place through the draft housing strategy and housing first, by social services and ABMU to ensure that this group do not miss out on much needed support.

- Dual diagnosis remains an issue. People with mental health needs are unable to access the Community Mental Health Team support because of drug dependency issues.

We heard that Social Services do provide provision but they agree that it may not be enough support. However ABMU confirmed there is going to be a Dual Diagnosis Strategy developed to map need across dual diagnosis as dealing with dual diagnosis is something that has not been done well in the past. We would like more detail on the implementation of this strategy including resources, timescale and proposed support.

ABMU were also asked if they have provision to add value to the Housing First Strategy. They confirmed that housing is key to their approach and strategy. If people have a dual diagnosis there can be a dual approach. They feel the important thing is how services are wrapped around people in Housing First.

- The homelessness nurse has identified that there is an issue with data sharing between health and social care.

We were told by Social Services that there is no issue with the sharing of data as far as they are concerned. Nevertheless, we felt that as the homelessness nurse works in a primary care environment that there may be difficulties in them accessing data on clients. We would like some reassurance that data sharing protocols enable primary care providers to work seamlessly with other agencies including the council and secondary care providers.

Health Service issues

- Hospital social work for people who are homeless or vulnerably housed is extremely limited. Homeless people in hospital should be assessed as quickly as possible to prevent delayed discharges.
- Within Swansea any client who wishes to be scripted must first self-refer to AADAS on either a Monday or Tuesday morning. To a chaotic drug user this is a time where they may be potentially begging etc to fund their first hit of the day. These referral hours need to be made more flexible and dramatically extended as clients who neither make it on a Monday or Tuesday must wait an entire week before the opportunity again arises. Once referred to AADAS there is approximately a six-month waiting list to be scripted. Many clients therefore do not even start the process. There is a 12 month wait to go into rehab.

Witnesses recognised that there is a problem and having more flexibility in the system to deal with people who are chaotic is something that will be explored in the future. We would like more detail as to what actions are being put in place to deal with this issue.

- Caer Las argue that services for people who are unable to access services due to dual diagnosis could be improved by Swansea having a network that brings together stakeholders from health (incl. mental health), D&A services and housing.

Witnesses confirmed that they hope there will be a joint approach taken with the Housing First project. We would like more information as to what that joint approach will entail.

- Concern that ABMU cuts will see the homeless nurse being axed.

ABMU confirmed that the homeless nurse post is secure and that they hope to extend the service. We are happy with that assurance.

Learning Disabilities

- There is an increasing number of homeless people with Borderline Learning Disabilities who have no access to Learning Disability services but are unable to read (or have limited reading and language skills), write, manage money or maintain a tenancy and are either homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

We would like information as to how this group will be supported as part of the draft housing strategy.

Housing First

- The Wallich argue that without the recruitment of additional experienced staff to provide intensive support then this pilot is doomed to fail. They say that there are still gaps in service provision which requires the full engagement of the health board specifically around mental health. Crisis argued that Housing First cannot be implemented in isolation but that it was not on the health board's agenda.

We were reassured by the health board representatives at the meeting that they are fully engaged with the housing first process but would like more detail on the work that is on-going to deliver a cross-agency service once housing first gets underway.

Ex-Offenders

- People are coming out of prison and have nowhere to go. What advice and support are being given to them before they are discharged? Is probation liaising with housing at appropriate staging points? What work is being carried out to maintain continuity of housing provision for Swansea residents from the start of their prison term to release?

The Working Group was informed that due to legislative changes ex-offenders are no longer priority need. However there is currently a prisoner pathway and there are resettlement teams in prisons in Wales. The challenge is to get ex-offenders into housing on the day of release from prison.

We also heard that Social Services have greater involvement with prisoners now as there is a statutory requirement. If prisoners are found to need social services support they will receive it when they leave prison.

We would like to see detailed statistics on the number of ex-prisoners who are released and return to Swansea. What percentage are referred to housing and social services and how quickly are they resettled and found accommodation?

Day Centre

- The loss of the St Matthew's day centre is felt particularly hard by agencies. Many argue for a one-stop seven-day service shop, opening long hours and which

accommodates all staff including outreach, Big Issue, physical and mental health professionals, Housing Options caseworkers, probation etc and which would benefit from regular drop-in sessions from Citizen's Advice, DWP and job centre coaches. They believe this building would include subsidised food, computers, lounge area, laundry facilities, showers, lockers etc. and could be used to develop suitable social enterprises to assist clients back into work.

