

Gloucestershire Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) Review January 2015.

What is SWEP?

The aim of the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol for the County, is to ensure no one dies on the streets due to extreme weather. Extreme weather is generally identified as a temperature forecast of zero degrees or lower for three days. If there is a forecast of zero degrees in a series of sub-zero nights then a common sense approach will be taken. It is up to each District to call SWEP.

A revised SWEP Protocol for 2014/15 from 1st Nov -31st March was produced by the Districts.

Aim.

The aim of this review is to highlight how SWEP operates, to assess any weaknesses, issues of concern, etc., to recommend actions or flag up issues that put lives at risk. It is meant as a discussion document to move forward and find resolutions together before the next cold spell. We all fully support SWEP and all those involved and are really worried/saddened that it isn't working as it should. We look forward to continue to work together to improve its effectiveness and efficiency. We thank all the SWEP members being statutory agency's, Districts and County for being open and transparent with us. The agency's are the Police, GEAR, P3, and Social Services Emergency Duty Team (EDT). The County Homeless Coordinator (CHC), funded by the Districts and led by CotswoldDC, coordinates.

Background.

SWEP was called on:-

1. Monday 29th December 2014 by Gloucester City Council. This was in the middle of the Christmas period when a number of key statutory agency's personnel were on leave.
2. Friday 16th January, in force for Friday, Saturday, Sunday. Called off Monday (Forest Thursday).

Executive Summary.

- We are really pleased that SWEP is in place but it is not working. There is a serious problem in evenings, at night and at weekends.
- There is general confusion. There appears to be no one in overall control.
- There was no one searching for rough sleepers. It is hoped that SWEP is not in danger of becoming just a paper exercise.
- The Council's instruction to ring EDT out of office hours in the 'Report a Rough Sleeper' contact card, does not work.
- EDT were generally good but problems arose possibly because they are social workers not housing officers.
- There are concerns that the homeless are expected to make their own travel arrangements when they may well be in ill health due to the extreme cold and wet, chaotic, vulnerable or have mental health issues. SWEP allows for payment of transportation costs if there is a lack of funds.
- Premier Inns are contracted to provide accommodation but are not complying.
- There are major concerns and implications re new 'hotel legislation'. Must be challenged.
- Health & wellbeing is a concern. Use of A&E should be avoided by timely interventions.
- There should be a follow up of individuals by the support services.
- The Outreach Workers Service should be 24/7.
- Additional SWEP accommodation should be sought.
- Emergency winter accommodation should be considered as a safety net for SWEP.
- Is there a link following the closure of the Day Centre?
- What is happening in the other Districts? Review to be expanded??

Call 1.

Members of the Faith Group were present on the night of the 29th December 2015. There was evidence that some agency's were not aware that SWEP had been called or when asked knowing what it was. Investigation found that there were various reasons for this which will be explained latter.

It was left to our members to help rough sleepers find suitable accommodation and were on the streets of Gloucester until after midnight. This was possible in liaison with the EDT who helped find accommodation at Cheltenham's Premier Inn although there were problems in finding transport, we could find no one who knew what to do. We have grave concerns when we learnt that SWEP had 'burnt its bridges' at Gloucester's Premier Inn's. We found Margaret at the EDT was very helpful.

What happened?

- There was confusion in the operation of SWEP.
- It seems that a number of key personnel at the agency's were on leave or there had been changes in personnel. It is imperative, especially during major holiday periods, at night or weekends, that agency's allow for this.
- The position of CHC was vacant. We feel that this was a major weakness in being able to coordinate the SWEP response and in the accuracy of protocol data.
- The protocol did not have full cover for appropriate contacts at the agency's and hence was a major weakness in this area. It was apparent that GEAR had forwarded a number of appropriate new contacts but these were not included in the protocol. (A revised and updated SWEP Protocol has been issued, 'CURRENT SWEP 14-15 Revised v3 Jan15').
- There was an error in the email addresses for the Police contact John Pumphy. They did not receive notice. This has now been rectified.
- It is said that an old protocol was used with out of date contacts etc
- There was no one from the Homeless Team 'on the ground' in the evening or night.
- There was a lack of awareness and some confusion among personnel in the agency's that night. The police, both the control room and officers on the street in Gloucester weren't aware SWEP had been called. Paula Jones, Internal Communications Advisor, was directed to Michelle Wheatley at the Council who explained the situation and was very helpful. We liaised further with Paula who, to her great credit, subsequently made important changes to improve awareness amongst staff and improve its response and now has, what we believe, to be full cover. Oddly the police in Cheltenham seemed to be aware as they bought a client along to P3's drop-in for assistance. We have also spoken to P3, as they (Dean at Gloucester) was also not aware that SWEP had been called. On speaking to P3 the confusion seems to be that notice was not passed onto him at the time and with the rider that it is the responsibility of EDT to house people and cascade down to all other agencies involved.
- It is imperative that agency's have appropriate cover during holiday periods, at weekends and at night.

