

WAVERLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

23 SEPTEMBER 2019

Title:

HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY UPDATE – YEAR ONE

[Portfolio Holder: Cllr Anne-Marie Rosoman]

[Wards Affected: All]

Summary and purpose:

The Council adopted its Homelessness Strategy 2018-2023 in April 2018. This report updates the Committee on the Council's and its partners' work to help prevent homelessness in Waverley.

How this report relates to the Council's Corporate Priorities:

Equality and Diversity Implications

Homelessness can have a devastating impact on health and welling and life chances for those affected by it. By providing services to prevent and relieve homelessness and to give support those affected by it, the work of the Housing Options Team supports Waverley's commitment to ensuring that those that live and work in Waverley have equal life chances.

Financial Implications:

Waverley currently benefits from new burdens and flexible homelessness funding from the Government but this is only guaranteed until April 2020. This report highlights some of the areas where this money has been used to help maintain Waverley's success in preventing homelessness.

Legal Implications:

Waverley has a statutory duty to assess homeless applications and to provide housing advice to its residents under Part VII of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended by the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017))

Background and Context

1. Waverley's Housing Options Service is one of the highest performing homelessness services nationally and in the South East. In 2017 it achieved Silver Award following a peer review and assessment by the National Practitioner Support Service- one of only 14 Councils nationally.
2. The team has an excellent reputation in preventing homelessness and, as a result, keeping the numbers of homeless households having to be placed in temporary accommodation to a minimum. This in turn limits costs to Waverley's General Fund.

3. The service has two main teams:
 - **Housing Options Team** - the team provide advice and assistance to households who are homeless or threatened with homelessness and also manage the Housing Register for housing applicants who are not already social housing tenants
 - **The Homechoice Team** - the team co-ordinate the advertising and allocation social housing properties in Waverley through the Council's Choice Based Letting scheme and they manage Housing Register applications from those who are social housing tenants.
4. The Council is legally required to have a Homelessness Strategy and adopted its most recent Strategy for 2018-2023 in April 2018. The Strategy contains:
 - a **Review** of the services and resources currently available in the borough and surrounding areas to meet the needs of people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness
 - a **Strategy** outlining the main themes and challenges for the strategy period, and
 - an **Action Plan** to identify the key actions that need to be taken to better meet these challenges
5. The five key priorities in the Strategy and Action Plan are:
 - The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017
 - Prevention / Early Help
 - Accommodation
 - Support
 - Partnership
6. This report gives an update on the Council's work to implement these five priorities during 2018-19 and then highlights some of the challenges and proposed actions to maintain a successful homeless prevention service for 2019-2020.
7. Annexe 1 contains an updated Homelessness Strategy Action Plan showing what actions have been achieved (or achieved and ongoing) and the actions that have been partially achieved to date.

