



ECONOMY REGENERATION & HOUSING COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 27 March 2024

REPORT TITLE:	HOMELESSNESS IN WIRRAL AND THE USE OF TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION
REPORT OF:	DIRECTOR OF REGENERATION & PLACE

REPORT SUMMARY

This report seeks to inform members on the current picture regarding homelessness in the borough, and more specifically in relation to the rising number of households in Temporary Accommodation, Bed and Breakfast (B&B), and the financial pressures arising from this. This report also provides Members with an update on the progress being made to respond to Homelessness in Wirral.

This increase in numbers of households in Temporary Accommodation is resulting in the need to review the existing service provision and has required the introduction of additional mitigating measures.

This report also informs Members of the initiatives taken to maintain the existing service provision, but also Wirral's approach to reducing the need for Bed and Breakfast placements.

An effective response to homelessness contributes to the following priorities set out in the Council Plan:

- Active & Healthy Lives
- Brighter Futures
- Safe & Vibrant Communities

This matter affects all Wards in the Borough.

This is not a key decision.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Economy, Regeneration & Housing Committee is requested to:

1. Note and endorse the progress being made to address Homelessness in Wirral and the increases seen in the use of temporary accommodation and mitigations in place, as contained within this report.

2. Endorse the undertaking of the 5-year review of homelessness in Wirral during 2024, with the findings used to support the development of a new Wirral Homeless and Rough Sleeping Strategy for 2025 onwards.
3. Approve that a 6-monthly performance report on Homelessness to be presented to future Committees as part of a wider Housing Services Update Report.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 In Wirral, the current homelessness situation is exacerbated by wider features of the national housing market and national policy context around housing. There is a national crisis in homelessness and rough sleeping that has seen a rise across the country with regard to homeless presentations and the use of temporary accommodation.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 This report is an update report for members and therefore no other options have been considered.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 Part VII of the Housing Act 1996 sets out the Council's duties to prevent and relieve homelessness and provide temporary and settled accommodation. The actions and support provided by the council will differ depending on which category a household may fall under. The Council's first approach to tackling homelessness is prevention, encouraging households who feel they may become threatened with homelessness to seek help through the newly introduced Wirral Advice Aid which was implemented in April 2023, and has since had over 2300 Hits by 1673 separate users.
- 3.2 Those people who are at risk of homelessness are signposted to contact the Housing Options Service at the earliest opportunity and this is either through a self-referral, referral from a 'duty to refer' partner, or by calling the main housing options number for an initial assessment. This also enables a full statutory housing assessment to be completed and a personalised housing plan formed. There is an opportunity to prevent homelessness either by saving a tenancy or housing situation or moving a household into alternative accommodation before they become homeless. If homelessness cannot be prevented, the local authority has a duty to relieve homelessness. The council has a statutory duty to provide Temporary Accommodation to people in priority need who are homeless while they have their application for permanent housing assessed.
- 3.3 The Council's Housing Options Service uses 2 distinct types of temporary accommodation, these being Hotel/B&B provision and dispersed, community-based, self-contained units of accommodation.
- 3.4 Bed and Breakfast is a form of temporary accommodation provided on a more short-term, and often emergency basis. This provision is sourced both within the Wirral area and out of borough, when demand requires, or where safety concerns exist. This type of accommodation is primarily used as a stopgap while people wait for longer-term Temporary Accommodation, and therefore usually precedes a Temporary Accommodation placement. The Homeless Code of Guidance, issued by Government, states that pregnant women and households with children should not be placed in a Hotel/B&B for a period that exceeds 6 weeks. However, both

nationally and locally, many placements will extend beyond this time, although there has been significant work in recent years by local authorities to reduce the number of families in B&Bs for more than 6 weeks.

- 3.5 Dispersed accommodation is offered once an assessment has been undertaken. The Council uses a combination of its own stock and stock leased from two local Registered Providers (RPs otherwise known as Social Landlords). A household will remain in this accommodation until such time as the Council's legal duty is ended, whether by securing permanent accommodation or some other reason. There is no maximum duration of stay within Temporary Accommodation, however it is clearly in the interests of the Council for households to spend as shorter time as possible in Temporary Accommodation, for the accommodation to be freed-up for other households.
- 3.6 For the purposes of this report when using the term 'Temporary accommodation' this will include both B&B/Hotel and Dispersed accommodation, unless otherwise stated.

