

WELWYN HATFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL
CABINET – 4 SEPTEMBER 2018
REPORT OF THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR (HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES)

HOMELESSNESS REDUCTION ACT AND TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION UPDATE

1 Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report sets out the impact on the housing needs service of the implementation of the Homeless Reduction Act, which was implemented on 3 April 2018 – in particular the increase in workload of the team, which is a direct result of the extension of duties.
- 1.2 The report sets out the current position in terms of the occupation of temporary accommodation and the current reliance on bed and breakfast accommodation, with associated costs and provides members with an overview of the measures being taken to reduce the use of bed and breakfast.
- 1.3 The report updates members on the use of the government ring fenced flexible homeless support grant and seeks authority to use some of the available grant funding to support the proposed Night Shelter project, which is currently planned at Queensway House. The grant funding provided will be time limited to support the start up running costs of the project, whilst further funds are sought by Resolve, and will be made available subject to a signed agreement and linked to the achievement of specified outcomes.

2 Recommendation(s)

- 2.1 Cabinet note the content of this report, including the increased demands placed on the housing needs team and the actions that are being undertaken to seek to reduce the reliance on bed and breakfast accommodation.
- 2.2 Cabinet note the potential budget pressure as outlined in this report, which will continue to be assessed as part of the budget monitoring process.
- 2.3 Cabinet approves the recommendation to direct £120k of the flexible homeless support grant funding to Resolve, over a maximum of a three year period, subject to the successful implementation of the Night Shelter project.

3 Explanation

- 3.1 The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which became law in 2018 places new duties on local authorities to help prevent the homelessness of all families and single people, regardless of priority need, who are eligible for assistance and threatened with homelessness.
- 3.2 The Act places a greater emphasis on intervention and acting quickly to provide advice and prevent homelessness, rather than only intervening when it has become crisis point. It also extends the duties placed on the council to offer more help to people considered to be 'non priority'.
- 3.3 The key changes are set out at Appendix A
- 3.4 The Act significantly extends the duties of the council to provide housing advice and homeless prevention advice and specifically states that the service must be designed to meet the needs of the following groups:
 - People released from prison or youth detention accommodation
 - Care Leavers
 - Former members of the regular armed forces
 - Victims of domestic abuse
 - Person's leaving hospital
 - Person's suffering from a mental illness or impairment and
 - Any other group that the authority identifies as being at particular risk of homelessness in the district
- 3.5 For applicants who are already homeless or who become homeless at the end of the 56 day prevention period, the new initial duty gives the council a 56 day window in order to resolve the applicant's homelessness. The initial duty can be discharged by securing suitable private sector accommodation for a minimum period of six months.
- 3.6 The Act increases the opportunities available to the applicant to request a review of decisions made by the council at various stages in the application process. There are 33 points in the process where an applicant may ask for a review. Depending on the number of requests received, this could have significant resource implications
- 3.7 An officer project group was formed to oversee the implementation of the Act, including the review of processes and enhancement of our homeless prevention services and rehousing options. In response to the new duties, the housing needs team was restructured and a tier of management removed, in order to invest more resource to the front line. The housing options officers are now responsible from the first point of contact to the conclusion of the case.
- 3.8 Whilst the number of customers approaching the service since April has remained consistent with previous years, the requirements introduced by the Act has led to an increase in the number of customers who become an active case and the

length of time spent with each household has increased. The initial interview takes between 1.5 to 2 hours per customer. The information taken in the interview is then used to create a Personalised Housing Plan, and this Plan becomes the blueprint for the actions taken to assist that customer.

3.9 We have streamlined processes as far as possible and we are also in discussion with our IT provider about an enhanced package, which will include the ability for customers to interact with the portal and to make updates and provide information directly via the online service, which will save time. The government has provided a small grant to help councils improve their IT systems and we hope that this will be sufficient to cover any additional costs.

3.10 Key figures relating to the current service and change in demands so far are set out below:

Year	Total Enquiries full year	Total Housing Options Cases	Total accepted full duty	Total number in Temporary accommodation
2016/17	1454	294 (20% of enquiries)	119	65 cases March 2017
2017/18	1092	264 (24% of enquiries)	171	100 cases March 2018
2018/19 (Quarter One only)	284	223 (78.5% of enquiries)	12*	113 cases end of July 2018

*Due to the extension in the duty period, the process leading up to a final decision is extended and therefore the number of decisions are currently low; over time we would expect this to increase, as it is due to the initial time lag following the introduction of the new Act.

3.11 Caseloads

3.12 The table above highlights that although the number of customers seeking housing advice remains steady, the percentage of customers who are now dealt with more intensively and become part of an ongoing caseload has tripled.

3.13 At the time of writing (31 July) the open cases were 130, which is equivalent to an active officer caseload of 32.5 cases per officer (based on 4 in post); once fully staffed (6 officers) this would be 21.7 cases per officer. It is too early to say whether this caseload number will remain steady and it will be kept under review. The housing options officers also retain responsibility for households who are temporarily accommodated and awaiting a permanent housing solution. At any

given time this is likely to be around 50 to 60 households between the team. Under the previous legislation, the accepted 'norm' for caseloads was between 11 to 20 cases per officer.

