

WAVERLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

28 SEPTEMBER 2020

Title:

HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY UPDATE – YEAR TWO

Portfolio Holder: Cllr Anne-Marie Rosoman, Portfolio Holder for Housing, & Community Safety

Head of Service: Andrew Smith, Head of Housing Delivery and Communities

Key decision: No

Access: Public

1. Purpose and summary

1.1 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 during the second year of the Strategy (19-20) and will also update Members on the work since the end of March 20 as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic.

2. Recommendation

2.1 The Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee is asked to note the contents of this report and agree any comments it wishes to pass to the Executive.

3. Reason for the recommendation

3.1 For members to be aware of the Council's work in implementing its Homelessness Strategy 2018-2023.

4. Background and Context

4.1 Waverley's Housing Options Service is one of the highest performing homelessness services in the South East and nationally. In 2017 it achieved Silver Award following a peer review and assessment by the National Practitioner Support Service- one of only 14 Councils across the country.

4.2 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.

4.3 The service has two main teams:

- **Housing Options Team** - the team provide advice, assistance and support 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.

4.4 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

4.5 The five key priorities in the Strategy and Action Plan are:

- The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017
- Prevention / Early Help
- Accommodation
- Support
- Partnership

5. Update on the key priorities during 19-20 and 20-21 to date

5.1 Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (HRA 2017)

5.1.1 The introduction of the HRA 2017 in 2018 was a seismic change for Council homelessness services across the Country. The legislation increases the duties owed to homeless households as well as the time timescales within which these duties are owed – 56 days prevention duty, 56 relief duty. The legislation also added a much greater administrative burden in regard to the capture of household information and the requirement to confirm in writing when different duties are owed and ended, as well as additional rights of review.

5.1.2 During 19-20 the Council has refined and consolidated the new processes introduced as a result of the HRA 2017 so staff can effectively fulfil both client and administrative duties.

5.1.3 As a result of COVID-19 the Government introduced additional requirements for local authorities to implement including housing rough sleepers under the 'everyone

in' directive in March 2020 and then to try to secure longer term accommodation options for these clients, where possible.

5.2 Prevention / Early Help

5.2.1 The Council maintained its excellent work in preventing homelessness during 19-20 and, as a result, has kept the number of homeless households having to be placed into temporary accommodation to a minimum. However, there was an understandable spike at the end of March 20 due to additional accommodating duties due to COVID-19.

5.2.2 The following tables show Surrey Local Authority temporary accommodation numbers as at 31 March, since 2012 and then Waverley's for the same period.

Surrey

2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
357	461	608	707	788	830	834	676 (not including Woking)	799 (not including Woking)

Waverley

2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
2	1	4	5	1	1	0	1	5

5.3 Accommodation

5.3.1 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 during 19-20

- A further two supported housing 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 and Waverley now has 7 bed-spaces at the Woking project.
- Two additional bed-spaces in a Transform Housing Scheme in Farnham (Simmonds Court) that were previously used by Rushmoor Borough Council.
- Leasing of two under utilised temporary accommodation units in Milford to A2 Dominion housing to provide supported housing for Waverley referrals.

5.3.2 COVID-19 and the 'everyone in' requirement meant Waverley had to procure quickly emergency accommodation options for rough sleepers and those under threat of

rough sleeping. This was particularly challenging given most hotels and B&Bs closed as a result of the pandemic. In the end Waverley was able to provide accommodation at Travelodges in Southampton and Woking, a hotel in London and a B&B in Farnborough.

- 5.3.3 Waverley then managed to secure longer term housing options for 19 clients initially housed under 'everyone in' and these options included: private rented accommodation, refuge provision, supported housing, housing association vacancies and short life Council accommodation identified for future re-development.
- 5.3.4 Given the increased priority to meet the needs of single homeless people, Waverley has submitted a capital and revenue funding bid to MHCLG in August 2020 to purchase 6 modular units of accommodation, to be supported and managed by a specialist worker. The bid outcome will be known in September 2020.

