



HOUSING COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 27 January 2021

REPORT TITLE:	HOMELESSNESS IN WIRRAL AND THE IMPACT OF COVID-19
REPORT OF:	DIRECTOR OF REGENERATION & PLACE

REPORT SUMMARY

This report seeks to provide members of the Housing Committee with an overview of the issue of homelessness within the borough, and the measures in place to prevent and respond to it.

The report describes the significant impact the Covid-19 pandemic has had on the Council's housing team and its commissioned services that respond to homelessness and sets out proposed actions to respond moving forward.

RECOMMENDATION/S

The Housing Committee is recommended to:

- 1.** Note the content of the report and the excellent work undertaken on partnership between the Council, local communities, voluntary and charitable agencies and Housing Providers that have responded to homelessness throughout the pandemic.
- 2.** Endorse the Wirral Triage Assessment process and the Next Steps Programme to provide a longer-term response to the pressures arising from Covid-19.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 To ensure that Members are fully briefed as to the Council's statutory obligations under homeless legislation and the actions taken and being taken, to effectively respond to the increased demand on homelessness services as a consequence of the Covid-19 Pandemic.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 No other options have been considered.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 The term 'homelessness' usually evokes an image of someone sleeping rough in shop doorways or on the streets, however homelessness can take many forms and is often not visible or apparent to the rest of the population. Other types of homelessness can include people living in homeless accommodation services (hostels), households that are threatened with eviction, those living in poor quality housing or those fleeing domestic violence.
- 3.2 Homelessness rarely has a single cause or explanation; it is most frequently the result of a combination of factors (*such as poverty, housing shortages, vulnerability through poor physical/mental health, substance misuse etc*). However, there will be some households for whom homelessness occurred solely as a consequence of one single catalyst, such as the loss of employment or a bereavement. Indeed, a significant number of, predominantly single, homeless people in Wirral present with multiple support needs and, by their nature, are defined as 'complex cases'. These cases can experience great barriers to accessing, and sustaining accommodation, and frequently require more intensive support and intervention.
- 3.3 Homeless legislation places several duties on a Local Authority in terms of its response to homelessness and the actions taken will differ depending on which category a household may fall under. These duties were significantly expanded upon with the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) in April 2018 and which fundamentally changed how Councils were required to respond to homelessness. **Appendix 1** sets out in the duties and stages under the Homelessness legislation.
- 3.4 In order to meet its obligations under these duties as outlined in Appendix 1, the Council deploys a range of measures, or 'toolkit', to tackle homelessness which, in common with all English Councils, fall under either 'Prevention' or 'Relief' activities. A (non-exhaustive) list of these measures include:
- **The provision of financial assistance** which could be used to repay rent arrears to prevent a household from being evicted, or the payment of a deposit / rent-in-advance to enable a homeless household to secure a tenancy within the private-rented sector.

- **Assistance to secure Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)** which is an extra payment that can be awarded to households that are struggling to pay their rent.
- **Negotiation and/or Mediation with third parties** such as Landlords or family members to prevent someone from becoming homeless.
- **The provision of debt and budgeting advice** to enable households to better manage their money.
- **The availability of 'Floating Support' Services** who provide practical housing-related support to prevent households from becoming homeless and who can help develop the skills necessary to sustain housing in the future.