- 3.14 Due to the increased number of households in temporary accommodation, there is pressure on the staff managing this. A vacant support officer post will be filled this month and we are currently reviewing the role profile of the temporary accommodation administrator. Once we have got the team fully staffed, we will review the capacity in this area.
- 3.15 We have also seen an increase in the complexity of cases that are presenting to the service or being referred by statutory agencies such as social care. The lack of supported housing means that the council is often the last resort and we are being asked to accommodate people who would previously have been offered a more supported housing environment. This poses challenges in terms of where we place people safely – both in terms of their own well-being and the well-being/safety of other residents – and how we manage people going forward.
- 3.16 We are working with Herts County Council and Herts Partnership Foundation Trust on a strategic and operational level to try and resolve these issues, although most solutions are likely to be longer term.

3.17 Temporary Accommodation Trend

The graph attached at Appendix B shows the increased number of households living in temporary accommodation over the last fifteen month period. This shows the total number of households in temporary accommodation, plus the number within each type of temporary accommodation. In particular the growth in the number of households being placed in Bed and Breakfast accommodation is of concern and brings its own pressures; it is very challenging for the households concerned and also resource intensive, as the process for booking and payment is long winded and the degree of contact with the customer is intensified.

- 3.18 The reasons for the growth in numbers is mainly due to the lack of move on accommodation, which has meant that the average time spent in temporary accommodation has increased from around 15 weeks last year to between 8 to 12 months over the past six months. Again this presents significant challenge to the team, as households become very dissatisfied with their circumstances and understandably contact the team on a frequent basis to query the status of move on and time frames.

3.19 Moving Forward – short term to medium term

- 3.20 There is an officer project team working on developing alternative accommodation options which should reduce the number of households being placed in bed and breakfast accommodation. There are a number of actions being progressed and some of the key actions are highlighted below:

- Consideration of properties which are currently empty, owned by the council or partner agencies, and earmarked for redevelopment as possible temporary accommodation in the interim.
- Consider the option of joining the scheme (ADAM) which facilitates access to nightly paid temporary accommodation (currently predominantly used by London Boroughs)
- Explore the feasibility of setting up a private sector leasing scheme or similar.
- Consideration of pods or shipping container style temporary accommodation on vacant sites. These are becoming more widely used by councils and housing associations.

3.21 As part of the Affordable Housing Programme we have commenced a project to redevelop and increase capacity at our main temporary accommodation site – Howlands House - and are due to consult on the potential change of use and redevelopment of a second site in Hatfield.

3.22 Flexible Homeless Grant

3.23 Since 2017/18 the government has provided an annual flexible homeless grant, to be used to help prevent homelessness or find housing solutions to relieve homelessness. Details of the annual grants made available to the council are set out in Paragraph 4.6. The government has not committed to providing this grant beyond 2019/20.

3.24 In July 2017 Cabinet approved a recommendation to allocate grant funding to a number of schemes, including the Housing First project – which provides outreach services to rough sleepers, specialist debt advice to anyone who is sofa surfing or rough sleeping and a supported house, via DrugLink.

3.25 At the time of that report the government was planning to reduce the housing benefit available to anyone who was under 35 years and in social housing and therefore funding was set aside to support a potential project to help provide an affordable housing solution for this client group. Following a change in policy approach, this is no longer required for the purpose and the funds can be re-allocated to other initiatives.

3.26 At the last meeting of Cabinet on 7 August, members considered and approved, in principle, the recommendations relating to a proposal to set up a Night Shelter in Queensway House. This included approval of the partial funding of the capital costs of conversion, from retained Right to Buy receipts.

3.27 The team have been in discussion with Resolve about their requirements in terms of operating the Shelter, which – subject to planning approval – will provide 15 bed spaces; the Shelter, which will be available 365 days per year and will require a core paid staffing presence. It is proposed that £120k is set aside from the council's available flexible homeless grant – to be used to support the start up running costs of the Shelter for a minimum of two years and up to three years.

- 3.28 This proposal is based on the understanding that this sum is coming from a ring fenced government grant and that Resolve will raise alternative funds in order to ensure that the Shelter is sustainable in the long term, without relying on council revenue funding.
- 3.29 Subject to approval of the recommendations in this report, there will be approximately £140k remaining from the flexible homeless support grant, which is set aside to support a potential private sector leasing scheme and/or other initiatives. A further report will be brought setting out recommendations in relation to such a scheme, once the options have been fully considered.

