

**Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Tuesday, 2 July 2019**

REPORT TITLE:	Homelessness in Wirral
REPORT OF:	Director – Delivery Services

REPORT SUMMARY

This report provides members with an overview of homeless services in Wirral, statistical data and an update in regards to the implementation of new legislation, the Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) which commenced in April 2018. The HRA placed new and significant responsibilities on local authorities to prevent and relieve homelessness, and changed how services are delivered to households who approach the Council for assistance each year.

The delivery of an effective homeless response directly contributes to a principal theme of the '*Wirral Council Plan: A 2020 Vision*' of ensuring the availability of "*Good quality housing that meets the needs of residents*" by assisting homeless people and families to secure permanent accommodation that is appropriate to their individual circumstances. It also assists with the achievement of a number of the other pledges that are set out in the Council's vision.

This matter affects all Wards within the Borough.

RECOMMENDATION/S

That Members note:

- 1) The statistics and content of this report as it relates to homelessness in Wirral.
- 2) The services offered by the Council to prevent and respond to homelessness.
- 3) The additional work planned to effectively prevent and respond to homelessness in the future.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 The Homeless Reduction Act 2017 (HRA), applied significant changes, when implemented in April 2018. The HRA sets out a framework and implements several new duties, which have now been in place for just over 12 months.
- 1.2 This report provides members with a summary of homelessness within the Borough, update about the Council's response to the HRA, and a statistical overview of homelessness since the changes came into effect in April 2018. Appendix 1 of this report provides further detailed information.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 No other options have been considered.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 The term 'homelessness' conjures up an image of someone sleeping rough on the streets, however homelessness has many forms and is often hidden. The Council works with households who require housing advice, and those who are threatened with or currently homeless. Forms of homelessness, amongst others, includes rough sleepers, people residing in hostels, households threatened with eviction, or those fleeing domestic violence.
- 3.2 Homelessness rarely has a single cause or explanation; it is often seen to be a symptom of wider underlying problems, for example those who suffer from physical or mental ill health, poverty, substance misuse or have an offending background. A number of homeless people in Wirral present with multiple support needs and as such are classed as 'complex cases'. Such cases experience great barriers to accessing, and sustaining accommodation, and require more intensive support and intervention.
- 3.3 The actions and duties placed on the Council to respond to homelessness differ in response to the circumstances of the applicant. Individual circumstances are explored and a personal approach developed to resolving their housing need. Whilst some households may only require basic housing advice, or will directly access a Council commissioned service, others will be awarded a statutory homeless duty for assistance.

4.0 HOMELESS REDUCTION ACT

- 4.1 The Homeless Reduction Act (HRA) 2017 is the most significant reform of homeless legislation to take place in over 10 years. The new legislation extends

homeless services significantly, leading to a greater number of households who can make a 'homeless application' which then triggers the statutory homeless process and a 'decision' by the Council as to what, if any legal duties are owed.

4.2 The HRA was implemented swiftly, and Government acknowledge that the impact was great on local authorities who would need to deliver new legislation, IT systems, and performance management frameworks whilst also remodelling services. As such Government allocated Wirral provide New Burdens funding of £200,639 to cover some of the additional resource requirements for a period of three years. One off grant funding of £9202 was also provided in 2018 to purchase bespoke IT systems.

4.3 The extension of homeless legislation, under the HRA, implements five key changes which directly impact on how services are delivered locally. This includes:

Improved advice and information to prevent homelessness

4.4 The Council has always had a duty to provide basic housing advice to all, however the HRA specifies that advice must be tailored to meet the needs of particular vulnerable groups in the local authority area and have a 'person centred' approach to developing solutions to an individual's circumstances, i.e. through the provision of personal housing advice.

Extension of statutory timeframes

4.5 Under the HRA a household is considered to be 'threatened with homelessness' if they are likely to become homeless within 56 days, as opposed to a previous time frame of 28 days, thus providing greater opportunities for early homeless prevention interventions.

New statutory duties to 'prevent' and 'relieve' homelessness

4.6 The reform redefined the legislation into three duty areas, and homeless applicants may find that they progress through each duty during their homeless experience until their housing need is resolved. A key drive of the HRA was to widen and improve services to single homeless households for whom the majority would not have previously been awarded a duty. Duties include 'prevention', 'relief' and at a later stage in the process a 'main duty'.

- **Prevention Duty** –awarded to households threatened with homelessness within 56 day. I.e. when a household has been served a Notice to Quit.
- **Relief Duty** – awarded where the applicant is assessed as being homeless and the duty includes offering 'temporary accommodation' for vulnerable households. I.e. households evicted from accommodation.

- **Main Duty** – the main duty cannot commence until the end of the relief duty period, and refers to the established homeless duties formed before the HRA reform and include decisions such as ‘intentionally homeless’ or ‘main housing duty’. Under the new duties ‘intentionality’ does not form a part of the early homeless decision process as these households are assisted at prevention and relief stage. Households deemed to be ‘intentionally’ homeless receive a reduced duty of advice and a period of up to 28 days in temporary accommodation.

Duties to complete assessments and issue Personalised Housing Plans

- 4.7 The legislation promotes that homeless applicants take responsibility for resolving their homeless situation, with support from the Council. For those households awarded a duty, the HRA requires the Council to complete a full assessment of a households circumstances, needs and reasons for homelessness. The assessment forms the basis of a jointly agreed Personal Housing Plan (PHP) which contains actions for both the Council and the applicant to complete to resolve their housing need. I.e. actively seeking private rented accommodation

New ‘Duty to Refer’ responsibility

- 4.8 The new ‘Duty to Refer’, implemented on the 1st October 2018, places a legal duty on specified public bodies¹ to refer households they believe to be homeless (or threatened with) to the Council. The Government is keen to see that all public bodies, such as hospitals, prisons, the Department of Work and Pensions, and social service teams, work together, in order to effectively prevent and relieve homelessness. A dedicated web page has been developed on the Council website to support public bodies to refer clients. Agencies not subject to the legal duty are also being actively encouraged to use the website referral function in order to promote early homelessness intervention.