National, Regional and Local Context

- 3.7 The recent release of Government statistics and media coverage have all highlighted the significantly increased use of temporary accommodation for homeless households across the country.
- 3.8 Nationally, the number of people who were placed in temporary accommodation during April – June 2023 was 105,750 - a new high since records began 25 years ago and an increase of 10.5% compared with the end of June last year. Of this figure, 64.4% were households that included dependent children. 7,510 were living in hostels or B&Bs representing an increase of 93% compared with one year ago. 2,510 of these households have been living in B&Bs beyond the statutory limit of six weeks, which is up 146% on a year ago and 39% on the previous three months.
- 3.8 The reasons for the increase in households presenting for housing advice and the need for temporary accommodation in Wirral are varied and complex but reflect the national picture and include a combination of the following factors:
- The impact of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2018, which brought many new duties to the Council to prevent and relieve homelessness.
 - Lack of investment in new social housing and, since 2010, a reduction of 63% to the new National Affordable Homes programme.
 - reductions through Right to Buy and a reduction in the turnover of affordable housing.
 - The continued aftermath of the Covid -19 pandemic.
 - The cost-of-living crisis and rising inflation particularly on energy, food, and fuel costs, all of which are recognised as impacting low-income households more severely.
 - The pressures within the housing market and particularly the impact on local affordability levels, with Local Housing Allowance rates having been frozen for some years, and which are usually significantly lower than market rents.

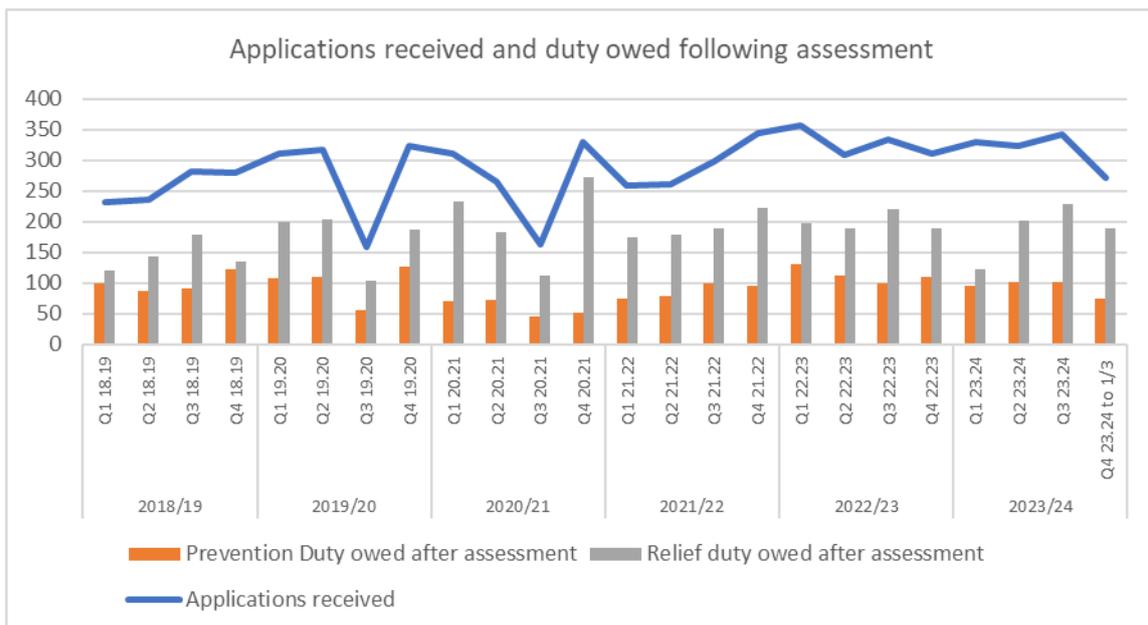
- Increased use by private landlords of no-fault eviction notices (national increase of 18% in 2022/23 with 8,300 no-fault court cases in July- Sept 23).
- Increased demand for private sector rented accommodation with rents rising at above inflation rates and some landlords refusing to accept households on benefits due to changes in the welfare support system, and concerns from landlords about rises in rent arrears from those on Universal Credit
- Requests for housing assistance from central Government for refugee groups, in particular from Afghanistan, Syria and Ukraine.

Numbers presenting as homeless in Wirral.

3.9 The Housing Options Service, which is responsible for fulfilling the Council’s statutory duties under Homeless legislation, has faced an increase in demand for homelessness services over the last 2-3 years based primarily on the factors described above. Over the last 12 months, the Service has received 5,636 presentations and there are approximately 900 open homelessness cases in Wirral at any one time which is, on average, over 60 cases per officer.

