

Reconnections Policy

1. Background

- 1.1 Temporary accommodation, and in particular short-term supported accommodation in Darlington is a finite resource. There is evidence to suggest that many of the temporary accommodation places available are accessed by other local authorities for homeless applicants who do not have a local connection with Darlington. In some instances, this may be appropriate, to protect the safety and well being of vulnerable homeless applicants and their families who are unable to remain in their own local authority area.
- 1.2 The impact of unplanned referrals or those made without prior notice to the respective local authority and temporary accommodation provider, can increase the likelihood of placement failure, leading to related problems such as;
 - 1.2.1. Reduction in the ability to accommodate homeless applicants and their families who do have an established local connection with Darlington.
 - 1.2.2. Some homeless applicants and their families are disengaged from essential homelessness support services contributing towards repeat homelessness.
 - 1.2.3. Some homeless applicants and their families are disengaged from essential health and educational services leading to poor health and lower educational attainment.
 - 1.2.4. Some homeless applicants and their families become disengaged from support networks provided by family and friends.
 - 1.2.5. Reduction in the ability to provide appropriate “move on” accommodation for homeless applicants with an established local connection to Darlington.
 - 1.2.6. The statutory local authority services in Darlington become responsible for a disproportionate cost of providing temporary accommodation, Supporting People and welfare benefits services.
 - 1.2.7. Reduction in the ability of local statutory services to plan, risk assess and prepare for homeless applicants and their families who may exhibit “challenging”, disruptive or anti-social behaviour in a new and unfamiliar environment.
 - 1.2.8. Alteration of the relationship with existing temporary accommodation and support providers by operating in isolation without an agreed and robust referral and eligibility criteria.

2. Context

- 2.1 In 2008, Darlington Borough Council carried out a strategic review of the homeless services funded by the Supporting People programme. To enable more needs data to be collected to inform the future commissioning of services and to better manage referrals into homeless hostels, a Single Point of Access (SPA) has been established. This is a partnership between Darlington Borough Council Housing Options team and First Stop, a local charity dedicated to working with homeless people to improve their life chance. The SPA will work with all people who access either service because they are homeless or are at risk of being homeless.
- 2.2 The SPA will look at the holistic needs of the customer, refer them on to specialist agencies (where appropriate), and work to prevent homelessness, or refer the customer onto a homeless hostel. Options will be given to the customer, based on a comprehensive assessment of need. The SPA will work with the customer to determine which route is most appropriate for them, once all the options have been explored.

3. Purpose

- 3.1 In 2007/2008, over a third of the people who accessed hostel bed spaces in Darlington were from out of the Local Authority area. Darlington is easily accessible and has a number of amenities that are not available in other surrounding areas. Accommodation is often sought and found within one of the 4 hostels funded by Supporting People, even when such accommodation and support is not required or does not meet the needs of the individual.
- 3.2 Hostel bed spaces are then taken up by people who do not necessarily have the appropriate need to be there. This results in bed blocking and those, who do have a need which can be met through hostel accommodation, have to be found accommodation in inappropriate bed and breakfast arrangements where support is not available. This can lead to any other support needs becoming exacerbated. It is widely recognised that support networks, whether formal or informal, increase the opportunity for people to move away from homelessness.
- 3.3 This policy does not seek to prevent people from accessing short-term supported accommodation in Darlington. Priority will always be given to those who present with the greatest need. However, where services are at capacity, or near to capacity, priority will then be given to those who also have a local connection to Darlington. However, the recent government rough sleeping strategy (*'No-one left out - a new goal to end rough sleeping'*) recognises that some people move areas because there are not enough resources in the area they want to live in, and every area should have a full range of appropriate housing and support services. Due to the benefits of being accommodated close to an existing support network, it is imperative that we work with people (and the housing options services in their local area) who do not have a local connection to give them the opportunity of being reconnected to their local area. In these cases, accommodation (with support and access to services if required) will be sought back in the area where the local connection and support networks exist.

4. Definition of a local connection

4.1 This policy also does not seek to override any statutory framework, but sets out to apply the same criteria for local connection first introduced by the Homeless Persons Act 1977:

4.1.1 because he or she is, or was in the past, normally resident there, and that residence was of his or her own choice; or

4.1.2 because he or she is employed there; or

4.1.3 because of family associations there; or

4.1.4 because of any special circumstances.

4.2 For the purpose of 4.1.1 above, a person can be classed as normally resident if they resided in an area for 6 out of the previous 12 months or 3 out of the previous 5 years. With regard to 4.1.2 the person should actually work in the district: it would not be sufficient that his or her employer's head office was located there. For the purpose of 4.1.3, family associations normally arise where an applicant or person who might reasonably be expected to reside with the applicant, has parents, adult children or brothers and sisters who have been resident in the district for period of at least 2 years, in settled housing. Family associations can extend beyond these categories such as stepparents, grandparents, grandchildren, aunts or uncles provided there are sufficiently close links in the form of frequent contact, commitment or dependency. Family associations may also include unmarried couples, provided that the relationship is sufficiently enduring. With regard to 4.1.4 this will be determined at the discretion of the SPA.