5.0 WIRRAL HOMELESSNESS –KEY FACTS 2018/19

- 5.1 A detailed statistical overview of homelessness in Wirral can be found in Appendix 1, however members should note the HRA is still in its infancy and as such Government continue to refine data and software specifications, and legislative guidance, therefore as such current reporting data is classed as ‘experimental data’. It also cannot be directly compared with previous Government homeless data sets as a new reporting system has been

¹ Specified public bodies include prisons, youth offender institutions, secure training centres, secure colleges, youth offending teams, probation services (including Community Rehabilitation Companies), jobcentre plus, social services authorities, emergency departments, urgent treatment centres, hospital in-patient functions, armed forces.

established with former data discontinued due to wider, new duties, introducing a shift in the presentation demographic.

- 5.2 Important factors such as the overhaul of homeless legislation, access to affordable accommodation, and considerable welfare benefit reform have impacted on homelessness levels both locally and nationally. In 2018/19, overall demand for homeless services increased in Wirral with the Council's Housing Options Team seeing a 17% increase in footfall from the previous year (3048 in 2017/18), and Council-commissioned supported accommodation (hostels) experienced a 13% uplift in demand for services. Rough sleeping levels in the Borough have also increased by 100% since 2015. This is indicative of rising national levels of homelessness with an estimated 320,000 homeless households nationally.
- 5.3 Locally, since the implementation of the HRA in April 2018, 3555 households have presented to the Housing Options Team and the team closed 3159 of which 78% were resolved with the provision of housing advice, whilst the remaining cases proceeded to be awarded a formal 'homeless duty' due to being homeless or threatened with homelessness. The remaining 396 cases were ongoing at the end of the reporting year and excluded from the data set.
- 5.4 The introduction of the new 'duty to refer' responsibility placed upon certain public bodies has led to over 330 referrals to the team since its enactment in October 2018. It should be noted that only 12% of public body referrals proceed to a homeless duty, as many are not deemed homeless or threatened with homelessness under the legislation or simply require housing advice. The Council has secured additional Government grant funding (administered by the Combined Authority) to offer Trail Blazer services to offer enhanced early intervention and prevention staffing resources. As such Wirral will be appointing a 'Homeless Champion' by the end of June 2019, who will focus on homeless prevention, and provide a specific training programme for public bodies to ensure effective, appropriate referrals and positive outcomes for service users.
- 5.5 Housing Options Team data indicates that the majority of presentations (50%) in 2018/19 were from applicants aged 25-44 years with the second highest being aged 16-24 year olds (25%). The HRA was, in part, introduced to tackle single-person homelessness more effectively and this is reflected in local data, which shows that 64% of presentations were from single person households, with the second highest group of presentations being from lone parent families (16%). Previously the leading household type awarded duties across both 2016/17 and 2017/18 were lone-parent households.
- 5.6 The Council is able to respond, in part, to single person homelessness via the commissioning of over 388 units of direct access supported accommodation to meet the need of vulnerable singles, including young people, those fleeing

domestic abuse, and those with substance misuse issues. The supported accommodation provided is set within an established pathway which progresses individuals into permanent accommodation, and provides an effective buffer to statutory homelessness services.

- 5.7 The current primary reason for homelessness in Wirral is the '*end of private rented accommodation*' which accounts for 30% of all homeless duties, with applicants citing that 47% of landlords wished to sell their property. Although we are aware that in some cases landlords do not progress or complete a sale of their property. In addition Members should note that Government has altered reporting categories in 2018/19 to capture more effectively the reasons for homelessness therefore figures may have previously been hidden in other categories. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that landlords may be leaving the market due to significant changes in welfare benefit administration, such as the administration of Universal Credit which limits the ability for direct payments to private landlords, and the Benefit Cap, alongside the introduction of more regulation for landlords. Local data also shows that external investors are actively purchasing properties in Wirral due to positive rental yields boosted by low interest rates and potentially inflating house prices at the lower end of the housing market, and potentially excluding local landlords. Welfare benefit factors, including the Housing Benefit single accommodation rate and difficulties accessing affordable accommodation may be linked to the 2018/19 increase in the category '*parents no longer willing or able to accommodate*' which accounts for 14% of all duties.
- 5.8 Presentations from households experiencing '*domestic abuse*' have remained consistently high over the past three years however figures indicate a significant rise in presentations in 2018/19. Similar rises have been experienced across the City Region and in response, the Combined Authority secured Government funding of £456,000 to launch a specialist Domestic Abuse project in 2018/19. The project provides a personal support package, target hardening measures and fast access to alternative private sector accommodation (for up to 30 households at any one time) if risk dictated that they unable to remain in their own home. The project compliments existing commissioned services including the Women's Refuge, and outreach services.
- 5.9 The HRA has significantly increased caseloads for Housing Options services across England. The team currently has 10 full time homeless prevention and assessment officer posts with an average caseload of approximately 45 cases per person, compared with about 20 cases per person previously. Government has recognised the increased pressure upon services and provided 3 year 'New Burdens' funding for local authorities to support implementation. Local data shows a 260% increase in the number of decisions made by officers between 2017/18 (215 decisions) and 2018/19 (775 decisions). In 2018/19, 56% of all

applications are awarded a 'homeless relief' duty, 34% a prevention duty and the remaining 10% receiving a 'main duty'. Whilst Wirral has seen a significant reduction in the main duties owed, which is a key anticipated outcome of the HRA, more work need to be completed to reduce the numbers of households presenting in crisis who are consequently awarded a 'relief' duty.