4.0 HOMELESSNESS DURING THE PANDEMIC

- 4.1 Nationally, the homelessness response to the first COVID-19 lockdown resulted in a massive mobilisation at short notice to cease traditional night shelters arising from the UK Government's '*Everyone In*' Campaign to provide emergency accommodation for everyone rough sleeping, at risk of rough sleeping (regardless of whether they met the normal legal duty), This has been an enormous undertaking and an intervention that has been recognised nationally as having saved lives, with infection rates and deaths amongst people experiencing homelessness at extremely low levels, when compared internationally.
- 4.2 Locally, the pandemic has resulted in a paradigm shift in the way that we respond to homelessness in the borough, and which has led to both opportunities and challenges to the Council and its partners.
- 4.3 In terms of simple presentations to the Council's Housing Options Service, it is estimated the total for this financial year will be the same as the previous year of **4174** enquiries. This has, however, to be put in context in that during this timeframe for a significant period no evictions have been allowed to take place which would, normally, constitute a significant proportion, if not the majority, of approaches to the service. Consequently, it is envisaged that there will be an increase in enquiries when court activity and associated evictions resume.
- 4.4 Similarly, within this context, the impact of the pandemic and the subsequent instruction to secure accommodation for all homeless households has led to an increased dimension of complexity to the enquiries received by the service. In particular, for single homeless people that would, under legislation, not be considered as 'priority need', and who would have typically been directed to night shelter provision, have been and continue to be dealt with by Housing Options Team through a triage system, in addition to the households who do meet legal thresholds. Due to the increased pressures and the instruction from Government to house everyone during lockdown regardless of any legal duty, a change in systems was required to ensure that 24 hour staffed hostel and support provision remained accessible to those individuals who required more intensive support/ had chaotic behaviour. Those without more intensive support needs were accommodated in hotel and B&B accommodation. This led to a significant increase in workload for the Housing Options Service and required other housing staff to support the response. This has further been compounded by:

- Landlords within the Private-Rented Sector have become increasingly risk averse in offering tenancies during a period of legislative change linked to protection from evictions under the Coronavirus Act.
 - Properties have remained 'void' for longer periods due to supply chain issues i.e. contractors and/or materials not being readily available.
 - The closure of commercial hotels and B&B which, historically, have been used to house homeless people occasionally, has meant that the Service has had to identify alternative forms of temporary accommodation, during a time of scarcity.
- 4.5 These factors will be further compounded by the fact that, traditionally, the Housing Options Service experiences a higher volume of enquiries in the final quarter of the financial year due to families struggling financially following Christmas.
- 4.6 Despite the challenges presented, the Housing Options Service has prevented or relieved **847** households from homelessness as at Q2 of 2020/21 and it is likely that, by the end of this financial year, the service will achieve a comparable figure, if not exceed the numbers delivered in 2019/20. This is, in part, due to enhanced partnership working with Registered Providers to directly match homeless households with vacant accommodation and the increased supply of new supported accommodation.
- 4.7 As in previous years, the main reasons for homelessness of those approaching the Council's Housing Options Service continue to be:
- Families (or friends) no longer willing to accommodate.
 - Domestic Abuse
 - End of a tenancy within the private rented sector.
- 4.8 While still remaining as one of the most significant reasons for homelessness, the numbers of households that have become homeless as a result of the ending of a private tenancy have reduced dramatically. This is due to the previously mentioned measures implemented in the Coronavirus Act awarding a level of protection from eviction and the cessation of associated court activity during the lockdown period.
- 4.9 A point to note is the high level of family (or friends) no longer able /or willing to accommodate, which officers report was commonly linked to shielding/ protecting those vulnerable to Covid-19. However, in those cases where a family member was being asked to leave due to factors such as overcrowding, then officers from the Housing Options Team would encourage these households to stay wherever it was appropriate and safe to do so.
- 4.10 Prior to the lockdown, the Council identified that there were 13 individuals actively rough sleeping across the borough, with a further 30 people using the various communal 'night-shelter' settings. In line with the Government's mandate to get 'Everybody In' and their instruction that communal shelters could no longer be used due to the transmissibility of Covid-19 and the inherent difficulties in implementing and enforcing social distancing requirements in these locations, the Council had to facilitate alternative housing options for this cohort.

