

WELWYN HATFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL
CABINET HOUSING PANEL – 31 JULY 2023
REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR (PLACE)

MEMBER UPDATE ON HOUSING OPTIONS SERVICE

1 **Executive Summary**

- 1.1 The Housing Options team is responsible for the homelessness functions of the Council, and the priority of the Housing Options team is to prevent and relieve homelessness. This report provides information on the on-going work and performance of the team and will be supplemented by a presentation at CHP.

2 **Recommendation**

- 2.1 That Cabinet Housing Panel note the contents of the report.

3 **Explanation**

- 3.1 The Housing Options team is responsible for the Council's homelessness functions. The priority of the team is firstly to prevent homelessness from occurring, and secondly to relieve homelessness where it does occur.
- 3.2 Prevention of homelessness is sought by negotiating with excluders (landlords, relatives, friends etc) to maintain the existing accommodation. That may be for the long term, such as negotiating with landlords to agree a new tenancy, or a short period for the applicant to find somewhere else to live. The earlier that the team are able to work with a person at risk of homelessness, the more opportunity there is for successful intervention.
- 3.3 Relief of homelessness is concerned with ending a period of homelessness that has already taken place. Resources are devoted to finding accommodation for applicants, to end their homelessness.
- 3.4 In 2018 new legislation was passed, The Homelessness Reduction Act, which placed additional obligations on local authorities to provide housing advice and assistance to those who were homeless or threatened with homelessness. The main additional obligations were:
- To provide assistance to those threatened with homelessness within 56 days (previously the period was 28 days)
 - To provide ongoing assistance for those threatened with homelessness for up to 56 days (indefinite period for those being evicted by private landlords)
 - To provide ongoing assistance for those that were homeless for up to 56 days

- To provide a Personalised Housing Plan to all those that were homeless or threatened with homelessness.

3.5 Some of the ways in which resources are used to carry out this work include:

- Deposits are paid to secure accommodation
- Rent is paid for the first month, which is often a requirement for new tenancies
- Applicants are eligible for other costs to be paid from a *Homelessness Prevention Fund*
- Insurance policies are taken out to guarantee the rent, providing assurance to landlords that they are not left out of pocket
- Applicants are eligible to receive assistance to pay rent arrears or other debts that are jeopardising their accommodation.

Partnership working to prevent homelessness

- 3.6 Partnerships have been established with housing associations, letting agents, other public bodies and charities, with the goal of ensuring communication so that homelessness prevention is a shared priority.
- 3.7 Pathways have been established to ensure that households are referred to the Housing options team as early as possible, with the intention that action is taken at initial stages rather than later in the process when it may be too late, or more expensive.
- 3.8 Partnership working with other Council departments, including the Income team dealing with Council Housing rent accounts, Neighbourhoods teams dealing with the tenants and general tenancy issues and the Allocations team dealing with the Council Housing Register.
- 3.9 The Council has also recently entered a partnership with Beam, a social enterprise, to utilise external funding to secure private sector housing and employment opportunities for people in the Borough; this innovative approach is aimed at accessing a sector of the housing market that has previously been hard to generate interest.

Working with the Allocations team

- 3.10 Housing Allocations and Homelessness are linked, sitting alongside each other in legislation (Parts VI and VII of the Housing Act 1996).
- 3.11 The teams work closely together, with many households that approach the Housing options team becoming eligible for additional banding on the Housing Needs Register. Those that the Council accept a housing duty towards are additional priority on the register.

Rising Demand

- 3.12 Since the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act in April 2018, the Council has seen a gradual increase in the number of approaches to the service.

Year	Number of Approaches to the service	Average per month
2018/19	1195	99.6
2019/20	1258	104.8
2020/21	1543	128.6
2021/22	1882	156.8
2022/23	2173	181.1

3.13 In order to deal with this rising demand, there have been a number of measures undertaken.

- Restructure of the team, and additional staffing (funded from Government grants)
- Increased use of Council properties as Temporary accommodation
- New partnership initiatives, including pilot project with Beam, CGL & Mind, YMCA, Resolve, Druglink and Citizens Advice.
- Increased engagement with the private sector and conversations around incentives.
- Increased communications, seeking to ensure that households approach our service earlier.