Call 2.

Having flagged up the major concerns and issues with the first SWEP Protocol, SWEP 2014-2015 FINAL, we thank the City Council particularly and applaud them for their urgent action in revising the SWEP protocol with updated contacts etc., This revised protocol was in place when SWEP was called on Friday 16th January.

Again our members were on the ground in the evening, at night and during the weekend and the following is a summary to date of their feedback and reports:-

None of the homeless individuals, when asked by Faith & VCS members on soup runs, knew SWEP had been called on Friday or Saturday.

The EDT are a major player in SWEP. On this occasion the person spoken to at EDT was rude and unhelpful and questioned why the Faith and VCS groups were going out looking for rough sleepers? we spoke to Margaret who again was helpful. We thank her for her patience and understanding. A favourite quote from the EDT is as follows..."I'm sorry, but I took the matter to the Homeless Team and they said it is a conflict with hotel legislation, if the homeless have no address they can't stay in a Premier Inn Hotel or any other hotel".

Reply...."but if they had an address they wouldn't need to stay in a Premier Inn Hotel, they wouldn't really be homeless if they had an address".

The position seems to be, no address....no hotel accommodation, no identification id....no hotel. This new stance is a nonsense.

Example: Phoned EDT at 6pm and had to wait until EDT rang back at 9pm. There was 1 family room that 2 people could share of either sex when partitioned, that was available in Coney Hill, being Jubilee House. However, had to wait till midnight for a return call as EDT were going out to do assessments. By then there were no buses running to Coney Hill and no transport available to get people there or back. The homeless individual was told he would have to make his own way there and to get out by 6am the following morning. There was no support or follow up help offered from other support services. There was obviously no way he could get there without help with transportation but this help was not offered. This is of grave concern when last winter, every effort was made to transport homeless individuals to safe accommodation even being bussed out of the County. We now wonder what has changed from last winters SWEP. SWEP policy states that transport costs can be payable/refundable, if there is a lack of funds but EDT seemed to be unaware of this. There seems to be general confusion on this that must be resolved as a matter of urgency.

EDT and the Homeless Team say that the SWEP Protocol is now in conflict with Hotel legislation. As long as they (EDT) phone Premier Inn to find accommodation and they say no, which they will do, then their duty is covered and they don't have to do anymore, i.e the person stays homeless on the street in the freezing cold at risk and is failed by SWEP. We would like to know from the Homeless Team what this hotel legislation is as referred to when it didn't apply last winter.

What Happened?

- There was still confusion and perceived lack of joined up working.
- 9 individuals were found sleeping rough on Saturday night.
- The protocol didn't work. No rough sleepers knew SWEP had been called and there had been no help when we questioned those on the street.
- EDT and the Homeless Team seemed to be blaming the new hotel legislation. It was worrying to hear that EDT were using this excuse to limit their responsibility to source alternative accommodation. It is peoples lives we are dealing with here.
- The out of hours process we have been told to follow by the County Council, by being signposted to and to contact the EDT, is not working.

- The Outreach Workers service is not a contracted 7 day 24 hour service. So any individuals found in the evening, night or weekend have to be reported the next day or Monday and hence may stay homeless for one or two nights in the freezing cold and at risk.
- P3 in the evening or night are unable to accept homeless individuals due to lone working issues with need to undertake assessments to assess suitability. If intoxicated etc., can't be accepted. If the homeless person is accompanied by support worker or other person then may be able to do an assessment. P3 themselves are usually full but do hold a list of B&B accommodation. However, B&B is not suitable for some individuals particularly those who are chaotic, entrenched, with mental health issues, which is a growing problem; they need appropriate sheltered / supervised accommodation. It is said that The Dorchester B&B Hotel used by the LA and agency's is not safe for vulnerable females.
- There was no one from the Homeless Team around to coordinate, organise assistance or arrange transportation in the evening, night or weekend.
- Had conversation with the police on Saturday night but didn't seem to know SWEP had been called and sadly, didn't offer to help. Due to the budget cuts, do the police now have adequate resources to deal with rough sleepers? Is it now a matter of priority's?
- We understand that EDT and the police have said that they had no problems when the night shelter was open. However, there are concerns that the night shelter was used/abused, just to dump individuals from off the street.
- There are major problems in the evening, at night and over weekends.
- The role of the Faith and VCS in the recently set up 'soup runs' during 'out of hours' periods in the week, can be seen as critical in helping rough sleepers to survive when SWEP isn't working.

The statutory agency's and LA were invited to contribute to this review on the 19th January. We realise this was very short notice and as yet there has been no response.

Summary and Recommendations.