- 4.11 Both the closure of key resources in the form of Night Shelters in parallel with the requirement to secure accommodation for every homeless household irrespective of whether they would fall under normal duties owed, created a uniquely challenging situation. In response, and to ensure that all Rough Sleepers (including those new to the streets) were identified and an appropriate housing solution established as quickly as possible, the Council implemented a daily 'triage' system with providers of local homeless accommodation services.
- 4.12 This triage system has proven to be so effective that the Housing Options Service has made 811 short and/or long-term housing placements (*n.b. This does not refer to individuals, as a number of individuals may have been placed on more than one occasion*) including supported housing, private and social and Bed & Breakfast accommodation. This approach has for the first time ever, resulted in Wirral being able to report **0** (zero) rough sleepers during the annual count we are required to undertake each year against previous reported figures in 2019 and 2018 being 6 and 16 respectively). As such, it is proposed the Housing Options Service continue with this daily triage system as a permanent response in the future.
- 4.13 Under usual conditions the Council will, typically, have around 30 homeless households placed in Temporary Accommodation / B&B at any one time. However, at the height of the pandemic in the Summer, over 120 people were placed in this type of accommodation and there continues to be a constant flow of people into this provision. Through partnership work, the Council was able to arrange for all people with support needs placed in B&B accommodation, to be visited regularly by Outreach Support Workers to ensure that their support needs continued to be addressed during this period of temporary accommodation.
- 4.14 In May, the Property Pool Plus Allocation Policy in place across the Merseyside Sub-Region was suspended, as is permitted in exceptional circumstances and all properties that would be normally advertised through this system were made available to the respective Merseyside Councils, on a nominations-only basis for homeless households. This was to enable both people who had no, or minimal support needs to go straight into general needs accommodation or to move people from supported living schemes into general needs to create increased access for these more complex households who needed intensive support. For Wirral, this has resulted in **120** people being matched for, and accommodated in social housing with a further **30** people being assisted to secure accommodation in the private-rented sector.
- 4.15 Previously, access to Homeless Accommodation Services (Hostels, Supported Housing etc) was facilitated through the Liverpool City Region online referral management system 'MainStay'. Essentially, this system would enable single homeless people to have their support needs assessed and then 'match' them with the homeless accommodation service most appropriate to their needs. In 2019/20, the MainStay System recorded that 1010 individuals were registered and assessed by MainStay services for accommodation and, of this number, 790 placements were made within these services.
- 4.16 As a consequence of the pandemic, MainStay's automated 'matching' function was suspended and all people accessing homeless accommodation services were assessed and placed via the aforementioned daily triage facility. Since the start of

the pandemic (2020/21 Q1 & Q2) 281 individuals have accessed homeless accommodation services.

- 4.17 The achievements and actions taken by Housing to respond and deliver homelessness services since the start of the pandemic has been successfully undertaken with the support of key partner organisations. There has been a significant collaboration to meet the challenges faced and the work has been supported through various teams and agencies. A list of those external agencies who have worked directly with the housing team with regards to the provision of accommodation and related support services are listed in **Appendix 2** of this report. The Head of Housing would like to formally record to the Committee that the response and services delivered, as outlined in this report, would not have been possible without the concerted effort and support of the housing staff and those agencies in being flexible and adaptable to changes.

5.0 NEXT STEPS ACCOMMODATION PROJECT

- 5.1 In order for Local Authorities to meet the additional requirements placed on them through the 'Everybody In' Programme and the recognition that accommodation to house some of those complex cases is not available, Government unveiled the 'Next Steps Accommodation Project' (NSAP).
- 5.2 The NSAP comprised two national funding streams: short term accommodation with support (£105m) and long-term move on accommodation (£161m of a 4-year total of £433m), making a total of £266m during the 2020/21 financial year for which Local Authorities were invited to submit a co-produced bid with MCHLG Advisers to support both a short and long-term response for responding to rough sleeping and to ensure those who were housed under the lockdown continued to be supported.
- 5.2 Over the Autumn period, Wirral Council received notification of being successful in its bid submission for the full amount of **£1.2m**, representing one of the largest awards in the North of England. Wirral's submission proposed the following:
- The reconfiguration of several homeless hostels and use of units within additional supported schemes to provide 11 additional 'Assessment Beds' for rough sleepers. This will include a fully disabled unit and units which have level access facilities to be flexible to support anyone with mobility issues.
 - Support for the development of a Social Lettings Agency, to increase access to private rented accommodation, administered by Wirral Churches Ark Project.
 - Enhancing and expanding Support Staff Teams to work with adults with complex needs.
 - The reconfiguration and refurbishment of new and existing supported accommodation to provide 36 units of long-term housing options for homeless people.
 - Request for the funding gap for non-recoverable Housing Benefit payments for B&B placements arising from the 'Everyone in' Programme.