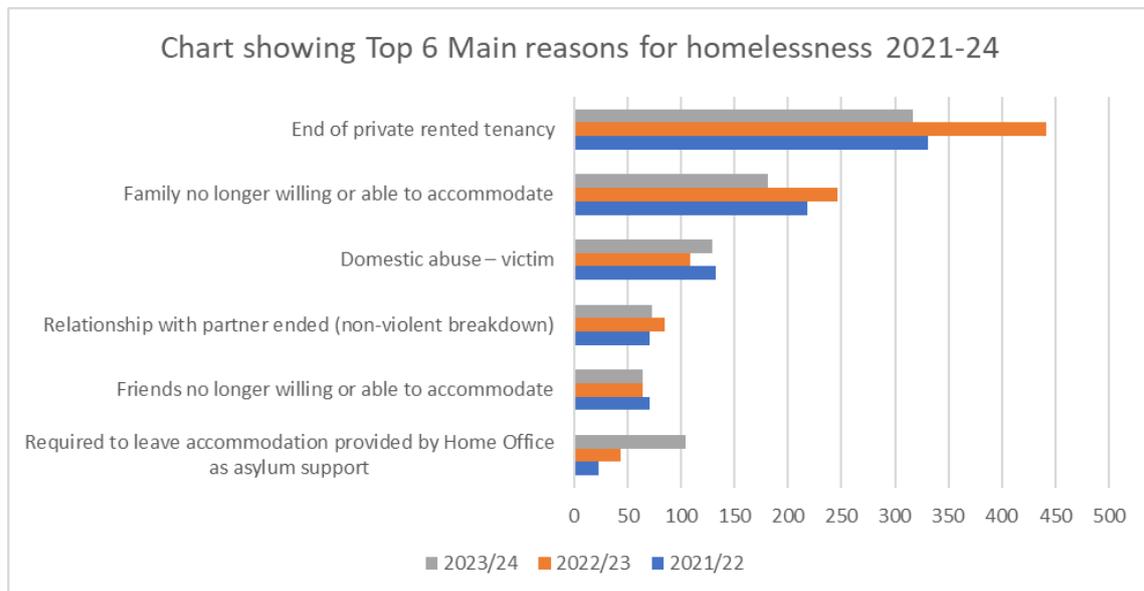
3.10 During 2022/23 the Council received 66 referrals from former asylum seekers who had been given a positive decision by the Home Office and, as of the 31st of January 2024, the numbers of referrals received for 2023/24 currently stands at 239. This is a substantial increase on former years and has latterly been because of the Home Office “fast track” process. Some of these applicants have moved into Temporary Accommodation once their accommodation via the Home Office ends.

3.11 Despite challenges, the Housing Options Service successfully prevented or relieved homelessness for 881 households in 2022/23, and 601 households in 2023/24 (as of January 2024)



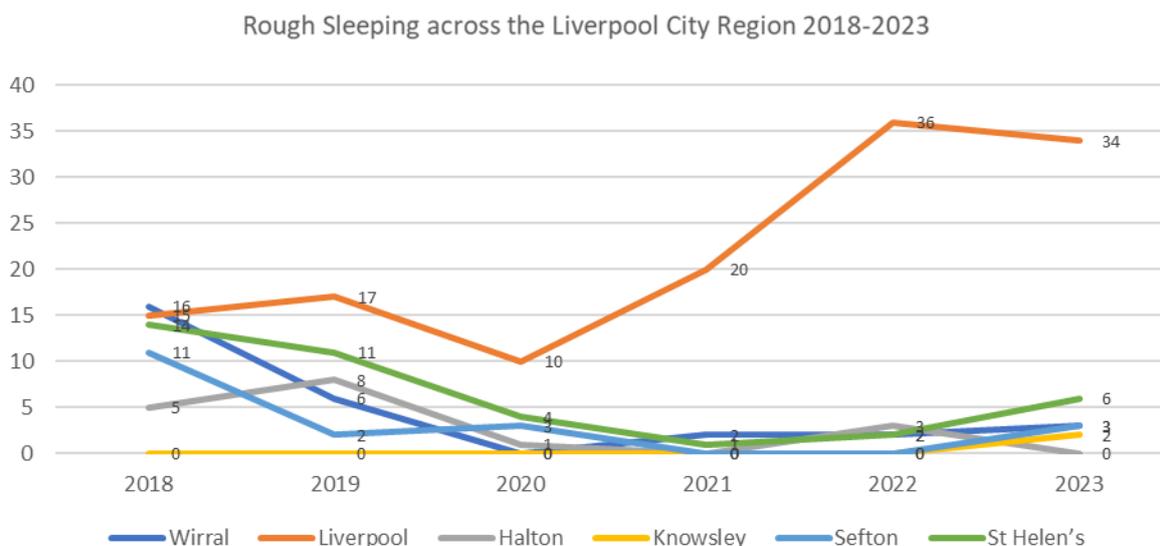
3.12 The Service saw a 24% increase in households assessed as ‘threatened with homelessness’ in 2022/23 and this continues to increase in 2023-2024. The ending