- 5.10 Housing Option Team outcomes reported a 60% success rate for all prevention and relief duties awarded in 2018/19. A success is noted as those households able to remain in their own homes, or assisted into new accommodation in order to prevent or relieve homelessness. It should be noted that this is not to say that 15% of cases fail, the duties also end if a household refuses an offer of accommodation, refused to co-operate or withdraws their application. The data also shows a number (25%) of duties that end in 'contact lost' this may be due to households finding their own solution to their housing needs following advice from the team. Ongoing internal performance monitoring and review will remain in place to understand reasons why this occurs.
- 5.11 Currently there are no national performance targets in place as each area is different and this is reflected in local homeless challenges however there are indications that Government will be seeking to implement performance targets upon local authorities at a future date which will primarily focus on homeless prevention and relief outcomes, reduce rough sleeping and the use of temporary accommodation. Wirral has internal performance monitoring within its pledges to report quarterly on homeless preventions. The data combines statutory and Council commissioned service data to reflect the breadth of work across the Borough and reported the achievement of 1154 homeless preventions in 2018/19.
- 5.12 Households assisted to secure alternative accommodation were most commonly supported into Registered Provider (housing association) properties (38%), closely followed by 36% into Council-funded supported housing or hostels, such as the Birkenhead YMCA. Supported accommodation or hostel provision is primarily for single person households, and the data is reflective of the overall increase in presentations from single people.
- 5.13 The enhancement of the legislation and higher numbers of homeless decisions being made are reflected in greater numbers of households accessing Council funded temporary accommodation. It is important to recognise that the Council has a legal duty to provide temporary accommodation to homeless households awarded relief or main duties and recognised as being 'vulnerable' in line with the homeless legislation e.g. families with children or a person with a disability. Households enter temporary accommodation whilst the Council makes a decision on their homeless application and discharges any duties awarded to them. The Council placed a total of 177 households in temporary accommodation in 2018/19 (compared to 118 in 2017/18), of which 43% were

single person households, with vulnerability. The average length of stay in temporary accommodation was 36 days (excluding households that stayed long term in Refuge accommodation). Government information indicates a national rise in temporary accommodation in response to the HRA, which was anticipated as the legislation is applicable to a wider group of people.

- 5.14 It is acknowledged that there remains an over-reliance on the use of Bed & Breakfast accommodation which accounted for 64% of all placements. The Council has responded to the increased demand for temporary accommodation usage by doubling the number of self-contained units leased from Registered Providers. This has enabled 30% of all households to be placed in Council-leased units that provide a level of privacy and stability for households, particularly those with children, whilst awaiting the outcome of their homeless application. The remaining 6% of households were temporarily accommodated in supported accommodation due to their specific needs.
- 5.15 High use of temporary accommodation has prompted a review of 'move-on' mechanisms, such as the Property Pool Plus policy being amended to reflect the different levels of duties under the HRA, and developing new landlord incentives to promote access to private rented properties to aid rehousing, linking property improvement grants to direct housing nominations, and reduce the overall time that households occupy emergency accommodation.
- 5.16 Rough sleepers are defined by Government for as "people sleeping, or bedded down, in the open air". Councils are required to undertake an annual estimate/count of their rough sleeper population and submit the findings to Government. Information shows that the official number of rough sleepers in Wirral has risen from 8 in 2015 to 16 in 2018. Whilst this is reflective of the national picture, the Council has recognised that a gap exists for services outside of normal office hours (9am – 5pm).
- 5.17 The Council has responded to recent rises in rough sleeping by securing £127,000 of Government funding, in partnership with the Birkenhead YMCA (BYMCA) to deliver a rough sleeper 'Assertive Outreach' project in 2019/20, which will operate alongside existing rough sleeper daytime outreach services, and night shelter provision. The Assertive Outreach Team will be based at the BYMCA and provide outreach services during evenings and weekends to quickly identify and respond to a rough sleeper's needs.
- 5.18 In addition, the City Region secured three years of Government funding, totalling £7.7m, to implement a 'Housing First Model' which aims to provide intensive, flexible and person-centred support within a tenancy to homeless people whose needs are not being resolved by current services. Staffing resources will initially be employed by the Combined Authority and Phase 1 is due to commence across the Liverpool City Region in July 2019 and will deliver a service for up to

60 individuals under an initial 'test and learn' before further roll out over the three year period to potentially help an estimated 360 people.

6.0 OUR RESPONSE TO HOMELESSNESS

6.1 The Council has always recognised the importance of and had a focus on early homeless prevention, providing a wide range of Council and commissioned services to meet needs to reduce the instances of households becoming homeless in the first place. The Housing Options Team provides a 24 hour, 365 days a year service to those threatened with homelessness, and presenting as homeless in Wirral. The activities mentioned below, give an indication of some of the tools used to tackle homelessness in Wirral.

- **Prevention activity**

6.2 Prevention activity is fundamental to reduce the negative impact of homelessness upon households and wider services, such as social care. The appointment of a 'Homeless Champion' will proactively promote early identification of homelessness with public bodies subject to 'Duty to Refer' and will look to enhance homeless prevention measures. The Council commissions two floating support services, the Whitechapel Centre (for people with mental health needs) and Excel Housing to provide support to individuals to retain and sustain their housing. The Housing Options Team has a range of homeless prevention tools including directly funding a dedicated Citizens Advice Bureau worker to provide debt, budgeting and employment advice, and officers directly negotiate with landlords and services to implement measures to assist households to remain in their home. Work is currently being progressed to strengthen working relationships with the Department of Work and Pensions, with preliminary discussions held to embed a DWP community officer into the Housing Options Team to reduce additional financial difficulties for homeless households or those threatened with homelessness in regards to benefit sanctions. In addition wider work is ongoing to improve the condition, management and regulation of private rented accommodation through housing standards and selective licensing work.

- **Relief activity**

6.3 For those people who present as homeless or their homelessness cannot be prevented, the Council responds under relief duties. Homeless relief measures are designed to minimise the length of time that households may be homeless. This includes them often occupying Council temporary accommodation whilst a long term solution is achieved. Wirral has 388 bed spaces in commissioned supported accommodation for single homeless people, women fleeing domestic violence, young people and young parents, such as the Women's Refuge, Wirral Ark, and Forum Housing. These bed spaces provide a supported environment in

which people can address any support needs they may have and gain skills to move towards independent living.