Homelessness Reduction Act 2017

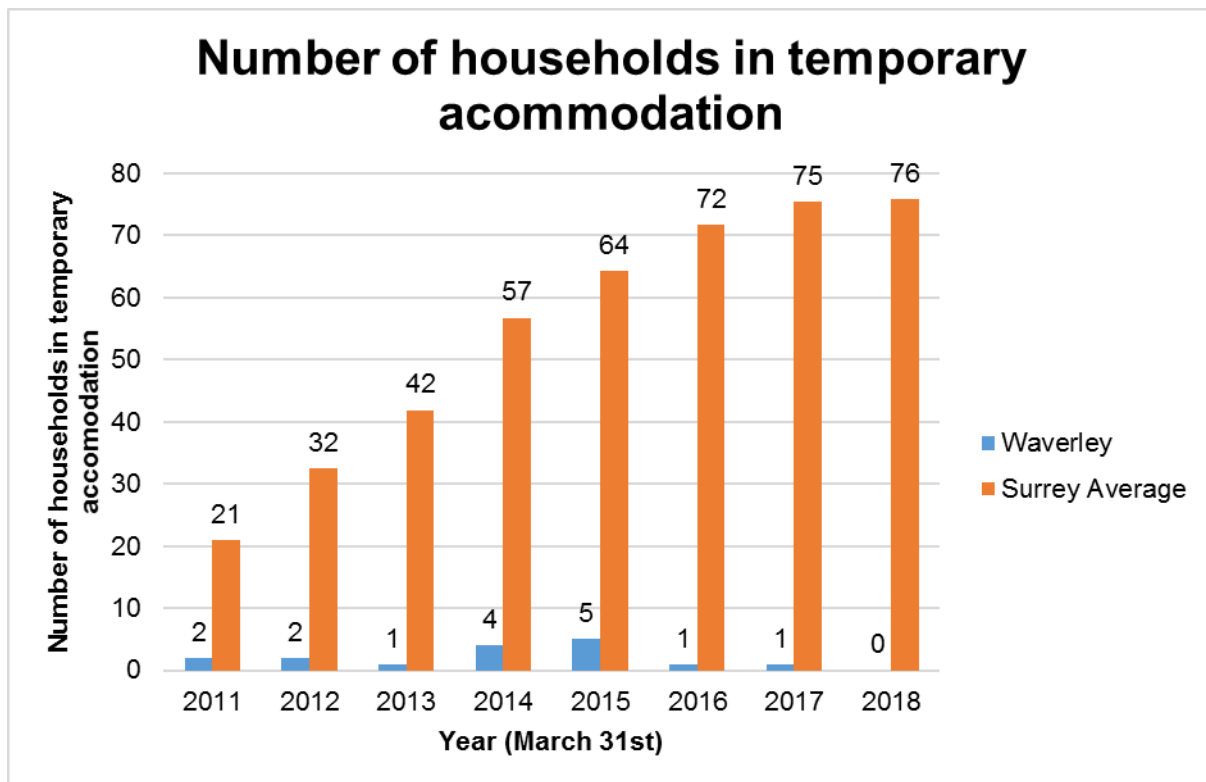
8. Members of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee received an update report on the Council's work to meet its new Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 duties on 27 November 2018. This work has included:
 - training staff and representatives from the Council's statutory and voluntary partners
 - introducing a new IT system to capture the additional data required by Government

- adjusting the housing options staff structure and areas of responsibility
- amending procedures, processes and website information

Prevention / Early Help

9. The Council has maintained its excellent work in preventing homelessness and, as a result, has kept the number of homeless households having to be placed into temporary accommodation to a minimum.

10. The following table shows Waverley's temporary accommodation performance compared to the Surrey average for the same period.



Accommodation

11. In addition to Waverley's social housing new build programme, there have been a number of positive steps to increase the number of supported housing bed-spaces within and outside of Waverley:

- Five bed-spaces for Waverley referrals in a Transform Housing Scheme in Woking that were previously funded by Surrey County Council. (Transform Housing are a specialist housing accommodation and support provider).
- Two additional bed-spaces in a Transform Housing Scheme in Farnham that were previously used by Rushmoor Borough Council.
- Five bed-spaces for young parents, couples or singles in a housing scheme in Milford managed by A2 Dominion from April 2019, again previously funded by Surrey County Council. (A2 Dominion are a specialist housing accommodation and support provider).

12. The ability to purchase these bed spaces has only been possible as a result of Waverley receiving additional Government funding (New Burdens Funding and Flexible Homelessness Grant). It is still not clear as to whether funding will be available beyond 19-20.

Support

13. Key to Waverley's success in preventing homelessness over the last few years has been having a dedicated, highly skilled support team embedded within the Housing Options Team to help the most vulnerable homeless applicants.

14. Following successful negotiation, Waverley has been able to add an additional fixed-term, full time role to this team, funded by Surrey County Council until March 2020. In addition, it has also been possible to increase the hours of two existing part-time officers by half a day each.

15. Having extra capacity in the team has been crucial in providing support for vulnerable clients in the first few weeks of their new private rented tenancies, particularly when clients are also having to navigate the complexities of transitioning to Universal Credit. Ensuring that benefit claims, housing register applications and debt re-payment arrangements are in place at the start of tenancies is vital to mitigate the risk of repeat homelessness in the future.

16. Additionally Waverley also co-funds an outreach worker based at the York Road Project, Woking. The Outreach worker follows up on referrals regarding rough sleepers in Waverley and supports Waverley clients temporarily accommodated in the night shelter to secure longer term housing and engage with health and welfare benefit services to try to break the cycle of homelessness.