5. Appropriateness of reconnecting people

5.1 There will be some people for whom reconnection may not appropriate. These could be people who have suffered some form of abuse in their local area, have anti-social behavior orders and cannot live in their home town or would be at risk of recrimination if they returned. If this is the case, all available information will be collated by the SPA from other agencies such as, police, probation, previous authorities housing option teams and recorded on their file.

5.2 If a person contacts the SPA, who does not have a local connection to Darlington (as defined by 4.1 above), and where the circumstances described in 5.1 do not apply, and who does not want to consider the reconnection option, they will still be offered a hostel bed space to prevent homelessness. This will be dependent on whether their needs and risk assessment identified that hostel accommodation is appropriate for them and the availability of that accommodation. However, they will be advised that it may impact on their ability to access move on accommodation in Darlington or to access long term services.

6. The reconnection process

6.1 Every person who accesses the SPA with a housing and/or support will receive a full needs and risk assessment. This assessment has been developed by Darlington Borough Council in partnership with support providers and First Stop. Its purpose is to determine what needs, if any, the customer has and which services would be most appropriate for them.

6.2 The assessment will also determine whether the person has a local connection. If no connection can be established then the SPA officer will work with the person to determine where they do have connections and links. If the person would prefer to be accommodated back in their local area, or the option of accessing services in Darlington is currently not available the SPA officer will:

- Contact the home housing options team in the person's local area to determine whether appropriate accommodation and/or support is available to meet the needs identified in the needs and risk assessment.
- Establish a contact within the home housing options team with which the person can liaise directly.
- Work with the home housing options team to move the person, in a planned way, onto the appropriate accommodation with or without support. This could include liaising with a support provider if necessary.
- Seek to house the person in hostel accommodation (if appropriate) in Darlington if accommodation is not available immediately, but their move on progress will be tracked very closely.
 - The hostel provider will then have a influential role in working with the person to prepare them for their move on in a planned way, and to re-establish any links, formal or informal they had with their local area.
 - The hostel provider will then take responsibility for the liaison with the home housing options team.
 - The SPA will require weekly updates as it is envisaged that the wait for accommodation should not be exceed one month.
 - If the move does not happen within the month, the SPA will ask the hostel provider for details of what liaison has taken place with the home authority's housing options team.
- Ensure, where appropriate that the person is able to travel safely back to their local area.
- Advise the home authority that the person in en route.
- Contact the home authority to ensure that the person has arrived safely.

7. Outcomes

- 7.1 The impact of applying the reconnections policy is likely to result in positive outcomes for people accessing services through the SPA, such as:
- 7.1.1. People will have more choice and control over their lives.
 - 7.1.2. The number of homeless applicants and their families requiring “move on” accommodation and specialist support services in Darlington will reduce.
 - 7.1.3. The number of people registered for, and, seeking permanent accommodation in Darlington, will be reduced.
 - 7.1.4. People will be supported to move back to areas where they have existing support networks in a planned way.
 - 7.1.5. Bed spaces in hostels will not be utilised unnecessarily.
 - 7.1.6. The number of people accessing inappropriate support services should reduce providing a more stable and sustainable environment thus reducing the likelihood of repeat homelessness.
 - 7.1.7. Neighbouring authorities will be encouraged to look at the existing provision they have for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Relationships between Darlington Borough Council and neighbouring authorities can be strengthened as we work together to ensure people are housed and supported in the most appropriate way to meet their needs. Good practice can be shared.
 - 7.1.8. Joint commissioning of services with other authorities can also be explored, which will enable people to enjoy a continuity of service if they do cross local authority borders.
- 7.2 The aim of this policy is not to deny people from accessing homeless services in Darlington, but we have to ensure that people are able to maximise their potential. This means giving them options and enabling them to be supported in their home town if that is the choice they make, or where resources are limited in Darlington. Data collected from the SPA will be used to inform our neighbouring authorities of our findings and will ensure robust and responsive homeless services are created in Darlington and its surrounding areas.

8. Monitoring

- 8.1 The effectiveness of this policy will be monitored through data collected by Darlington Borough Council and First Stop, through the SPA.
- 8.2 Data will be collected, in partnership with the hostel providers where necessary, on the number of people successfully reconnected to their local area.

- 8.3 Data will be collected, in partnership with hostel providers on the number of people who do not have a local connection, who do not wish to be reconnected. Close monitoring will be done to ascertain where these people will move on to after their time at the hostel comes to an end.
- 8.4 Regular feedback will be obtained from the SPA and hostel providers to undertake a formal review of this policy, on an annual basis. More regular, ongoing monitoring will be undertaken of this policy during the first 12 months, following its implementation.