

Report To:	CABINET	Date:	19 OCTOBER 2017
Heading:	SCRUTINY CONSIDERATION OF HOMELESSNESS – INTERIM REPORT		
Portfolio Holder:	N/A		
Ward/s:	ALL		
Key Decision:	NO		
Subject to Call-In:	NO		

Purpose Of Report

As part of the Scrutiny Workplan consultation, Members approved the topic of considering access to homelessness services and how we work with our partner agencies in addressing and preventing homelessness at the earliest possible stage.

The Panel held 2 meetings on this issue, however during the course of consideration of this topic, national progress on the Homelessness Reduction Bill and preparations of the Council to deal with these changes started to take place, thus changing the focus of the review.

This interim report provides an overview of the considerations of the Panel and its conclusions so far.

Recommendations

- that Council recognises the importance of developing effective prevention initiatives (the Homelessness Reduction Bill [now an Act] seeks to place extra duties on Councils) to facilitate early intervention with households/persons at risk of homelessness to provide more detailed advice, support and guidance thus preventing homelessness wherever possible;
- that the Council continues to strengthen relationships with third sector organisations to facilitate the pooling of resources for tackling homelessness or the threat of homelessness within the Ashfield District;
- Members to be furnished with a copy of the 'How to Contact the Housing Options Team' leaflet;
- to consider the possibility of working with late night establishments and community initiatives to raise awareness and facilitate the necessary signposting should persons present themselves as homeless or are believed to be under threat of homelessness;

- to continue to work effectively with local services and communities to ensure the new outreach service is as effective as possible;
- to ensure that Panel Members are kept informed of progress with the Homelessness Reduction Bill [now an Act] and revisit the topic in due course to understand its implications.

Reasons for Recommendation(s)

Homelessness was agreed as a Scrutiny Workplan Topic in 2016. The Homelessness Reduction Act achieved Royal Assent in April 2017, placing a number of additional requirements on the Council.

Alternative Options Considered (With Reasons Why Not Adopted)

As detailed in the report.

Detailed Information

Homelessness Definition

Homelessness is the problem faced by people who lack a place to live that is supportive, affordable, decent and secure. Whilst rough sleepers are the most visible homeless population, the vast majority of homeless people often live in hostels, squats, bed and breakfasts or in temporary and insecure conditions with friends and family.

People who experience homelessness are often amongst the most vulnerable people in our society, suffering from a combination of poor housing, unemployment, low income, bad health, poor skills, loneliness, isolation and relationship breakdown. Whilst there is some debate over the precise definition of homelessness there is a widespread acceptance that homelessness is about more than rooflessness.

A home is not just a physical space; it provides “roots, identity, security, a sense of belonging and a place of emotional wellbeing”; it is also a practical pre-requisite to living and working in modern society, with a permanent address often being a basic requirement for employers and other essential services.

Most statistics on homelessness relate to the statutorily homeless, i.e. those households which meet specific criteria of priority need set out in legislation, and to whom a homelessness duty has been accepted by a local authority. Such households may not be homeless in the literal sense of being without a roof over their heads, but are more likely to be threatened with the loss of, or are unable to continue with, their current accommodation.

Statutory homelessness

Each local housing authority is required to consider housing needs within its area, including the needs of homeless households, to whom local authorities have a statutory duty to provide assistance.

The Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977, Housing Act 1996, and the Homelessness Act 2002, placed statutory duties on local housing authorities to ensure that advice and

assistance to households who are homeless or threatened with homelessness is available

free of charge. All households that apply for assistance under the Housing and Homelessness Acts are referred to as 'decisions'. However, these do not include households found to be ineligible for assistance (some persons from abroad are ineligible for assistance).

A 'main homelessness duty' is owed where the authority is satisfied that the applicant is eligible for assistance, unintentionally homeless and falls within a specified priority need group. Such statutorily homeless households are referred to as 'acceptances'.

The 'priority need groups' include households with dependent children or a pregnant woman and people who are vulnerable in some way e.g. because of mental illness or physical disability. In 2002 an Order made under the 1996 Act extended the priority need categories to include applicants:

- aged 16 or 17
- aged 18 to 20 who were previously in care
- vulnerable as a result of time spent in care, in custody, or in HM Forces
- vulnerable as a result of having to flee their home because of violence or the threat of violence

Where a main duty is owed, the authority must ensure that suitable accommodation is available for the applicant and his or her household. The duty continues until a settled housing solution becomes available for them, or some other circumstance brings the duty to an end. Where households are found to be intentionally homeless, or not in priority need, the authority must make an assessment of their housing needs and provide advice and assistance to help them find accommodation for themselves.