- 6.4 Dedicated services have been developed with partner organisations to ensure that no one has to 'sleep rough' in Wirral. A 'night shelter' provision, which provide up to 15 bed spaces, is active 365 days a year and if full a 'safe seat' additional service is delivered by hostels providing up to a further 13 bed spaces on any given day. The Night Shelter and Safe Seats provide a safe and secure area for homeless people where they are able to access washing and laundry facilities, receive hot food and drink and obtain advice and assistance with their presenting support needs. Rough sleeper specialist outreach teams, including the Assertive Outreach Team, operate across Wirral, engaging with rough sleepers to provide support to them to engage and ultimately encourage them to access mainstream services.
- 6.5 Financial resources are used to remove barriers to accessing housing, such as the payment of former tenant rent arrears or to fund deposits to secure private rented accommodation. The Citizens Advice Bureau worker has a role in securing direct rent payments to landlords and educating households about financial sustainability. The Council has developed a process, with dedicated staff, to improve access to the private rented sector for homeless people, ensuring that accreditation standards are met. Additional Trail Blazer funding secured is being utilised to appoint a dedicated officer to develop relationships and proactively work with private landlords to promote better access to accommodation. This role will complement the current, wider activity to support landlords to use creative ways of addressing the needs of homeless households. In addition, the Council's choice based lettings policy actively supports homeless households with priority bandings to secure social housing, along with direct nomination arrangements.
- 6.6 Going forward, the Council is in the process of appointing consultants to complete a comprehensive Homelessness Review by autumn 2019. This is a statutory requirement of local authorities with the outcome of the review informing the development and reconfiguration of homelessness services. Local data highlighted in this report, along with the engagement of other services, such as probation, will be used to inform the Review to ensure a targeted response is achieved to local issues.

7.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 The Councils revenue budget contribution for meeting its statutory homeless requirements for 2019/20 is £1,008,800, which contributes to staffing costs, use of temporary accommodation (albeit that some costs can be recovered via housing benefits) and prevention activity.

7.2 The Council also has budget provision for commissioned services that prevent and relieve homelessness for vulnerable groups, such as hostels and floating support services. The 2019/20 Budget totals £2.9 million to deliver 388 units of accommodation and 155 units of floating support which forms part of the Council Supported Housing Commissioned Services (formerly known as Supporting People programme).

7.3 In addition to the above, the Council has received a number of funding grants from government to support the implementation and delivery of the HRA, including securing targeted funding through bids placed both by Wirral Council and as part of the Combined Authority and are set out in the table below:-

Funding Stream	Total Allocation
Flexible Homeless Grant	£336,495.89
New Burdens	£209,841.00
Trailblazer ²	£214,518
Rough Sleeper Initiative	£127,000

7.4 Of the total grants received to date £369,000 has been spent and/or committed to support current service delivery in response to the increased demand upon services since the introduction of the HRA. The remaining funding will be utilised in the future as a 'draw down' fund to expand our prevention tools and following the completion of the Homeless Review in Autumn 2019, to respond to anticipated recommendations.

8.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

8.1 Wirral Council will continue to deliver its statutory responsibilities as set out in the homeless legislation.

9.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: ICT, STAFFING AND ASSETS

9.1 To respond to the HRA the Housing Options Service has implemented a number of changes, including a bespoke software system, increased temporary accommodation provision and undertaken an initial staff reconfiguration to respond to the changes.

9.2 A further restructure of staffing resources is currently in progress in order to establish a permanent structure moving forward.

² This funding is yet to be received by the Council.

10.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 10.1 Whilst the government has awarded initial funding to help meet the costs of implementing the HRA and this will be reviewed, there is a continued risk that due to increasing homelessness levels there will need to be continued investment in related services and continued co-operation with relevant agencies to address this.
- 10.2 Failure to comply with the requirements of the HRA would mean that the Council would breach its statutory obligations.
- 10.3 Supported Accommodation Services, funded by the Council and delivered by the community, voluntary and charitable sectors, are a key resource in combatting homelessness. Disinvestment in these services may compromise the Council's ability to deliver an effective response to the issue of homelessness in the Borough and may, potentially, result in increased incidences of visible homelessness.
- 10.4 The recent changes in legislation and performance monitoring have effectively 'retired' all previous known data and data baselines therefore limiting the ability of the Council to effectively forecast data or interpret emerging trends. The Council only has a single financial year of experimental data and we are still seeking to understand emerging trends and how best to respond. The outcome of the forthcoming Homeless Review in autumn 2019 will assist to better inform service delivery and innovation.

11.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 11.1 Officers conduct meetings with representatives from Government in regard to the ongoing implementation of the HRA for both Wirral and as part of the Combined Authority Liverpool City Region homelessness programmes.
- 11.2 All relevant agencies will be invited to participate in the Homeless Review consultation process in autumn 2019.

12.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1 There are no equality implications arising from this report.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Wirral Homelessness Overview

BACKGROUND PAPERS

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
<i>'Homelessness and the impact of welfare reform'</i> Regeneration & Environment Policy and Performance Committee	March 22nd 2016

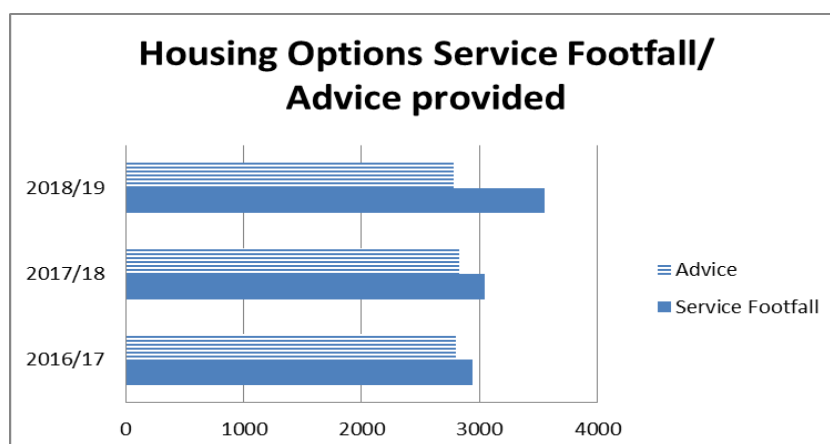
APPENDIX ONE - WIRRAL HOMELESSNESS OVERVIEW 2018/19