Partnership work

17. Some notable example of partnership working in the last few months include:

- A successful second annual homelessness forum held in October 2018 attended by 48 delegates from Waverley's partners including Health, Social Services, supported housing providers, Citizens Advice Waverley, Probation, DWP, faith groups and other council services/teams.
- Excellent joint working between the Council, Move to Independence and Ethical Lettings to secure alternative accommodation for a supported housing scheme for those with mental health issues in Godalming. Without this, the Council would have lost 3 supported housing placements in the borough.
- The Council has been instrumental in helping facilitate the successful transfer of the South West Surrey Domestic Abuse Outreach Service to Citizens Advice Waverley. This protects the future of this vital outreach service for victims of domestic abuse in Waverley and Guildford and provides resilience and economies of scale to Citizens Advice Waverley.

Challenges ahead

18. Whilst the Council has so far managed the difficult transition to working under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, many of the other challenges remain the same, namely:

- The undersupply of social housing in Waverley
- The unaffordability of so much private sector housing in Waverley for those on low incomes or who are dependent on welfare benefits
- Persuading landlords and letting agents to rent their properties within the Local Housing Allowance rates to those who are dependant on state benefits
- Having sufficient funds to provide financial assistance to customers to secure suitable properties through the Council's Rent Deposit Bond Scheme. Increasingly the Council is having to fund six months rent in advance. Whilst payments against bonds and rent in advance are repayable loans to customers, for many, it will take many years to repay the loans to the Council.
- Having sufficient funds to continue to purchase supported housing bed-spaces.

Key actions for 2019-20

19. The key actions for the year ahead include:

- Maintain and build on the successful transition to working under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 e.g. adjust processes and review statistical information and trends, so resources are targeted effectively.
- Take the opportunity of recent retirements to re-configure the Homechoice and Housing Options Teams to maintain excellent performance, maximise resources and build on the already close joint working between the Homechoice and Housing Options Teams and wider housing and communities teams.
- Monitor the effectiveness of the fixed term, Surrey County Council funded Housing Options Support Officer role. Explore whether it would be necessary to fund the role beyond March 2020 using flexible homelessness grant, if Surrey decide to no longer fund the service.
- Monitor the effectiveness of the fixed term Housing Options Coordinator role and the merits of extending the role beyond March 2020 using flexible homelessness funding.
- Review funding arrangements for supported housing bed-spaces from March 2020 onwards in the light of Government announcements regarding flexible homelessness grant / new burdens funding beyond 2020.

- Maximise the use Discretionary Housing Payments to help households secure or retain private rented accommodation to prevent homelessness. This will reduce the burden of funding deposits and rent in advance from the General Fund and minimise customer debt to Waverley.
- Support the more vulnerable homeless customers as they move into private rented properties so that their tenancies can be successfully sustained to avoid repeat homelessness.
- Host and co-ordinate a third Homelessness Forum In October 2019 to build and develop increased partnership working to prevent homelessness with the council's statutory and voluntary partners
- Monitor the recent increase in begging / rough sleeping in the Borough (particularly in the Farnham area) and explore how best to ensure that those who are genuinely homeless can be encouraged to engage with the advice and assistance available through Waverley (or through neighbouring Boroughs/Districts for those with no connection with Waverley).
- Review the Council's Allocation Scheme to ensure it continues to comply with legislation, helps those in housing need in the Borough and continues to support Waverley's homeless prevention approach.

Conclusion

20. The Council has so far successfully navigated the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and has achieved the vast majority of its Homelessness Strategy Action Plan targets (See Annexe1).
21. The Council's ability to maintain its success in preventing homelessness is very much dependant on:
 - having a highly skilled and dedicated staff working in its Housing Options and Homechoice Teams
 - excellent joint working and liaison with its statutory and voluntary partners
 - Government funding to purchase additional supported housing bed spaces and to cover the increased expenditure needed to secure private rented accommodation

Recommendation

The Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee is asked to note the Council's progress in implementing its Homelessness Strategy Action Plan and agree any comments it wishes to pass to the Executive.

Background Papers

There are no background papers (as defined by Section 100D(5) of the Local Government Act 1972) relating to this report.

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