We heard that good work is being done by Access Point but that they need better accommodation to provide better services. You implied that as part of the Homelessness Strategy you are looking to bring providers together under one roof and provide some of the day services previously available at St, Matthew's centre. You said that you recognise that there is a gap and the Council, with partners, is looking at what can be done. We would like more detail on these proposals together with some idea of timescale.

Gateway

- All the agencies argued that the Gateway system, which is the single central referral system that operates all the supported (hostel) accommodation in Swansea needs reform. They argue that the system is not being managed or utilised to its full potential. They would like to see an allocated 'Gateway Officer' appointed to oversee all hostel vacancies in Swansea.

Because some hostels allegedly 'cherry pick' clients leaving the most difficult clients to sit on the waiting or declined lists indefinitely, and because many hostels also require their own specialist referral forms to be completed as well as the gateway referral form, this creates a duplication of work and places an extra burden on the limited outreach services.

There was also an assertion that there is a lack of confidence/knowledge from frontline staff in using/managing Gateway effectively. This could be due to the turnover of staff in residential projects and needs to be addressed by training new recruits correctly.

We heard the Council recognises there is a problem and hope to put such an officer in place in the next few months. We would like some indication as to when that officer is likely to take up post.

Evictions from supported accommodation due to rent arrears

- Wallich argue that many of their clients have previously relied on Simple Payment or Post Office accounts for their benefit payments. However due to the closure of these types of accounts all supported accommodation providers are being urged to ensure that residents are being assisted to open bank accounts. Clients are frequently being evicted from supported accommodation due to service charge arrears.

Can the council work with these providers to assist them in setting up Direct Debit payments for these charges? This would assist the most vulnerable, those lacking

budgeting skills, and financially exploited members of our society to avoid losing their accommodation due to these arrears.

The Council is aware that it is an issue but that people have to take responsibility. However, they are looking at the number of evictions and the reasons for them. We would like more detail on the conclusions of this study.

Out-of-hours support

- Matthew's House argue that there does not appear to be any support at weekend and out-of-hours. They say that being open on Sunday evenings they are often caught in a volatile situation with people struggling with nothing. On many occasions they say they have been unable to access anything after 2pm on weekdays. Can the council provide clearer signposting for volunteers and charities to access support out-of-hours?

We were given confirmation that the rough sleeper's team provision has been extended and there is therefore support at the weekend. An offer was made by the operations manager of community housing to meet with Matthew's House to discuss the matter further if they still think that there is a gap. We would appreciate more detail as to the hours this provision now works and how it is being advertised to various third sector agencies working with rough sleepers.

Co-ordination

- There are many small groups that have established themselves on Facebook etc. and want to help homeless people. However, these are not co-ordinated or monitored. Do we have the capacity to try and tackle this?

The Council says that for assistance people should contact Housing Options in the first instance, then Access Point and then the rough sleeper's team. Could the council better publicise these arrangements for these groups?

City Centre

- A number of agencies told us that the City Rangers and Police have acted in an aggressive way towards homeless people and even outreach workers seeking to help them. As well as homeless people, Big Issue sellers have also been moved on by Rangers. Can the council provide training for the Rangers to act in a more sympathetic way? Can they liaise with the police on this issue?

It was confirmed that a City Centre Street Vulnerability Group has been set up by the police. It has only just started but it will look at the issues. We would like some details as to the instructions and training issued to City Rangers as to how to deal with rough sleepers and beggars in the City Centre. We would also like details of any discussions that the council has had with the police on this issue.

Following the meeting, we discussed progress and made the following conclusions:

1. The Working Group appreciates what is being done by everyone involved but feels that the threads need to come together – a clear pathway is needed.
2. The Working Group feels that it is important for the Council to take a strategic viewpoint and that is why Housing First is so important.
3. Scrutiny will need to do pre-decision on the Homelessness Strategy before it goes to Cabinet. The issues highlighted by this Working Group will need to be taken into account when developing the Strategy.

Your Response

We hope you find this letter useful and informative. We are interested in hearing your thoughts about the issues raised and would ask that you respond by Thursday 26 July 2018.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter Black', written in a cursive style.

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