of a private rented tenancy continues to be the highest stated reason for homelessness, of which there were 209 during 2022/23 and 169 in 2023/24 as of the 31^s of January 2024.



3.13 In terms of Rough Sleepers, this group is defined by Government as “people sleeping, or bedded down, in the open air.” Councils are required to undertake an annual estimate or actual count of their rough sleeper population and submit the findings to Government.

3.14 All Councils within the Liverpool City Region co-ordinate their estimates/counts to occur on the same night as each other to avoid duplication of individuals that may migrate between their areas. The spotlight count took place on the night of 14th November / morning of 15th November 2023. The chart below shows the levels of rough sleeping across the Liverpool City Region since 2018.

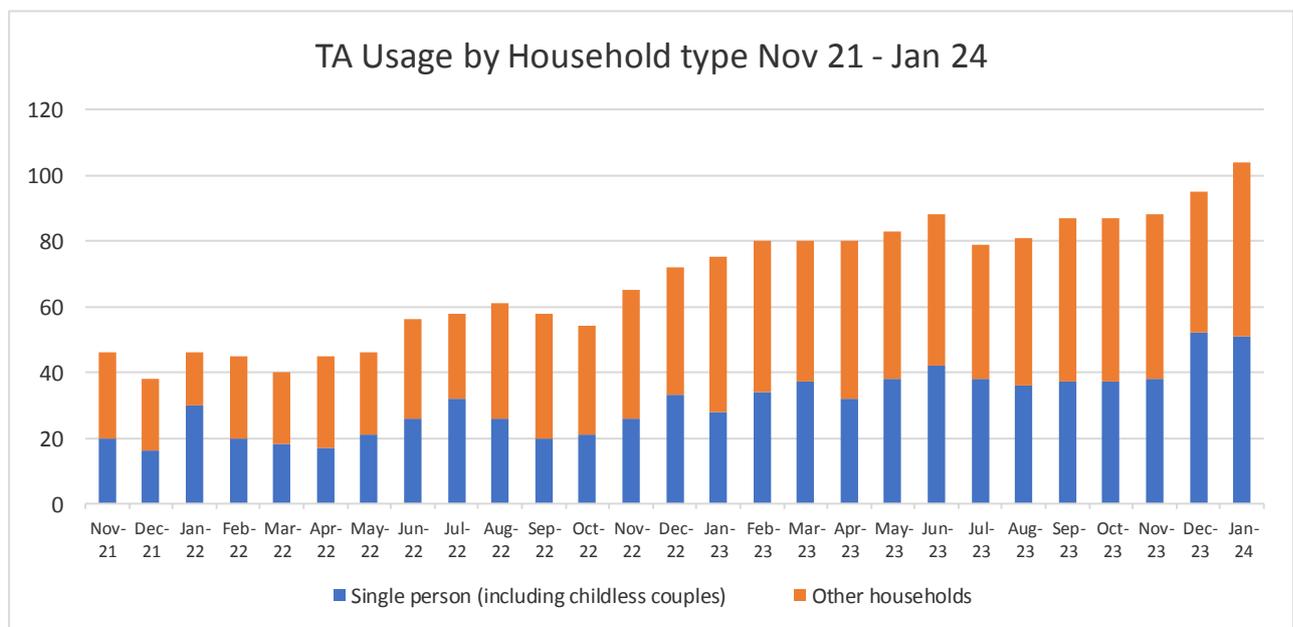


3.15 As can be seen in the chart above, the level of rough sleeping in the borough has reduced by 81% from 2018. This reduction is due to the development of a ‘mobile’

(frequently referred to as Outreach) service which provides purposeful, pro-active, and persistent support that aims to move Rough Sleepers from the streets into permanent accommodation. This service, provided by Birkenhead YMCA, and in partnership with other hostel services, operates throughout the night to encourage rough sleepers to access appropriate accommodation. A range of innovative tools are used through this programme to work with rough sleepers who, for various reasons, choose not to engage with statutory services.

