

## Services Manager's Report

This year has seen the opening of the refurbished Dean St premises and the development of a programme of day time activities within the project.

Service users moved in to the new project in September 2010 and the official opening by Her Grace the Duchess of Northumberland was on the 8<sup>th</sup> October. The official opening was attended by current and past service users as well as project staff, Trustees old and new, representatives from local agencies and Northumberland County Council. Bill Carr, area manager for Homes and Communities Agency which provided the Places of Change grant for the refurbishment was also present. The opening was well covered by the local media with reports appearing in the Hexham Courant and The Journal and the opening featured on the Homes and Communities Agency website and on a number of Social Housing websites.



Councillor Simon Reed, Her Grace the Duchess of Northumberland and Bill Carr Area Manager HCA are welcomed to Dean St by Lorna Ballantyne.

The Duchess was shown around the project by Colin Dixon, who was living in the project at that time. Colin spent some time talking with the Duchess about his time with StopGap and what led him to require our support. He has since moved into a flat of his own.



Colin and the Duchess sampling freshly prepared lunch in the new kitchen.

Staffs from the Opus project, based at the Hexham Tans Vegetarian restaurant, were here on the day to demonstrate meal preparation in the new kitchen. Operated by the Northumberland, Tyne & Wear NHS Trust the Opus project helps people with mental health needs back into employment. It is joint working with projects such as this that we wish to develop.

The Duchess unveiled a commemorative plaque ably assisted by Lorna Ballantyne, an ex-service user of the old Dean St project. Lorna was very keen to speak to people about her experience of living at the project and the support that StopGap had given her. Quoted in Northern Housing, Lorna commented.

“StopGap was like a home and the staff were like family to me. Now I have a job working in a care home and I also volunteer with Tynedale FM community radio station, something I could never of dreamt of doing a couple of years ago”



Speaking later Bill Carr commented; “Homelessness affects people in all sorts of areas and a small well-planned project like StopGap can make a real difference in a rural town like Hexham, helping people to stay within their own community. Our role is all about helping councils and communities to tackle local needs and this is a great example of that approach in action.”

Increased staffing has been crucial in delivering the new programme of support and activities that we have been developing since the opening and we are confident that really can prove to be a place of change for those needing our services. Thanks to a one off grant from NCC we were able to recruit two additional posts, an additional TSW post and a new Housing Support Co-ordinator position. The latter post has two aspects to it; one to help people access the new choice based lettings system, and the second to promote and facilitate the use of the Dean St project during day time hours. This has proved to be a great success and has had a real positive impact on the numbers moving on to a home of their own.

As always the key to any improvement to the service we provide is the professionalism and commitment of the staff team. We are keen to ensure that staff are supported to do what can be at times a very challenging job. We have consistently reviewed pay and conditions and, within the constraints of an increasingly challenging financial environment, increased basic salary payments.

Training and staff development are also important elements in both retaining good staff and providing a quality service. As part of our commitment to staff development all existing staff have successfully completed NVQ level 3 in Health and Social Care qualification and new staff will, if required, begin this training. Training to cover basics of First Aid, Health and Safety and Food Hygiene have been delivered.

Thanks are due to all staff for their dedication and commitment to the service during the year; Tenant Support Workers; Raymond Robson, Kizzy Rudd, Rosalind Christer, Dawn Gardner and Paul Sloane; Team Managers Helen Newton and Lorna Boyd and Housing Support Co-ordinator Catherine Ambrose.

During the rebuilding of the project we had been using two properties on Haugh Lane in Hexham as a decant facility. Leased from Northumberland County Council, this accommodation had allowed us to continue to provide a service during the rebuild period. We were successful in our discussions with NCC regarding the continued leasing of the property to provide a four bed move-on facility for Dean St. In the long term the site is needed for redevelopment but in the short term we are able to provide a really useful semi-independent living project. Staffing has been funded via the NCC Homelessness Grant and the office has provided a base for the Team Manager as well as the support member of staff. Service users have a license agreement and a key to the front door and their room. This service has remained at capacity for the majority of the year and has proved to be a much needed addition to our services. We now need to look at finding a more secure alternative site.

We have continued to develop our working relationship with the new Northumberland County Council and their support via the Homelessness Grant and the continued lease of Haugh Lane property testifies to the productive nature of that relationship. Negotiations with all departments have been very positive, particularly in the crucial area of Housing Benefit awarding and payment. The team at the Homefinder office in Hexham and the Vulnerable Persons Officer, Elayne Bristow have all helped to ensure the best possible support for referral to and move-on from our services. StopGap is an important part of the councils' Homelessness Strategy and we need to continue our development to ensure that we have a service that is able to meet the future needs of homeless and vulnerable people.

