

FENLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL EXPLANATORY STATEMENT

25 June, 2020

On Wednesday 24 June, Fenland District Council publicised a press release highlighting the good work relating to rough sleepers: Life after lockdown: Rough sleepers rehoused during pandemic find settled homes

We have seen a number of inaccurate, negative, posts on social media and thought it would be helpful to publish the accurate picture below:

Do you have a homeless strategy? Who did you consult with?

We have an approved Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy that was signed off by Cabinet in June 2020. As part of this strategy process, workshops and consultation were carried out with all partners and organisations in the district to ensure the strategy benefitted all homeless people.

You have helped house 51 people, why couldn't you have done this before?

Due to Government guidance, all Councils were told to place rough sleepers and those in night shelters in self-contained accommodation or placed in B&B due to the pandemic. The hotels and B&B's are usually open for the general public, however due to COVID-19 these providers opened their doors for us to be able to accommodate our vulnerable clients and keep them safe. These spaces would not usually be available because the accommodation would be catering to paying customers – this enabled us to help both the hotel industry and the homeless simultaneously.

This is an opportunity for our rough sleeping clients that we have not had before. In addition, the Council has committed over £200,000 over a 3 month period to find emergency self-contained accommodation for the rough sleepers and clients in the night shelter (with no guarantee of getting the funding back). We were determined to do what is best for our clients whatever the cost in a public emergency. There is a huge cost to the work that has been done, but when there is a global emergency you have to pay these costs. However, sustainability is always going to be a challenge and much of this has been made possible due to Government funding – not normally present outside of a national emergency.

Why was the number quoted in the press release higher than the rough sleeper count?

The number increased as the clients who were staying in the night shelter could no longer stay there due to COVID-19, as the Government forced all night shelters to close. This number also included those who were staying in Cold Weather Emergency Provision (which was due to end 31/03/20) meaning in total we had a further 28 clients to accommodate on top of those rough sleeping. Since the pandemic began we have had 6 new clients approach us as they had lost their accommodation with friends and were found rough sleeping.

What about these empty homes? What's being done with these?

The Council committed funding for an officer to work with owners of properties which had been empty for a longer period than 6 months. Since December 2019 the officer has directly helped 42 long term properties to be brought back into use (end of May 2020). These are private homes not in the ownership of the Council.

Can't you just house homeless people in these empty homes?

The owners of the homes make their own decisions with regard to the future occupancy. The council does not have a housing stock or maintenance team or the funding to modernise homes in private ownership. The officer will encourage owners to think of private rental at which point there may be opportunity to place a household threatened with homelessness.

Are FDC only using Private landlords and why?

FDC are working closely with all local supported living providers, social housing as well as the private rented sector. The Council has built strong relationships with all types of housing providers and therefore we use this opportunity for our clients to get in to accommodation with the support they need. As many of our rough sleepers are single we look to utilise Houses in Multiple Occupation and affordable flats based on an affordable rate to ensure they can sustain their accommodation. The worst thing would be to place in accommodation that they could not afford. FDC have built a good relationship with private landlords however alternative housing such as supported living and social housing are just as heavily relied on. We don't decide who Landlords or Housing Association house, that decision lays with them.

What's housing first?

Housing First is a project that offers accommodation and an intense level of support for our most vulnerable, entrenched members of society. The aim of the service is to provide multiply disadvantaged individuals who have a repeat history of homelessness and rough sleeping with self-contained accommodation and intensive tenancy support to prevent them from returning to the streets. This enables them to recover, stabilise, manage any previous chaotic lifestyle, begin to develop or rebuild their independent living skills, sustain their own tenancy, develop their support networks and develop and live an independent and fulfilling life.

This is a ground breaking new service which is being trialled; we cannot judge how well it works or how much we should invest in it in future until we see how successful the results are at the end of the trial.

Does placing an individual in private rented accommodation mean the council relinquish a requirement to provide support?

No not at all. We will develop a bespoke support package for each rough sleeper to be delivered whatever the type of accommodation they are in. We do not want the tenancy to fail, however it is fair to say that some cases are extremely complex and sometimes tenancies do break down. When this happens we do look for alternatives.

Do we look for a home and forget the reasons for the homelessness?

No, fundamental to our work is getting to the root cause to the homelessness. That is why we have built a network of support e.g Drug and Alcohol outreach services, GP registration support, building access to mental health services. The home loss is the symptom not the root cause and that is what we specialise in to understand the root cause and take interventions to support the rough sleeper to address the needs he or she has. In fact, one of the reasons we got a mental health worker in the day hub was because we recognised the importance of mental health to this issue.

What if the rough sleeper has been found to be “intentionally homeless” and / or banned from a hostel?

We will still offer support. For example our Outreach Worker will offer them an appointment at the hub and encourage the rough sleeper to address the issues that led to the loss of a home that was determined to be deliberate or the issue that led to eviction from the temporary accommodation. If another organisation working with the rough sleeper can encourage them to access the hub we can then start to develop the action plan to address the problem.

Why do other organisations have to pay deposits from their own funds?

If any supporting organisation have access to accommodation that the council does not they can refer the rough sleeper to the Council. We will then look at the needs of the rough sleeper referred. We will then develop a support package for the individual and then if the accommodation found by a support organisation is sustainable and meets legal standards we will pay the deposit rather than that organisation having to use their own funds.

Does everyone succeed with no setbacks?

Unfortunately not, just this week a resident receiving support became abusive and aggressive to support staff and caused damage to his accommodation and even after an opportunity to apologise which could have led to the individual being allowed to remain, he continued to be aggressive. We have sourced alternative accommodation for that individual and will continue to work with him to recognise the importance of his behaviour if accommodation is to be sustained.

Most importantly we need organisations who may be contacted by such a rough sleeper to let the Council know so we can continue to try and work with the individual. Our homelessness strategy works because we have a fantastic team of organisations wanting to help and committed to work together, not blame and publicise when things don't go to plan which happens sometimes. In those circumstances the concern is raised in an appropriate manner and the partnership work towards getting a shared way forward for the concern.

If FDC have housed a homeless person and the tenancy fails, does it fall back on voluntary groups to step in?

No. FDC have statutory duties under the housing act and as such if people are aware a tenancy has failed they should call 01354 654321 and ask for the Housing Option Team to get the individual the correct help.

Can't we just all work together with all these Charities and Organisations with one big co-ordinated pot?

FDC works with every Organisation and Charity in different capacities. Homelessness is a very complex issue and so we must ensure we work with accredited partners with a proven track record of expertise and professionalism when commissioning services. We cannot simply entrust vulnerable peoples' care into the hands of anyone, no matter how well intentioned they may be.

It is very unhelpful when people who we would hope would be working with us to tackle this serious issue instead chose to make inaccurate social media statements without understanding the issues.

We continue to urge organisations supporting rough sleepers to encourage them to refer themselves to the Council on 01354 654321 or email housingadvice@fenland.gov.uk . Unfortunately this does not always happen which leads to a time delay to get an opportunity to work with the individual towards a solution.

Furthermore, a very small number of cases choose to not engage with any service. As we do not have the power to compel them to engage there will always be a challenge to house some individuals.