6.0 COLD WEATHER FUNDING

- 6.1 In October 2020, a National £10 million Cold Weather Fund was announced to support Councils in offering accommodation to people at risk of rough sleeping during the winter by helping to provide more self-contained accommodation.
- 6.2 Wirral was successful in its request for funding and received approval for £81,050 to further support the range of accommodation solutions for homeless people during the cold weather period, and also to ensure the availability of temporary accommodation arising from the permanent refurbishment of hostel provision (funded through NSAP) thereby enabling the installation of self-contained 'Assessment Beds' for Rough Sleepers, alongside their mainstream hostel beds.

7.0 ROUGH SLEEPER INITIATIVE FUNDING

- 7.1 For 2020/21, the Council was successful in securing Government 'Rough Sleeper Initiative' funding of **£306,345**. This award has enabled the development of a 'mobile' (frequently referred to as Outreach) service which provides purposeful, proactive, and persistent support that aims to move Rough Sleepers from the streets into permanent accommodation. This service, known as the 'Rough Sleeper Initiative Outreach Service', is provided by the YMCA and works throughout the night to encourage rough sleepers to access appropriate accommodation. A range of tools are used through this programme and flexibility on use for funding to engage with rough sleepers who ordinarily will not engage with services. During the pandemic MCHLG gave even greater flexibility on the use of this fund and allowed authorities to repurpose elements of the programme. As such to respond to the 'Everyone In' Campaign, outreach workers have also been utilised to undertake assessment for those people who were placed in temporary accommodation and also to provide outreach support in a different way and enhance existing support services.
- 7.2 The work of the Rough Sleeper Initiative Team receives oversight from a Steering Group, which meets on a monthly basis and comprises representatives from; the Council (Public Health & Social Care), Merseyside Police, Homeless Agencies in the Community and Voluntary Sectors and a representative from MHCLG. The remit of the Steering Group encompasses both operational and strategic aspects; from identifying potential housing pathways and solutions for individual rough sleepers to gathering the intelligence base for future funding requests.

8.0 LONGER-TERM IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON HOMELESSNESS

- 8.1 Nationally, there has been a continued new flow of people experiencing homelessness since the start of the pandemic. Locally, during the initial stage of the pandemic, the increase appeared to be largely driven by those people that were already homeless, such as those who were 'sofa-surfing' or living in night shelters, on the streets and transient accommodation, and who became more visible as the pandemic forced them to approach services. Although exerting additional pressure on the Housing Service, this situation has provided the Council with an opportunity to engage with a cohort that is, traditionally, reluctant to engage and has provided the basis for meaningful change to the homeless landscape in Wirral. The needs of this cohort have largely been met through adapting existing service arrangements and

will continue to be met through the additional provision that will be enabled by our successful bid for NSAP funding.

- 8.2 Locally, it is envisaged that the profile of households approaching homeless service provision will shift to those that may not have previously used homeless services but who may already have been on the borderline of affordability pressures prior to the pandemic and as a result of low and/or reduced income, and for whom furloughing, or unemployment has exacerbated an already precarious situation.
- 8.3 Given the above, and at the time of writing this report no further extensions have been announced on the Government’s plan to hold off court activity and associated evictions, it is likely that, in the future, the Council’s Housing Options Service and other, related, areas will begin to experience further increases in presentations amongst those households threatened with, or at risk of becoming homeless.
- 8.4 However, despite these unique challenges presented by the pandemic, the Housing Options Service and its partners including Registered providers, other statutory agencies and voluntary and community sectors have worked collaboratively to enhance local partnership working arrangements which has led to a step-change in how support is provided to people experiencing multiple disadvantages and, as such, it is critical to build upon this momentum.