We were really pleased that the perceived weaknesses in the first protocol were rectified. However, on the second occasion there was again a failure of the SWEP Protocol.

The main issue is that SWEP can be called, people notified etc., but if no one then actually goes out looking for those sleeping rough to tell them that there is an emergency provision in place for them then concerns that it is in danger of becoming a pointless exercise; it mustn't become just a tick box exercise. We therefore must conclude, that at present, we sadly have little faith in the protocol and are gravely concerned that lives are being put at risk. We urgently ask that all concerned sit down and help to address this concern.

We are confused at to why this failure has come about when SWEP last winter operated really well and homeless persons were accommodated which included transporting individual's out of the County when necessary. We feel that there may be a link with the closure of the Day Centre and this needs to be explored further. First liaise with the previous CHC as to why? We look forward to working with the new CHC.

1. The confusion as to who does what, who is responsible, etc., must be resolved by the LA and agency's to prevent deaths on the street. No one actually goes out looking for rough sleepers 'out of hours'; what happens in the day time? The Faith Group and VCS cannot be expected to act as the only group on the ground searching for and helping to get the homeless housed 'out of hours' without backing and support. The LA & statutory agency's have a duty. To better understand each other it is suggested that:-

- a) A representative from the Faith and VCS goes out with an Outreach Worker for a day.
- b) That the Outreach Workers and Statutory Agency's go and visit where the homeless, those with addictions, mental health issues, the sick and disadvantaged can be found, such as at the Salvation Army on Mondays; Wednesdays at City Mission, Park Street; Fridays at The Galley, Mariners.
- c) That the EDT is invited to a meeting of the Faith & VCS Homeless Forum.
- d) Representatives from the Faith & VCS are invited to go on training/awareness days with the statutory agency's and Homeless Team at the City Council.

2. Notification of SWEP is a concern. How this works and is cascaded should be assessed.

3. As the Faith Group/ Project Beacon/City Mission/VCS....were the only ones on the ground outside office hours in liaison with EDT, it would be advisable to make them aware when SWEP is called so they can advocate etc.

4. The Outreach Workers contracted service is limited and doesn't operate outside office hours. This is seen as a big failing with SWEP and for the Councils NSNO. We recommend liaison with Homeless Link to open discussions and discuss options with the view of finding how the Faith and VCS can support the Councils SWEP.

The new contracts for the Outreach Service must address this concern and should be a 7 day 24 hour service.

5. The failure of Premier Inns to comply with their contract with the Local Authority must be questioned and challenged. Urgent action needs to be taken to resolve this as this is critical as a major accommodation resource for SWEP's Outreach Workers and EDT.

6. We recommend that a meeting be held with the LA, agency's, providers, Commissioners, Health, Faith Group, VCS, etc., at least once a year following the new protocol for that year. Relying on just email for communication is unsafe unless strict checks are in place.

7. It is recommended that a trial exercise is undertaken to check on response and find and resolve weaknesses.

8. Agency's must ensure that staff are aware and trained and are fully covered for worst case scenario's.

9. There is no emergency accommodation resource, as a safety net, in accordance with the governments NSNO initiative. We are aware of conversations in the past with Homeless Link where the use of 'crash pads' were discussed. All party's should explore this together. (See 12).

10. Due to the lack of suitable accommodation, appropriate accommodation should be sourced for Gloucester in a central area to prevent future major difficulty and problems with transport.

11. Due to the lack of suitable accommodation, it is suggested that the LA opens discussions with the Faith Groups and the VCS to look at the possibility of sourcing additional accommodation for SWEP.

12. The need for emergency winter accommodation, in accordance with NSNO, should be considered by the Faith Groups and the VCS in conjunction with and in liaison with the County, Districts and statutory agency's, resolving concerns and issues through an agreed joint Strategy and Business Plan. It is understood from Ella that initial argument against this by the LA, was the previous success of SWEP. It is suggested that Homeless Link be contacted for advice.

13. Health & Wellbeing is a concern. Is there a process in place? If not, it is recommended that discussions should be held with SWEP members, the Homeless Health Team, Public Health, NHS as to the process when individuals have or may have health concerns or injuries to alleviate visits to A&E, address inequalities, bring off the street, etc . This should be shared with all party's.

14. Who is the 'Homeless Team' and who has ultimate responsibility for SWEP?

We would be pleased to discuss further any of the issues raised in this Review with those involved or help set up a joint liaison and coordination meeting.

We reiterate that this Review is meant as a discussion document to move forward and find resolutions together before the next cold spell. We do not want anyone to get into a blame game scenario.

The priority of all must be to fully support SWEP and all those involved and what it stands forto ensure no one dies on the streets due to extreme weather.

Finally, we are all really worried/saddened that it isn't working as it should for the most vulnerable in our society who desperately need help and have nothing, maybe through no fault of their own.