## **Service Reports**

### **Dean St.**

Since opening in September and with the Housing Support Co-ordinator in post we have been able to provide in-house training and support to access and register on the NCC Choice Based Lettings (CBL) system. This has resulted in 63% of referrals to our homelessness project successfully moving on to their own accommodation. In the previous 12 months this percentage was 25%

Training programmes delivered include:

- City & Guilds Power Learning Qualification – essential life skills such as budgeting and finance, healthy living, effective communication.
- Steps to Work – Delivered by A4E
- Capacity Building – Delivered by Five Lamps. Budgeting/debt management
- Counselling – Available by appointment each Wednesday
- Inspire Life Coaching – Changing ways of thinking to maximise opportunity.
- Employability Training – Delivery by Dave Gardner one day each week
- Basic Food Hygiene – Food Safety Level1 certification
- Basic First Aid
- H & S Training – Safety in the home
- Access to the Choice Based Letting system with support on a daily basis and support around the production of a CV and applications for employment and volunteering opportunities.

Below are just a few examples of the difficulties faced by those who need our service and the help we have been able to offer them. *In order to ensure confidentiality no name or gender is noted.*

- A 21 year old young person who became homeless after relationship breakdown. Registered on the CBL system and supported to bid each week. Also contact made with NCC Homefinder re: housing status and need for a two bed property to allow home visits by young child. A CV was completed and attended the in house training 'Steps to Work'. Has recently moved into own two bed house in Hexham and is the full time carer of young child.
- 30 year old, homeless due to marriage breakdown. Support needs around substantial debt and alcohol abuse. Personal situation also led to mental health issues, depression and low self-esteem. Registered on the CBL system, attended in-house counselling and confidence building with Inspire. CV completed and supported to start a volunteer placement. Referral made to Escape. Has now gained in confidence and is applying for employment that better reflects ability. Has secured accommodation through CBL and now moved into own home.
- Young person referred by Prudhoe Youth Team. Victim of domestic abuse and had to leave the family home. Had been registered with NCC for accommodation for over 12 months but had had no offers in that time. Very low self-esteem. Supported to bid on the CBL system and Homefinder contacted re: housing status. Also attended in-house counselling service and Power Learning course. Within two weeks was offered a property and has successfully moved-on and is supported via Tenant Support Service.
- Referred via NCC. Young person in private rented accommodation at risk of homelessness due to unemployment. Had been working as a teacher but relationship breakdown led to depression and unemployment. Registered with CBL and supported to bid each week. Attended confidence building and motivational training at the Dean St project. A CV was produced and a volunteer placement at the Crisis Homelessness Centre was arranged. Has now moved into own accommodation offered through CBL and continues to work as a volunteer.
- Middle aged person homeless due to domestic abuse. Issues around debt and alcohol abuse. Had been registered for housing for a considerable time but had not been offered a property as required a 3 bed house to allow children to visit. Referral made to Escape and supported to attend. Also attended in-house healthy living courses which looked at the effects of alcohol on the body. Also basic living skills course and debt management. Access to property via CBL was problematic due to previous rent arrears so the private rented sector was viewed. An application was made to a bond scheme operated via Escape and this resulted in the securing of a 3 bed property in Hexham. Has now moved-on and is being supported via the Tenant Support Service.

## **Haugh Lane**

Haugh lane has worked well as a semi-independent supported housing service and as a move-on from Dean St. Priority is to look at an alternative property in the Hexham area to replicate this facility in view of the lack of long term security of tenure.

## **Tenant Support Service.**

The capacity of this service is eleven, and has been running at capacity throughout the year, six people left the service after a successful period of support and six people came on to the service. The majority of new referrals have been those moving on from either Dean St or Haugh Lane.

## **Conclusion.**

This has been a very rewarding year for StopGap, particularly with the opening of the new Dean St service and its success to date. We need to continue the development of day time training and activity programmes. Existing funding will go some way to financing this but by no means will it provide the income we need. We need to look at alternative funding for not only the day time activity in Dean St but for our services generally.

As can be seen from the funding breakdown at present we are heavily reliant on rental income and Supporting People grant to fund our services. Both these funding streams are under threat. SP as a separate government department no longer exists and we are looking at funding cuts of up to 10% in the coming year. The County Council must make savings to all its budgets, not least Housing Benefit. Increased HB levels are not likely to reflect the percentage increases in utility charges and new legislation relating to unemployment and incapacity benefit may affect levels awarded to individuals. This can increase the level of personal contribution we require from our service users which can then lead to an increase in rent arrears.

Broadening our funding base along with service development is a difficult balancing act but a challenge we must face if we are to remain in business and continue to help homeless and vulnerable people, as we have done since 1999.

Andrew Sanders – Services Manager