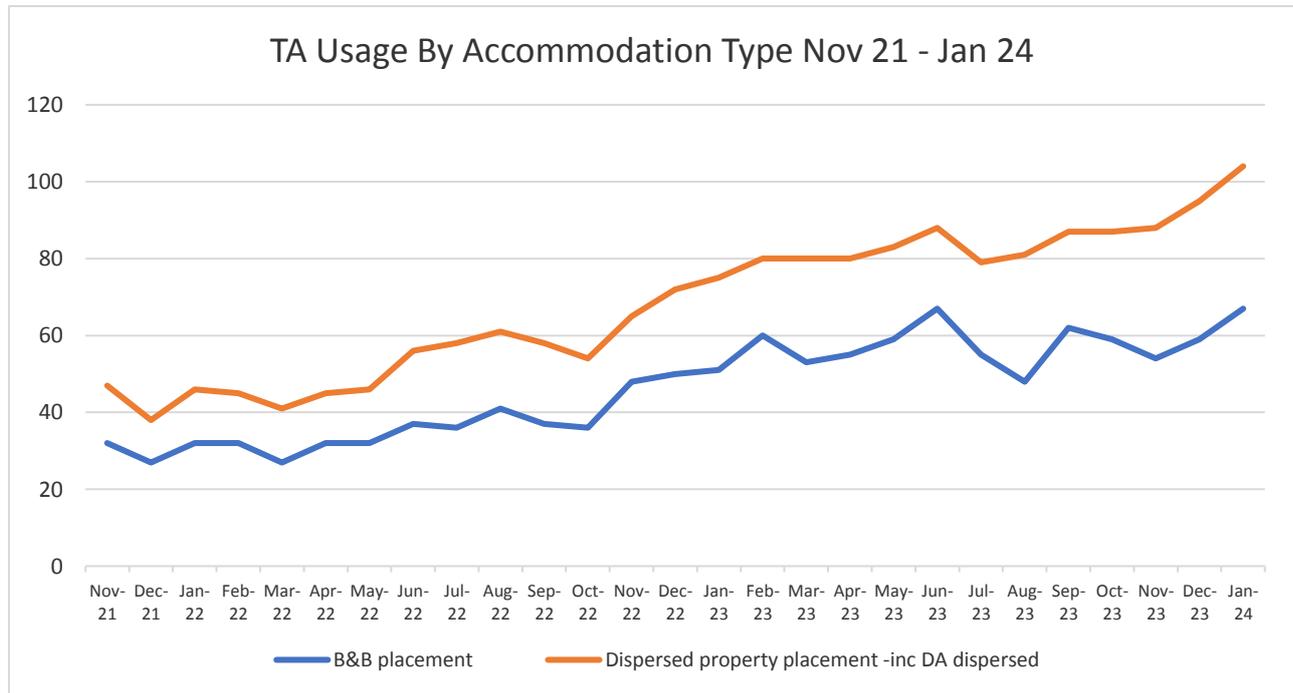
Homeless Temporary Accommodation Demand

- 3.16 The level of demand in Wirral has been increasing steadily in recent years and has led to a rise over the past year in households requiring temporary accommodation, particularly the use of B&Bs for emergency accommodation. There are currently 105 households in temporary accommodation, 73 of these are in B&B accommodation.
- 3.17 This increase in demand is compounded by the fact that some proprietors of B&B establishments are reluctant to accept a homeless client as a placement. This is a challenge for the Council, as whilst the primary approach by the housing team is to place within the borough, especially for families, it is dependent upon what placements can be sourced in emergency situations and can therefore result in some households being placed out of borough. Whilst this can be deemed to be an acceptable response in the Council meeting its statutory responsibilities based on availability, it does naturally result in complaints and enquiries from those households and Members.
- 3.18 The chart below shows the longer-term usage of Temporary Accommodation by household type and covers period November 2021 to January 2024.