Implications

4 Financial Implication(s)

- 4.1 The government made a small amount of money available to local councils under the new burdens regime in recognition of the additional duties within the Homeless Reduction Act. This council received approximately £35k per annum for three years, which is being used to support additional front line staffing costs.
- 4.2 Homelessness is a statutory function, funded from the General Fund, although the Council can, and does make use of HRA properties to support the provision temporary accommodation. In these scenarios, the income and expenditure is maintained within the HRA, and provides a net income to the HRA. All other income and expenditure is allocated to the General Fund.
- 4.3 Until the implementation of the new regulations this year, the majority of temporary accommodation needs were met through the use of HRA properties and arrangements with third sector providers and registered housing providers, with a very small proportion of need being met by the use of bed and breakfast.
- 4.4 Since the implementation of the regulations and the increase in duties on Local Government, there has been a significant increase in the use of bed and breakfast, from an average of just over 2 per month in 2017/18, to an average of just under 11 per month, based on the first four months of 2018/19.
- 4.5 It should be noted that for the first four months of this year, the net expenditure incurred on the provision of temporary accommodation is around £48k and the position will continue to be monitored as part of the budget monitoring process.
- 4.6 There is also an increase in expenditure on goods and services required to ensure that additional temporary accommodation provided within our own housing stock is fit for purpose – for example white goods and flooring for temporary self-contained units. This is currently being funded by existing budgets.
- 4.7 The government has made available an annual flexible homelessness support grant, which is ring fenced to support homelessness services. The following sums have been allocated, prior to the recommendations contained within this report:

Year	Allocation to WHBC £'000	Commitment/ Expenditure £'000	Balance remaining £'000
2017/18	202	84	118
2018/19	228	168	60
2019/20	280	198	82
Total – three years	710	450	260

4.8 To date we have committed just over £450k over the three year period, which provides the Housing First initiative; an enhanced 'spend to save' budget – a fund that can be used by front line officers to prevent homelessness or help secure suitable housing in the private sector; specialised staff training; access to a specialist mediation service and a contribution to a fixed term post within the housing needs team. This leaves a balance of just under £260k, which will reduce to £140k following approval of the recommendations in this report.

4.9 The government has provided a new burdens grant to help support the implementation of any new IT required to deliver the new duties. This was a one off sum of around £9k.

5 Legal Implication(s)

5.1 The Homeless Reduction Act 2017 gained Royal Assent in April 2017 and was implemented from April 2018.

5.2 The 'duty to refer' which is a duty on public sector organisations to refer cases where they believe someone may have triggered a homeless duty to a housing authority, will come into force in October 2018. We are anticipating that this will lead to an increase in demand on services and additional burdens, as each referral will need to be considered.

6 Climate Change Implication(s)

6.1 There are no Climate Change implications arising directly from this report.

7 Risk Management Implications

7.1 The risks related to this report are:

7.2 Legal, Reputational and Financial

Legal – assessing and meeting the duties arising from the homeless legislation is a statutory responsibility for the council. The HRA has brought about a significant change to the legal duties and introduced many new opportunities for applicants to seek a review of the council's decision(s). A project group has overseen the

implementation of the Act and relevant training provided to officers. A full process review was conducted. We are still recruiting to vacant roles and so the team is not yet at full capacity, however based on current demand on the service we believe the team will continue to be under pressure Risk score subject to controls being in place: Likelihood Medium; Impact Medium.

Reputational – it is important that the council adheres to the new legislative framework and that our staff and stakeholders are knowledgeable about our legal duties. Failure to implement these new duties adequately could be detrimental to households seeking help from the council and will be a reputational risk to the council and could leave us vulnerable to legal challenge regarding our decision making. Risk score subject to controls being in place: Likelihood Medium; Impact Medium.

Financial – the Act has placed new burdens on the council and there is an associated cost of additional staffing. The government has provided new burdens funding, which has been used to expand the capacity of the team and the restructure has increased the number of front line officers; additional budget has been provided for a two year period, whilst the new processes bed in and we get a fuller understanding of the long term impacts; we have also funded additional resource via the flexible homeless support grant, which will provide support to the team to enable homeless prevention. We are looking at various options to provide alternative temporary accommodation as an alternative to expensive options such as bed and breakfast. Risk score subject to controls being in place. Likelihood High; Impact High

8 Security & Terrorism Implications

8.1 There are no additional implications arising from this report.

9 Procurement Implications

9.1 There are no implications arising from this report.

10 Link to Corporate Priorities

10.1 I confirm that the subject of this report is linked to the Council's Corporate Priority, Our Housing, and specifically planning for current and future housing need and prevention of homelessness, as set out in the council's Housing and Homelessness Strategy 2013-2018.

11 Equality and Diversity

11.1 An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) has been carried out in relation to projects that are already funded via the flexible homeless support grant and an EIA will be carried out in relation to the recommendation to fund the running costs of the Night Shelter project, in partnership with Resolve. However in brief, this is a new service and therefore will provide services which are not currently available. It will be accessible to all and will have separate accommodation for men and women.

12 Communication Plan

- 12.1 The council will work in partnership with Resolve and other partners to the Night Shelter project to engage with stakeholders to promote the service.
- 12.2 The council actively promotes its homeless prevention services and options, in order to encourage people to seek help as early as possible

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Date: 8 August 2018