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Members should note that the Homeless Reduction Act (HRA) is still very much in its infancy, and as such Government continue to refine the software system specifications and its new performance reporting system 'HCLIC'. The reporting system was introduced in April 2018 to reflect the changes in legislation, and replaced the former 'P1E' data tables which have now been discontinued. The emerging data is currently classed as 'experimental data' by Government.
- 1.2 Members should note that data definitions and reporting categories have also changed, with a focus towards the specific needs within households, not just those awarded a 'full housing duty' as previously focused on in earlier reports. Government recognises that there are still issues with data definitions and collection process, therefore figures provided should be considered with caution and may be subject to MHCLG future refinement.

2.0 Housing Options Service Footfall

- 2.1 The Council has a Housing Options Team that provides a 24 hour, 365 days of the year triage service which assesses all households seeking advice and assistance to determine if an 'application' under the homeless legislation should be taken. Following a period of investigation, the Council will make a decision on the homeless application and award any legal duties are owed.



- 2.2 The chart above highlights the continuing upward trend in demand for Housing Option Team services, with a 17% increase in footfall since the implementation

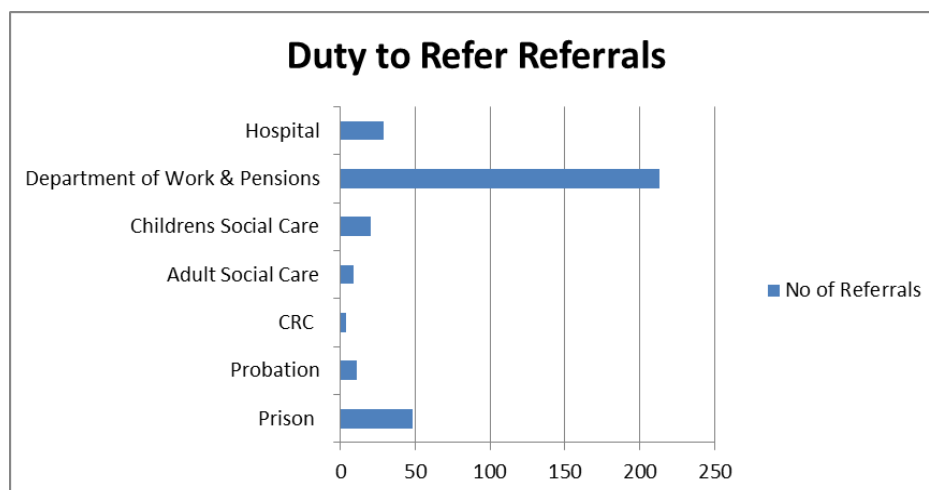
of the HRA. This is attributable the significant changes in legislation and external factors such as welfare benefit changes, and could be partially attributed to the new 'duty to refer' placed on public bodies.

2.3 The majority (78%) of cases are resolved with the provision of housing advice, with the remaining cases proceeding to a formal 'homeless application' requiring a statutory homeless decision. The team has recently launched further data capture tasks in order to better understand the reasons for case closure and advice sought in order to target future service provision. This will enable better information resources to be developed to aid households to access housing advice, for example via the Council web page.

2.4 The following sections use data taken from cases closed by officers in 2018/19.

3.0 Duty to Refer

3.1 The Council has received 334 referrals from public bodies since the enactment of the 'Duty to Refer' in October 2018. The primary referring agency is the Department of Work and Pensions. It should be noted that only 12% of public body referrals proceed to a homeless duty, as many are not deemed homeless or threatened with homelessness under the legislation or simply require housing advice. These are new legal duties for public bodies to apply and as such, a key part of the work of the Homeless Champion is to provide continued support and a specific training programme for public bodies to ensure effective, appropriate referrals.

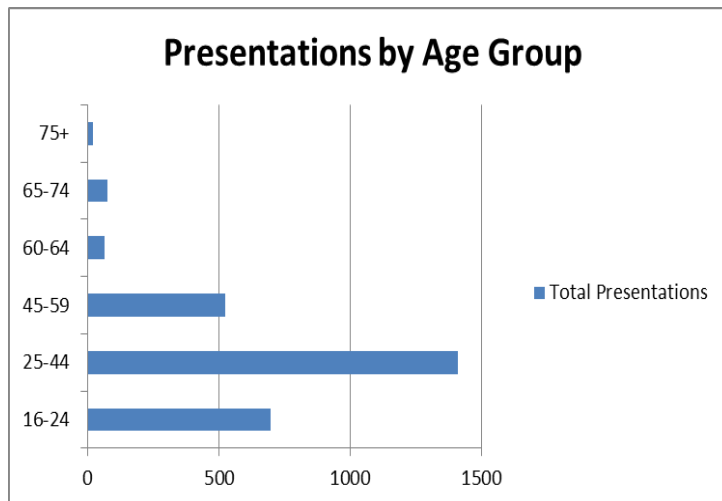


***CRC is Community Rehabilitation Company*

3.2 A further 98 referrals have been received from agencies not subject to the Duty to Refer such as schools, GPs and third sector organisations. Referrals are actively encouraged to support early intervention and homeless prevention.