Housing Options Team (Ashfield and Mansfield)

Ashfield District Council deliver homelessness services through the Housing Options Team, this is delivered jointly with Mansfield District Council and operates under a 'shared service' arrangement where advice and assistance can be obtained in either Ashfield or Mansfield. The housing options service is available to anyone who is homeless or who could become homeless in the near future or would like general housing advice.

The Team provide a range of support services to anyone that;

- Has nowhere to live;
- Has been told to leave their home by a parent, relative, friend or partner;
- Need to leave their home because of domestic abuse, violence or threats;
- Has mortgage or rent arrears that they cannot afford to pay;
- Has been told by their landlord that they need to leave.

The Housing Options Team also provide advice and help to assist in the prevention of homelessness. This includes;

- Advice on the different housing options available, which might include being able to stay in their current home or having to move;
- Advice about rights as a tenant or as an owner;
- Explore options to prevent having to leave the home;
- Advice on paying housing costs, which may include how to claim benefits;
- Assistance to find other housing accommodation including private rented, council, housing associations, supported accommodation, emergency housing and refuges.

The Team also provide a range of other specialist support services that may help prevent

homelessness or assist with someone who presents themselves as homeless. These include;

- Specialist debt advice
- Bond Guarantee Scheme
- Sanctuary Scheme
- Referrals for Tenancy Support
- Referrals to Supported accommodation

The shared service with Mansfield District Council commenced in March 2015 with the team remaining based at the Council Offices in Kirkby in Ashfield. The sharing of resources and expertise has led to greater resilience and easier access to advice, assistance and emergency accommodation.

As an example the Panel were informed that in 2014/15 the cost for bed and breakfast accommodation was in the region of £150,000. Since the inception of the shared service only one person has been placed in bed and breakfast accommodation with alternative solutions being found for the majority of people/households presenting as homeless including use of the hostel facilities in Mansfield.

Demand for this service in Ashfield was increasing year on year but not at the same rate as was presenting nationally.

Demand at the time of the Review was as follows;

Demand	Total
Number of homelessness applications taken in first 3 quarters 2016/2017:	118
Number of new service requests taken to date 2016/2017:	685
Number of households attending drop-in to date in 2016/2017:	940
Number of households prevented from being homeless in first 3 quarters of 2016/2017:	151 (compared to 68 in 2014/2015)
Estimated number of rough sleepers in Ashfield (November 2016)	9 (compared to 8 in 2015 as estimated)

It was recognised by the Panel that accessibility to the service was of vital importance and various methods of contact included telephone, drop in sessions, appointment at the Council offices, home visits and an out of hour's service.

During consideration of this topic, the Homelessness Prevention Officer took the opportunity to convey some of the challenges facing the team for the future. It was almost inevitable that demand would rise due to an increasing lack of housing supply exacerbated by the impact and ramifications of the Welfare Reform Act.

Casework was becoming increasing more complex with an increase in homeless single people with mental health issues and the ongoing problem of a shortfall in support for vulnerable people within local communities.

However, the Panel recognised that the team were fully aware of the challenges facing them and had recognised possible solutions for coping with future demands which included enhanced customer focus (understanding recurring issues and causes), great partnership working, cultivating better relationships with private landlords, regular staff training and innovative use of scarce resources.

Framework Street Outreach Team

As part of consideration of this topic the Panel invited a representative from Framework to talk to Members about collaborative work between agencies to reduce homelessness. The representative took the opportunity to address the Panel and talk about the work of the Framework Street Outreach Team. Up until now, the team had only been working within Nottingham City but were preparing to expand their services out into neighbouring districts following receipt of £370,000 additional Government funding (over a 2 year period) and match funding by the City Council. Recruitment was currently taking place and it was envisaged that the service expansion would commence within the next couple of months.

The Outreach Team worked predominantly with rough sleepers and offered ongoing care and support to hopefully get them back into secure accommodation. However, many rough sleepers did not fit into the category of 'vulnerable adults' and therefore did not automatically fall under the homelessness legislation which placed a duty on local authorities to provide accommodation.

The Panel were informed that Framework offered a 24 hour helpline number and they currently received around 2,000 calls a month. The new outreach service would run in accordance with the principles of a "No Second Night Out" policy and would involve the presence of a nurse from the NHS Homeless Health Team to carry out any necessary health assessments.