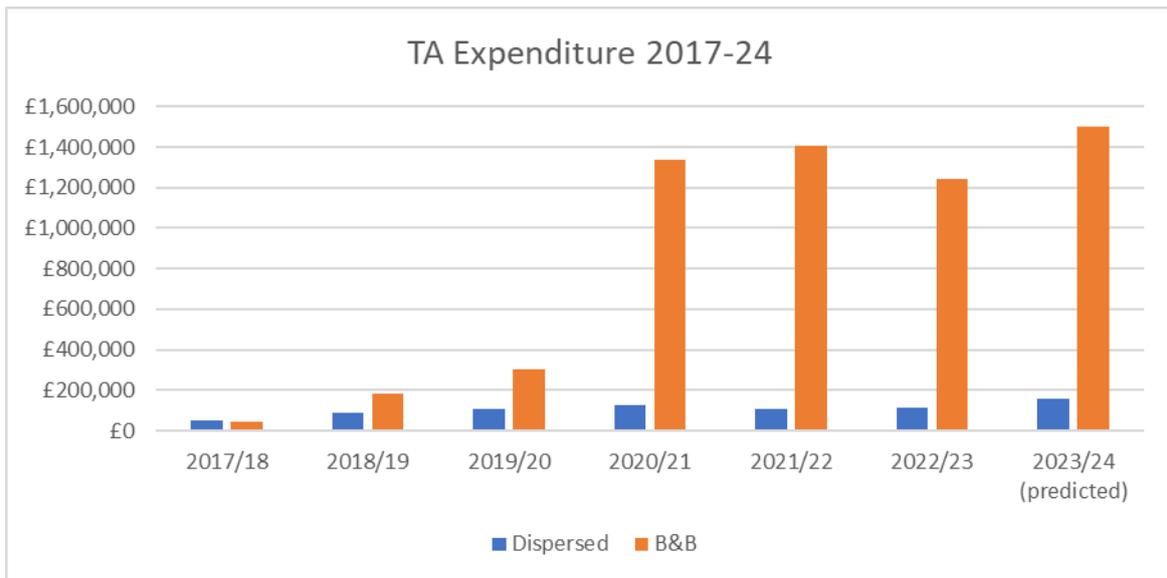


- 3.19 The lowest level of households in Temporary Accommodation was in December 2021 when there were 38 households placed, of which 22 were families (i.e. with dependent children) this was after a significant period of time and activity as part of

the move-on Plan, following the pandemic. However, since this time there has been a steady increase in those households as demonstrated in the chart above.



- 3.20 It is clear from the table above that the increase in hotel/B&B placements has significantly increased over the 2- year period that the table covers. The increase in use of Hotel/B&B is 109%.
- 3.21 The use of Dispersed, community-based accommodation (leased from local RPs) has also increased by 146% but is limited due to the quantity of this style of TA available to the Council and the difficulty in securing more at a time when the RPs are achieving almost maximum occupation of their properties.
- 3.22 One of the key challenges for the Housing Options Service is to reduce the use (and cost) of bed and breakfast accommodation which has a higher cost to the Council, than temporary dispersed accommodation. The cost can vary, however, on average it costs £375 per week more to place within bed and breakfast establishments, than dispersed accommodation.
- 3.23 When homeless households are provided with temporary accommodation leased by the Council, then the accommodation costs are mostly met by housing benefit charges. However, when this is not available and households are accommodated in hotels, this is with a significantly higher subsidy loss which, in turn, requires the Council to meet the shortfall from its own budget.
- 3.24 While the Council is facing increasing number of households presenting as homeless in crisis and needing support, the expenditure on Temporary Accommodation has risen from £406,418 in 2019 to a projected £1.6m in 2023/24. This places additional pressure on the General Fund budget and the Council's wider financial resources.



- 3.25 When considering the chart above, it should be noted that although expenditure is high between 2020 and 2022, this arose because of the Council complying with Governments mandate, during the pandemic, to accommodate all homeless people, irrespective of whether they were priority need or not (for which subsidy was received from Government). As the pandemic ended, it was considered that the level of Temporary Accommodation leased would either be sufficient, or may only require a slight increase, to meet the future demand. However, due to the unforeseen global factors that influenced levels of homelessness, this was not the case and, consequently, expenditure has continued to remain at high levels due to the reliance on emergency B&B accommodation.
- 3.26 The situation is further exacerbated by central Government having frozen subsidy levels specifically for temporary accommodation at the 2011 Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates which means the Council will only receive a contribution to TA costs, based on 2011 rates, even though costs and rental charges have dramatically increased.