4.0 Demographic Data

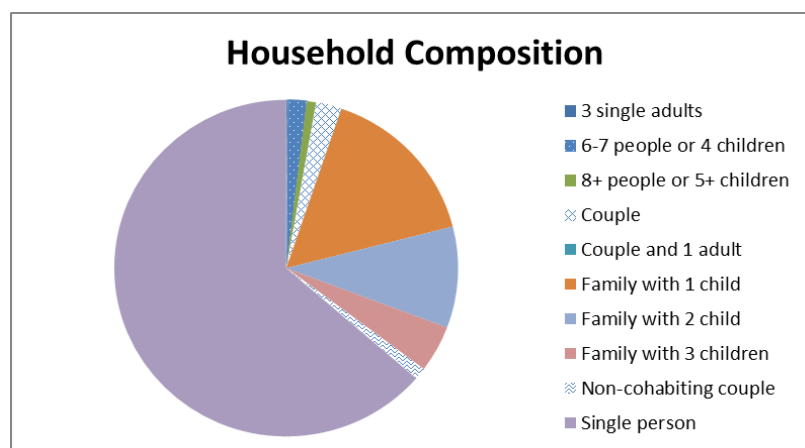
- 4.1 The data indicates that the majority of presentations (50%) in 2018/19 were from applicants aged 25-44 years with the second highest being aged 16-24 year olds (25%).



- 4.2 The HRA was in part introduced to tackle single person homelessness more effectively. This is reflected in local data, and throughout this report, which shows that 64% of presentations were from single person households. It should be noted that 94% of households identified as White British.

5.0 Household Type

- 5.1 The leading household type awarded a 'full housing duty' across both 2016/17 and 2017/18 were lone-parent household. The implementation of the Homeless Reduction Act has widened legal duties to a far greater number of households and has produced a shift in demand for local homeless services with 64% of all duties awarded in 2018/19 being to single person households, with the second highest group of presentations being, the lone parent category (16%).



6.0 Homeless Decisions

- 6.1 Table 1 below combines data from Government P1E data tables and Housing Options Team system statistics to show the number of statutory homeless decisions made in regards to homeless applications from April 2016 to March 2019.

Table 1: Homeless Decisions made by Wirral Council

Decision made	Total number of decisions		
	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19 *HRA introduce d
Full housing duty <i>-Eligible, homeless and in priority need³ with a duty to provide temporary accommodation</i> <i>-Duty to provide advice, one offer of settled accommodation to end duty</i>	56	113	44
Intentionally homeless <i>-Eligible, homeless, in priority need but deemed to have lost their accommodation through their own actions</i> <i>-Duty to provide advice, a 'reasonable period' in temporary accommodation in order for household to source own accommodation</i>	33	39	21
Prevention Duty <i>-Eligible, homeless</i> <i>-Duty to provide advice, take reasonable steps to prevent homelessness, issue Assessment and Personal Housing Plan</i>	n/a	n/a	266
Relief Duty* <i>-Eligible, homeless</i> <i>-Duty to provide temporary accommodation to priority need households</i> <i>-Duty to provide advice, take reasonable steps to secure accommodation, issue Assessment and Personal Housing Plan</i>	n/a	n/a	434
Not in priority need <i>-Eligible, homeless but no priority, duty to provide advice, duty to issue Assessment and Personal Housing Plan</i>	8	16	5
Not homeless <i>- Duty to provide advice only</i>	49	45	5
Ineligible <i>- Duty to provide advice only</i>	0	2	0
TOTAL	146	215	775

³ The 'priority need groups' include households with dependent children or a pregnant woman, people who are vulnerable in some way e.g. because of mental illness or physical disability, young people aged 16 or 17 and 18 to 20 year olds who were previously in care, people that are vulnerable as a result of time spent in care, in custody, or in HM Forces and people that are vulnerable as a result of having to flee their home because of violence or the threat of violence

**please note that households can be awarded multiple decisions during the term of their application which is reflected in totals above*

- 6.2 Importantly the data shows a 260% increase in the number of decisions between 2017/18 and 2018/19 made by the Housing Options service, following the implementation of the Homeless Reduction Act. The figures highlight the significant uplift in work load as a result of the new legislation. Members should note that 'legacy cases' from the previous legislation were phased out in the first six months of 2018/19 and are included in the data table below. It is also important to recognise that the Council has a legal duty to offer temporary accommodation for those households awarded a 'homeless relief duty' and assessed as having a 'priority need'.
- 6.3 It is anticipated that the early intervention focus of services will, overtime, reduce the number of households subject to main and relief duty decisions in the future, with more applications being subject to a prevention duty.

Table 2: HRA Duty outcomes

Duty Outcomes	Prevention Duty	Relief Duty	TOTAL
Secured existing accommodation	30	n/a	30
Secured alternative accommodation	109	281	390
56 Days expired (case closed)	22	6	28
Contact lost	70	103	173
Homeless (move from prevention to relief)	21	n/a	21
Intentionally Homeless from accommodation provided	0	0	0
Refused suitable accommodation offer	3	16	19
Refused to co-operate	1	0	1
Withdrew/ deceased	9	26	35
No longer eligible under homeless legislation	1	1	2
Local connection referral to other LA	n/a	1	1
TOTAL	266	434	700

- 6.4 As shown in Table 2, the Housing Options Team reported a 60% success rate for all prevention and relief duties awarded in 2018/19. A success is noted as those households able to remain in their own homes, or assisted into new accommodation in order to prevent or relieve homelessness. It should be noted that this is not to say that 15% of cases fail, the duties also end if a household refuses an offer of accommodation, refused to co-operate or withdraws their application. The data also shows a number (25%) of duties that end in 'contact lost' this may be due to households finding their own solution to their housing needs following advice from the team. Ongoing internal performance monitoring and review will remain in place to understand reasons why this occurs.
- 6.5 The Council has secured additional Government grant funding (administered by the Combined Authority) to offer Trail Blazer services to offer enhanced early intervention and prevention staffing resources. As such Wirral will be appointing

a 'Homeless Champion' by the end of June 2019, who will focus on homeless prevention, and provide a specific training programme for public bodies to ensure effective, appropriate referrals and positive outcomes for service users.