The new Outreach Team covering the neighbouring districts would be focussing on need and being available to respond to any referrals they received (day or night). Drop in sessions were also being arranged to offer health and housing advice to anyone who attended and required support and assistance. It was envisaged that a Rough Sleepers Steering Group would be established, with a representative from each district authority, to ensure continuous sharing of information/feedback and to develop cross-district preventative solutions for tackling homelessness and assisting rough sleepers as appropriate.

Homelessness Reduction Bill (Now Homelessness Reduction Act)

During the review the Council's Housing Strategy Team Leader gave an update presentation to the Panel in relation to what was then the draft Homelessness Reduction Bill.

At the time of considering this topic, the Draft Bill had already passed through the House of Commons and would be progressing through the House of Lords with the second reading due on 24th February, 2017. It was hoped that the Bill would be enacted by the end of 2017 and twelve new measures were being introduced to amend the existing legislation. A summary of the twelve measures/changes were circulated at the meeting.

It was acknowledged that should the Bill be passed, it would have implications for the Council as follows:-

- expected 25% rise in homeless applications;
- suitable IT and monitoring systems would need to be in place;
- new procedures finalised for non-priority need applicants;
- protocols agreed to work with specified referral agencies;
- enhanced self help and advice services on the website;

- templates for personal plans;
- agreed additional staffing requirements

- development of new prevention initiatives;
- informing partner agencies and stakeholders of changes through homelessness forum.

At the time of the review it was anticipated a report would be considered by the Cabinet in the summer with an intention to pilot the enhanced services and finalise the staffing arrangements as necessary by the autumn. Presentation would commence to forum members and stakeholders around October / November 2017.

The Panel were advised that the changes would be funded by the additional Government funding for rough sleepers, the £61m national Government funding to enable local authorities to implement the changes arising from the Homelessness Reduction Bill and existing budgets. An announcement as to how the £61m would be allocated had not yet been received but it was presumed that the funding would be allocated to local authorities nationally based on their P1E Quarterly returns (for households dealt with under the homelessness provisions of the 1996 Housing Act and homelessness prevention and relief).

It was acknowledged that the Strategic Housing Team would need to give consideration to the following issues to ensure a smooth transition once the Act had been passed:-

- enhanced cross-County working to share best practice and ensure consistency;
- negotiation for new sites to provide accommodation to single people under LHA rates;
- to update the Home Finder Lettings Policy;
- alternative private sector solutions;
- improved links with private sector landlords;
- understanding the impact of Welfare Reforms;
- potential further uses for Discretionary Housing Payments;
- effective working with health and social care to deal with complex cases.

Conclusion

The Panel concluded by agreeing that with imminent changes expected when the Bill receives Royal Assent (which it now has), a further update to the Panel was required with regards to actions that the Council would need to take (detailed in an Action Plan). In the interim, the Panel considered that early intervention, continued collaborative working with both other agencies and the community and regular updates to Members to keep them informed were important steps in preparation for the Homelessness Reduction Act.

Implications

Corporate Plan:

The Corporate Plan for 2016-2019 reflects the Council's corporate priorities in addressing homelessness by ensuring that we understand the reasons for homelessness and adopt measures to assist those affected and prevent where possible.

Legal:

The Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977, Housing Act 1996, and the Homelessness Act 2002, place statutory duties on local housing authorities to ensure that advice and assistance to households who are homeless or threatened with homelessness is available. The Homelessness Reduction Bill received Royal Assent in April 2017.

Finance:

There are no direct financial implications relating to the recommendations of this review, however it is recognised that the Homelessness Reduction Act and its implications does require financial considerations and this is subject to a separate report to Cabinet in due course.

Budget Area	Implication
General Fund – Revenue Budget	N/A
General Fund – Capital Programme	N/A
Housing Revenue Account – Revenue Budget	As detailed above
Housing Revenue Account – Capital Programme	As detailed above

Risk:

Risk	Mitigation
Planning and resources required for the Homelessness Reduction Act	Collaborative working between agencies to prepare for implications and additional requirements of the Act.

Human Resources:

Staffing implications will be considered following a future report to Cabinet.

Equalities

In considering this topic, Members of the Committee gave due consideration to equalities and equal access to homelessness services and advice.

Other Implications:

None

Background Papers

Ashfield Housing Strategy 2016 – 2020
Homelessness Reduction Bill

Report Author and Contact Officer

Mike Joy

Scrutiny Manager

m.joy@ashfield.gov.uk

01623 457232

Ruth Dennis

Director of Legal and Governance