9.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 The delivery of the Housing Options Service is supported by a Council annual controllable Budget of **£984,000**. In addition to this a range of grants have been secured during 2020/2021 through both bid for grant programmes or via Government allocations to support the Council in delivering additional homeless services within Wirral. These total **£1,946,587** and include:

Flexible Homeless Grant / New Burdens Funding	£301,969
Rough Sleeper Initiative Funding	£306,345
Cold Weather Provision	£81,050
Next Steps Accommodation Programme	£1,257,223*

*NEXT STEPS ACCOMMODATION PROGRAMME FUNDING BREAKDOWN	
Funding for short-term projects 2020/21 (Capital & Revenue)	£811,363
Funding for long-term projects 2021/22 – 2023/2024 (Revenue only)	£445, 860
TOTAL	£1,257, 223

- 9.2 Wirral has just received notification that the annual award for Flexible Homeless Grant for 2021/22 has been increased to **£513,579**. Officers are in the process of identifying programmes and measures to support those who present as homeless or are at risk to mitigate pressures.

10.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1 The provision of a homeless service is a statutory requirement under the Housing Act 1996, the Homelessness Act 2002, and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

11.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

11.1 The shift to remote working as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic has led to changes in operational arrangements for the Council's Housing Options Service, most notably the cessation of an outward-facing emergency appointment system. However there has been over the past few years a channel shift in respect enabling a range of options for people to send in any information including uploading information, use of text messaging services etc. to enable the Council to be more responsive.

11.2 The pressures currently facing the Housing Options Service and with the introduction of the new triage system introduced during the first lockdown and the intention to continue to operate this has meant the Council has appointed two additional team members for a period of 12 months. This is being funded via grant which has been secured as detailed in this report. It is intended that this will be monitored as we emerge from the pandemic with a view to seeing if this requires any longer-term resource requirement. As this process is evaluated any implications regarding impacts on any Council budgets would be the subject of a further report for Members' consideration.

12.0 RELEVANT RISKS

12.1 The Everyone In campaign enabled a reduction in the risk to vulnerable people rough sleeping or at risk of rough sleeping to be delivered. The continuation of the triage assessment process continues to mitigate risks from the pandemic and other health risks to be reduced for some of the most vulnerable in society. Failure to continue with this approach will result in the potential that rough sleeping numbers will increase again in the borough and the Council will not be able to meet its strategic aspirations as set out in the Homelessness Strategy.

12.2 Any future withdrawal of current annual grant allocations to Wirral to support responses may result in a pressure to the Council's Budget. This would be the subject of a separate report to Policy and Resources Committee.

13.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

13.1 The triage process and next steps programme approach was undertaken in conjunction with engagement and collaboration with a wide range of partners. The Council has a Rough Sleeper Steering Group which includes an MCHLG Adviser and other key providers of services in Wirral, this group will continue to meet and engage on approaches to respond to ensuring that no one has the need to sleep rough in Wirral.

14.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

14.1 The work of the Housing Options Service seeks to respond to homelessness and rough sleeping amongst our most vulnerable residents who are subject to social

exclusion and equalities issues. The programme of works being proposed is to have Triage Assessment beds include for a fully adapted wheelchair user unit and all others will have level access showers to ensure that the accommodation can be flexible to meet the needs of any homeless person who may have disabilities/mobility issues.

- 14.2 The equality issues associated with the delivery of the Housing Options Service is assessed through both the 2016-2026 Housing Strategy (which can be found at the link below) and the 2020-2025 Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy (which can be found in Appendix 3)

15.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 15.1 The additional units of homeless accommodation obtained through the successful bid for NSAP funding will result in a reduction in the number of people placed in temporary accommodation such as hotels and B&B's that are dispersed across the borough. This will result in the need for fewer car and public transport journeys for visiting support staff. Given that the average petrol car on the road in the UK produces the equivalent of 180g of CO² for every kilometre, and with diesel cars producing 173g per kilometre, then fewer car journeys will lead to a reduced carbon footprint associated with this travel.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Summary of Statutory Homeless duties

Appendix 2 – List of external agencies

Appendix 3 – Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy 2020-25 Equality Impact Assessment

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Next Steps Accommodation Project Guidance and Allocations

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/next-steps-accommodation-programme-guidance-and-proposal-templates>

Housing Strategy 2016-2026 Equality Impact Assessment

<https://www.wirral.gov.uk/sites/default/files/all/communities%20and%20neighbourhoods/Equality%20Impact%20Assessments/EIA%20since%202014/Regeneration%20and%20environment/Housing%20Strategy%202016%20-%202026%20EIA.pdf>

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date