- 6.6 The data shows a concerning number (25%) of duties that end in 'contact lost'. This may be attributed to households disengaging, possibly due to the extended timescale for working with people (56 days in either or 118 days if proceeding through both prevention and relief stages), finding their own solution to their housing needs following advice from the team, or a small number may return to prison. Ongoing internal performance monitoring and review will remain in place to drive forward further improvements and better understand the data to ensure that no vulnerable households are slipping through the system.
- 6.7 Currently there are no national performance targets in place as each area is different and this is reflected in local homeless challenges however there are indications that Government will be seeking to implement performance targets upon local authorities at a future date which will primarily focus on homeless prevention and relief outcomes, reduce rough sleeping and the use of temporary accommodation. Wirral has internal performance monitoring within its pledges to report quarterly on homeless preventions. The data combines statutory and Council commissioned service data to reflect the breadth of work across the Borough and reported the achievement of 1154 homeless preventions in 2018/19.

7.0 Reasons for Homelessness

- 7.1 In previous years the primary reasons cited by applicants for homelessness were most commonly domestic abuse, and loss of rented accommodation. The reporting categories have altered slightly between the PIE and current data submissions as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Reason for Homelessness

Main reason for loss of home	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19 (Category changes implemented by HRA)
Parents no longer willing or able to accommodate	3	8	101
Other relatives or friends no longer willing to accommodate	4	15	28
Non-violent relationship breakdown (with partner)	5	11	53
Violence	6	7	
Domestic Abuse	7	20	71
Harassment	1	1	
Non-racially motivated or other motivated violence.			20
Racially motivated violence/harassment			0
Mortgage arrears/ repossession	1	0	3

Rent arrears	1	1	
Loss of rented or tied accommodation	12	22	
End of Private rented accommodation			210
Eviction from supported housing			46
End of social tenancy			34
Property disrepair			4
Required to leave NASS accommodation	2	3	13
Left an institution or LA care	6	8	26
Left HM forces			0
Other reason for loss of last settled home	8	17*	90
Fire/ Flood/ other Emergency			1
TOTAL	56	113	700

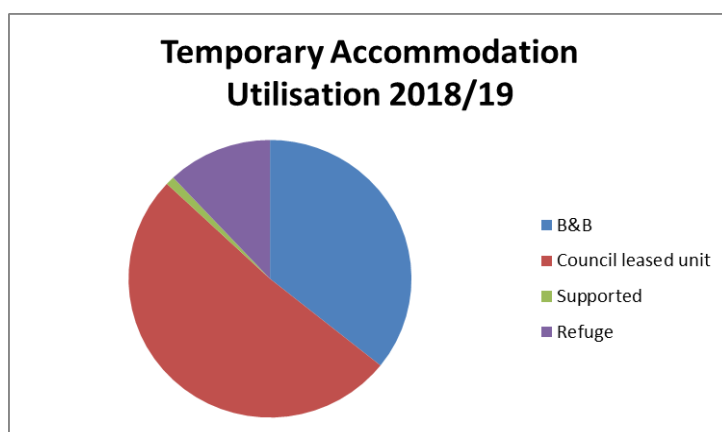
**please note this data reflects action taken in response to New Ferry incident*

- 7.2 The current primary reason for homelessness in Wirral is the ‘*end of private rented accommodation*’ which accounts for 30% of all homeless duties, with applicants citing that 47% of landlords wished to sell their property. Although we are aware that in some cases landlords do not progress or complete a sale of their property. In addition Members should note that Government has altered reporting categories in 2018/19 to capture more effectively the reasons for homelessness therefore figures may have previously been hidden in other categories. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that landlords may be leaving the market due to significant changes in welfare benefit administration, such as the administration of Universal Credit which limits the ability for direct payments to private landlords, and the Benefit Cap, alongside the introduction of more regulation for landlords. Local data also shows that external investors are actively purchasing properties in Wirral due to positive rental yields boosted by low interest rates and potentially inflating house prices at the lower end of the housing market, and potentially excluding local landlords. Welfare benefit factors, including the Housing Benefit single accommodation rate and difficulties accessing affordable accommodation may be linked to the 2018/19 increase in the category ‘*parents no longer willing or able to accommodate*’ which accounts for 14% of all duties.
- 7.3 Presentations from households experiencing ‘*domestic abuse*’ have remained consistently high over the past three years however figures indicate a significant rise in presentations in 2018/19. Similar rises have been experienced across the City Region and in response, a specialist Domestic Abuse project was launched in 2018/19 to provide targeted floating support to households and fast access to alternative accommodation if risk dictates that they unable to remain in their own home.
- 7.4 As previously mentioned the current reporting mechanisms are subject to ongoing development and this may account for the high number of cases placed in the ‘other reasons’ category. ‘Other reasons’ may include situations such as harassment, affordability issues, property unsuitable due to health, or gang/ anti-social behaviour. It is evident that reporting categories fail to capture the broad

range of reasons for homelessness and this may be addressed at a later date by Government.

8.0 Temporary Accommodation

- 8.1 The enhancement of the legislation and significantly higher numbers of homeless decisions being made under HRA are reflected in greater numbers of households accessing temporary accommodation. Households enter temporary accommodation whilst the Council makes a decision on their homeless application and discharges any duties awarded to them.
- 8.2 The Council has responded to the need by doubling self-contained temporary accommodation provision leased from Registered Providers. This is reflected in the chart below which highlights that 51% of all households are placed in a Council unit which provides a level of privacy and stability for households, particularly those with children, whilst awaiting the outcome of their homeless application.
- 8.3 High use of temporary accommodation has also prompted a review of 'move-on' mechanisms, such as the Property Pool Plus policy and access to private rented properties to aid rehousing, and reduce the overall time that households occupy emergency accommodation. The average length of stay in temporary accommodation (excluding long term Domestic Abuse Refuge placements) was 36 days per household.



- 8.4 The Council placed a total of 177 households in temporary accommodation in 2018/19 (compared to 118 in 2017/18), of which 43% were single person households. Wirral is not alone in experiencing an up-lift in temporary accommodation usage. Government statistics show an overall national increase in the use of temporary accommodation following the introduction of the HRA.