3.14 As a result we have seen an increase in the number of households where homelessness is successfully prevented.

Year	Number of Preventions
2018/19	235
2019/20	260
2020/21	271
2021/22	391
2022/23	428

3.15 Whilst the previous KPIs can give an impression that we have a “static” number of households in temporary accommodation, in reality the team have been able to support many people to gain sustained housing, but the team continues to look for new ways to meet the significant demand on the service.

Temporary accommodation

- 3.16 Temporary Accommodation refers to the housing that is used to accommodate those households to whom the Council owe a homelessness duty. Not every household that approaches a local authority will be accommodated. It is perhaps best explained with this example:

In a month 200 households approach Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council. Of that 200, 60 may be homeless at the point that they approach the Council. Of that 60, 30 may meet the criteria to be provided with temporary accommodation.

- 3.17 Homelessness Legislation sets out the criteria that local authorities work to, when deciding whether a household is owed a duty to be provided with suitable accommodation. If the criteria is met, then the council must by law provide suitable accommodation for that household.
- 3.18 Broadly, the criteria is related to the level of vulnerability of a household. Vulnerability in this sense is known as Priority Need. A household in Priority Need is owed an accommodation duty if they are homeless.
- 3.19 Some households meet the automatic criteria. Households with dependent children are automatically owed an accommodation duty. The full list of automatic criteria is below:
- a. a pregnant woman or a person with whom she resides or might reasonably be expected to reside
 - b. a person with whom dependent children reside or might reasonably be expected to reside
 - c. a person who is homeless as a result of that person being a victim of domestic abuse
 - d. a person aged 16 or 17
 - e. a person under 21 who was (but is no longer) looked after, accommodated or fostered between the ages of 16 and 18
 - f. a person who is homeless, or threatened with homelessness, as a result of an emergency such as flood, fire or other disaster.
- 3.20 Others may be considered to be vulnerable to the extent that they are owed an accommodation duty, but this isn't automatic, and is subject to an assessment.
- 3.21 For those that do not meet the criteria for accommodation to be provided, they are still provided with advice and an assessment is carried out to determine the necessary steps that should be taken to assist that person in finding accommodation.
- 3.22 A breakdown of the Council's temporary accommodation is provided in Appendix A.

4 Legal Implication(s)

- 4.1 This report does not have any direct legal implications, but the work of the team must be carried out in strict accordance with homelessness legislation.

5 Financial Implication(s)

- 5.1 There are no direct financial implications from this report. The team work closely with finance colleagues to utilise government grant funding for much of the homelessness prevention work.

6 Risk Management Implications

There are no direct risk implications from this report.

7 Security and Terrorism Implication(s)

- 7.1 There are no direct implications from this report.

8 Procurement Implication(s)

- 8.1 There are no direct implications from this report.

9 Climate Change Implication(s)

- 9.1 There are no direct implications from this report.

10 Human Resources Implication(s)

- 10.1 There are no direct implications from this report

11 Health and Wellbeing Implication(s)

- 11.1 We have a high number of households living in temporary accommodation. This type of accommodation, particularly for families with children, can have a detrimental effect on residents' health and wellbeing if it is not adequate to meet their needs. It is important that we use all of the tools at our disposal to support these families to find permanent accommodation.

12 Communication and Engagement Implication(s)

- 12.1 There are no direct implications from this report.

13 Link to Corporate Priorities

- 13.1 The subject of this report is linked to the Council's Strategic Aim 'Quality Homes Through Managed Growth', and specifically to the achievement of 'providing high quality housing, thriving neighbourhoods and sustainable communities.

14 Equality and Diversity

- 14.1 An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) was not completed because this report does not propose changes to existing service-related policies or the development of new service-related policies.

Title
Date

Housing Options Manager
Tuesday 18 July 2023