Lack of Supply of Affordable Accommodation

- 3.27 There is a shortage of affordable and social housing options nationally, meaning that households are remaining in Temporary Accommodation for longer periods while they wait for a more sustainable longer-term home. Locally, there are currently circa 7,160 households on the Housing Register. Those who are homeless and owed a statutory duty under homeless legislation are given the highest priority, Band A, to help support them to be able to move as quickly as possible. There are currently 192 households on the register with a priority under homelessness duties.

Mitigation and Actions Taken in Response

- 3.34 Actions are being taken to address homelessness in Wirral and reduce the pressure of the need for B&B placements as follows:

- The principal route to move out of Temporary Accommodation is for households to access social housing to end the Council's homelessness duty and, although movement has slowed in recent years due to the pandemic, the Council has still been able to assist households into social housing. In 2022/23 111 households were accommodated via this route and, as of 31st January 2024, 132 households for 2023/24 financial year.
- The Housing team continues to commission supported homeless accommodation services, including hostels, refuges, semi-independent supported housing schemes and outreach/floating support, provided by a combination of charitable, voluntary, and social organisations which provide support to some 520 people at any one time.
- Increased the provision of temporary accommodation during 2023 from 23 units to 41, with a further 9 units expected to go live by the end of March 2024. This represents an increase of 117% which is significant in the current climate of supply. This has included the council maximising investment opportunities under the Local Authority Housing Fund, Homes England funding and ring-fenced eligible budgets.
- The launch of the Web-based Wirral Housing Advice aid self-help toolkit in April 2023. This enables all residents of the borough to access quality advice across a whole range of housing activity, not just Housing Options and Homelessness, and allows residents to self-refer into Housing Services. From March to December 2023, the toolkit received over 2300 Hits by 1673 separate users.
- A pilot with the DWP (Department of Work & Pensions) enabling them to identify and refer applicants in housing need, allowing the Council to intervene at an earlier stage and provide specific housing advice, in the hope of avoiding the need for a formal homeless application. From the start of the project in January 2023, the Housing Options Service has received 123 referrals from the DWP.
- Securing emergency sponsors for any Homes for Ukraine (HFU) or Resettlement cases who have experienced sponsor breakdowns to reduce the pressure on Temporary Accommodation.
- Utilising eligible funding to prevent HFU cases from needing to make a formal homeless application, including the holding of rehousing services events, services to support sponsors and placements, extension of winter pressure payments, deposits for private sector tenancies and funding for furniture packages and additional staff to respond to the Governments fast track decision process; and
- Mitigate cost increases to the Council on subsidy loss through negotiation and brokerage between hostel providers and housing benefits to reduce the annual loss by approximately £265K for 2022/23, with further hostels to be reviewed for this financial year's subsidy return.

- Daily multi-agency meetings to review new presentations of single homeless people to ensure best use of commissioned homeless accommodation services.
- Proposal for changes to the financial assistance policy, which is the subject of a separate report to Members at this Committee, to increase the current incentives to landlords to bring back empty properties into use but linked to a 3-year nomination right for placement of homeless cases.

Further Actions

3.36 The following represent the further actions to be undertaken by the Council to respond to homelessness pressure and also reduce the reliance on B&B accommodation, particularly for families, over the next 12 months.

- Increased utilisation of the Private Rented Sector to discharge the Council's statutory duties. The government encourages and empowers Councils to make use of the Private Rented Sector to discharge statutory duties.
- The extension of the Resettlement Team to support homeless households to move out of temporary accommodation into permanent, private-rented sector housing arrangements.
- The recruitment of another Housing Assessment and Prevention Officer to work directly with HM Prison Service to determine priority need at the earliest stage of prisoners being released and facilitate access to alternatives to Temporary Accommodation.
- A further review of the Council's Landlord Incentive programme to ensure that it maximises access to Private-Rented Sector accommodation for larger family households and expand areas of choice.
- Explore further the availability of other accommodation that can be secured as an alternative to the current, expensive, B&B/Hotel provision.
- Increase the numbers of temporary accommodation further to reduce the numbers required to be placed into bed and breakfast and ensure that no family is placed outside of the borough, unless for safety reasons, in B&B/ accommodation.
- Consider the customer journey as part of the Council's approach to efficient services and the Enabling Services review.
- Complete the 5-year statutory Homeless Review of services to inform future commissioning activity to meet local needs.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1 The total budget allocated for the delivery of the Housing Options Service is £3,358,935, comprising:

1. £1,193,561 contribution from the General Fund.
 2. £946,336 from several national programme grant/new burden awards that currently support the work of the Council in both preventing and responding to homelessness for 2023/24. Government allocations to continue in 2024/25; and
 3. £1,219,038 recouped (to date in 2023/24) through Housing Benefit claims associated rental income associated with Temporary Accommodation.
- 4.2 £1.6m is forecasted to be spent on B&B during 2023/24, against a budget of £1.405m meaning a forecasted £200,000 overspend in 2023/24. This overspend is being mitigated by an increase in Housing Benefit Rental Income and eligible offsetting of some costs against ring fenced grant awards allocated to assist with responding to Homelessness and winter pressures. Therefore the actions outlined in this report have helped to mitigate some of the financial pressures with a balanced Homeless budget forecast for 2023/24.
- 4.3 It is a legal requirement to undertake a review of homelessness in the borough and publish a strategy that sets out how homelessness will be tackled. The current strategy is due to expire in 2025 and, consequently, a new review will be commissioned in 2024/25 financial year. It is estimated that the cost of commissioning this review will be £50,000 but this will be met within existing resources.

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The Council has a duty under Section 188(1) of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended) to provide accommodation to applicants and their households if they have reason to believe that the applicant may be homeless, be eligible for assistance; have a priority need and be unintentionally homeless.
- 5.2 The Housing Act 1996 Part VII (as amended) sets out the circumstances where a local authority is required to provide temporary accommodation to homeless households. The expectations for this temporary accommodation are set out in the Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) (England) Order 2012. There is also statutory guidance by way of the Homelessness Code of Guidance for local authorities.
- 5.3 It is anticipated that the plans set out in this report will assist in ensuring that the Council is able to meet its statutory duties as outlined above.

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

- 6.1 There are no direct implications arising from this report.
- 6.2 Officers will be required to contribute to the development of the Homeless Review but will be met through existing staff resources.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 7.1 Risks arising from increases in homelessness presentations are contained within both the Corporate and Regeneration and Place Directorate Risk Registers. These also outline the mitigation and controls in place to manage these identified risks.
- 7.2 As a result of the growing numbers presenting to the council for support and temporary accommodation, the most significant risk to the Council is the financial pressures associated with the use of bed and breakfast accommodation, as set out in the financial implications section of this report. This risk will be mitigated through the delivery plans focussed on preventing homelessness increasing the range and number of temporary accommodation options.
- 7.3 Should the Council not provide enough temporary accommodation to meet demand, it will be in breach of its statutory duty to provide temporary accommodation for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.
- 7.4 National Programme funding as identified in the financial implications of this report are awarded to Councils, if any of this funding was to cease, a report would be presented to Members on the impact and options available for consideration at that time.
- 7.5 For residents placed into non-self-contained accommodation (board and lodging or licensed), Housing Benefit subsidy will be limited to the one-bedroom self-contained Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rate based on the location of the property. For those in self-contained licensed and short-term leased accommodation, the maximum Housing Benefit subsidy will be determined by using 90% of the Local Housing Allowance rate for the size of the property. These subsidy rules have a significant impact on the income the Council can recoup depending on the type of accommodation used, particularly when this is Bed and Breakfast or hotel accommodation.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 8.1 No engagement or consultation was required as part of this report.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Wirral Council has a legal requirement to make sure its policies, and the way it carries out its work, do not discriminate against anyone. An Equality Impact Assessment is a tool to help council services identify steps they can take to ensure equality for anyone who might be affected by a particular policy, decision, or activity.
- 9.2 The aims and objectives of the Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy and, by extension, the work of the Housing Options Service is compliant with the Equality Act 2010 and Public Sector Equality Duty. Services commissioned or provided across the Council in respect of supporting individuals who are homeless, threatened with homelessness or may be sleeping rough outlined in this report have regard to, and ensure, that all protected characteristics are not negatively impacted.

9.3 This report is linked to the Equality Impact assessment undertaken in respect of the Wirral Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2020-2025, which has been reviewed and updated and still valid for this report. This can be found at the following link:

<https://www.wirral.gov.uk/communities-and-neighbourhoods/equality-impact-assessments>

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

10.1 The content and/or recommendations contained within this report are expected to have no impact on emissions of Greenhouse Gases.

11.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS

11.1 The objectives of the Councils housing services team and commissioned providers are to improve the economic, social and health outcomes of the borough, through the provision of accommodation and support services, leading to improved outcomes for homeless people.

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APPENDICES

Not applicable

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Homelessness Code of Guidance for local authorities.

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/homelessness-code-of-guidance-for-local-authorities>

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date