9.0 Duty Tenure Outcome

- 9.1 As shown in Table 4, households assisted to secure alternative accommodation, following the award of a prevention or relief duty were most commonly supported into Registered Provider (housing association) properties (38%), closely followed by 36% into Council-commissioned supported housing or hostels such as the Birkenhead YMCA. Supported accommodation or hostel provision is primarily for single person households, and is reflective of the overall increase in presentations from single people.
- 9.2 The HRA made provisions for local authorities to discharge accommodation duties more easily into the private-rented sector. The wider housing division teams continue to develop mechanisms, including use of statutory powers such as selective licensing, to increase access to good quality, affordable, private rented accommodation.

Table 4: Duty Accommodation Outcomes

Prevention & Relief Duty - Secured alternative accommodation	No of applicants
Other	2
Private rented sector: HMO	5
Private rented sector: self-contained	90
Private rented sector: lodging (not with family or friends)	1
Registered Provider tenancy	148
Social rented supported housing or hostel	139
Staying with family/friends	5
TOTAL	390

10.0 Rough Sleeping

- 10.1 Rough sleepers are defined for the purpose of statistics as “people sleeping, or bedded down, in the open air”. In Wirral, rough sleepers are reported sleeping in Birkenhead Park, at the back of Birkenhead Market, sheds they have broken into, and tents along the waterfront.
- 10.2 Councils are required to undertake an annual estimate/count of their rough sleeper population and submit the findings to Government. The table below shows the official numbers of rough sleepers in Wirral, which indicates a 100% increase between 2015 and 2018. The next scheduled count is due to take place in November 2019.

Table 5: Rough Sleeping Count

Year	Number Reported
2015	8
2016	11
2017	14
2018	16

- 10.3 Comparisons, however, across the Liverpool City Region authorities show that Wirral is not alone in experiencing a rise in rough sleeping levels. The only exception was Liverpool City Council, who in 2018 reported a decrease in rough sleeping via its annual count. Liverpool has been the focus of a specialist project, funded by Government, to reduce rough sleeping in the city following previous high reported figures. Whilst this is reflective of the national picture, the Council has recognised that a gap exists for services outside of normal office hours (9am – 5pm).
- 10.4 The Council has responded to recent rises in rough sleeping through the commissioning of an ‘Assertive Outreach Team’, which complements existing service provision. Government funding of £127,400 was secured to meet the scheme cost which included £30,000 to provide dedicated ‘personal budgets’ intended to equip rough sleepers with a tenancy and basic essentials.
- 10.5 The Assertive Outreach Team will work outside of office hours (5pm-7am), to quickly identify and respond to a rough sleeper’s needs utilising where needed, the dedicated personal budget for service users to support access to mainstream services. In addition, the wider City Region secured £7.7m of Government funding to implement a ‘Housing First Model’ which aims to provide an intensive, flexible and person-centred support within a tenancy to single homeless people. Staffing resources will initially be employed by the Combined Authority and Phase 1 is due to commence across the Liverpool City Region in July 2019 and will deliver a service for up to 60 individuals under an initial ‘test and learn’ before further roll out over the three year period to potentially help an estimated 360 people.

11.0 Supporting People Commissioned Services

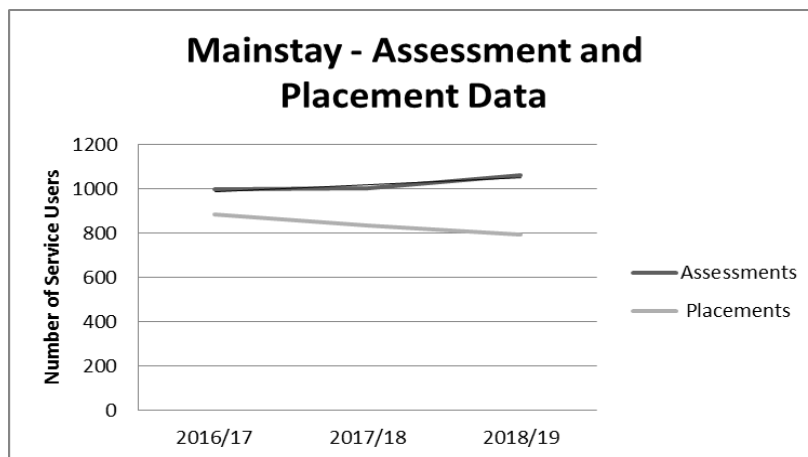
- 11.1 The Council provides 388 units of accommodation-based commissioned services to meet the needs of vulnerable groups, including young people, those fleeing domestic abuse, and services for those with substance misuse. The supported accommodation provided is set within an established pathway which progresses individuals into permanent accommodation and provides an effective buffer to statutory homelessness services, particularly due to the HRA broadening duties to single person households. Table 6 highlights the current bed spaces available:

Table 6: Council-funded Supported Accommodation and Floating Support services

Direct Access Hostel Accommodation	
Direct Access 18 years +	129
Direct Access 16 year +	34
Direct Access 25 year +	104
Semi-independent accommodation	
Semi-independent 25 years +	64

Domestic Abuse Refuge	
18 years +	12
Specialist Young Persons accommodation for 16 years +	45
TOTAL	388
Floating Support/outreach Support (18 +)	155

11.2 Access to supported accommodation is via 'Mainstay', which is a software system specifically designed to link homeless individuals with supported accommodation following a detailed self-assessment. Data indicates that the number of individuals approaching services for an assessment has increased by 6% since 2016/17 however the number of placements has decreased by 10% in the same period, as shown in the infographic below.



11.3 There is acknowledged pressure upon supported accommodation, primarily hostels, due to increasing demand for services. Individuals occupying services often present with multiple, complex needs which require time to be addressed via person-centred support, thus reducing the turnover of bed spaces. In addition, difficulties are acknowledged in moving some individuals forward into permanent accommodation due to previous poor tenancy conduct. Specific 'move on' mechanisms such as a dedicated housing panel and specialist project with a floating support services are in place to assist move on from hostels.