5.4 Support

- 5.4.1 Key to Waverley's success in preventing homelessness over the last few years has been having a dedicated, highly skilled support team (Specialist Housing Options Officers) embedded within the Housing Options Team to help the most vulnerable homeless applicants.
- 5.4.2 Following successful negotiation, Waverley was been able to add capacity to this team using fixed term funding from Surrey County Council from 2018-2020 and this funding has been extended for 20-21.
- 5.4.3 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. In one particular example Waverley successfully helped a client through a DWP Universal Credit appeal tribunal where the judge made special reference to the excellent way the Specialist Housing Options Officer had prepared the information
- 5.4.4 COVID-19 brought particular challenges in trying to provide support to clients placed as far afield as Southampton. Given food was not being provided by the accommodation providers at the time, Waverley had to work with different local charities in separate areas to source essential supplies such as food parcels as well as supporting households make housing benefit and Universal Credit claims.
- 5.4.5 Following the requirement to try to secure longer term accommodation for those housed under 'everyone in', Waverley officers were successful in securing donations from charities for new essential household items such as kettles, toasters, crockery, cutlery etc. to help the homeless households settle into their new homes. Officers then delivered the items to clients in their new homes.
- 5.4.6 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.

5.5 Partnership work

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- 5.5.1 A successful third annual homelessness forum was held in October 2019 attended by delegates from Waverley's partners, including Health, Social Services, supported housing providers, Citizens Advice Waverley, Probation, DWP, faith groups and other council services/teams.
- 5.5.2 Excellent joint working continues between the Council, Move to Independence and Ethical Lettings to secure long term accommodation in 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.
- 5.5.3 Joint working also continues with partners including Ethical lettings, York Road Project, Transform Housing and Support, A2 Dominion Housing, DWP, South West Surrey Domestic Abuse Outreach Services, refuges, Social Services, Probation, the Police, MHCLG, as well as with local landlords and agents and emergency accommodation providers.

6. Challenges ahead - Financial

- 6.1 The extra accommodation costs resulting from providing emergency housing under 'everyone in' and the costs of continuing to support applicants into private rented accommodation, have been met by emergency COVID grants from the Government.
- 6.2 The financial aspects of the service are covered within the General Fund MTFP and recently agreed Contingency Budget.

7.0 Challenges ahead – service demand and capacity

- 7.1 The fact that the Government withdrew the ability of landlords to enforce evictions through the courts has helped Waverley weather the current COVID-19 storm. However, as things stand the Courts are due to be open again in late September 2020. This could potentially open up the floodgates of many households being made homeless due to the impact of COVID-19 on employment and their ability to pay their rent.
- 7.2 Similarly, a requirement for private landlord's to serve 6 month rather than 2 month Notices expires in February 2021, so again, there is a further potential for an influx of cases.
- 7.3 In the worst case scenario Waverley will need additional resources both for staffing and for emergency accommodation costs if demand significantly increases and homelessness cannot be prevented.
- 7.4 In the event of a 'second wave' of COVID-19 the Government may also re-instate the 'everyone in' policy. . Even if this is not the case the fact that we are entering the

winter with the ongoing threat of COVID-19 is likely to mean increased emergency accommodation costs.

- 7.5 The ongoing challenge exists to source affordable private rented accommodation for homeless clients dependent on welfare benefits.
- 7.6 Whilst staff have been managing admirably, the team's capacity is stretched as a result of a long term sickness absence and covering temporary reduced hours.

8.0 Key actions for the remainder of 2020-21

- 8.1 Continue to maintain Waverley's statutory homeless prevention service within the current COVID 19 guidelines.
- 8.2 Carry out the annual rough sleeping estimate exercise – scheduled for 11 November 2020.
- 8.3 Provide an update on homelessness in Waverley to the Council's statutory and voluntary partners as an alternative to hosting the Homelessness Forum in November 2020.
- 8.4 If the capital and revenue bid to MHCLG is successful, make arrangements to progress the installation of modular units by 31 March 2021 and recruit to the post that will support the scheme.
- 8.5 Monitor the impact of the ending of the eviction ban and the staffing capacity and, if necessary, bring in additional resources that are needed to manage any increased demand and caseload pressures.

9.0 Conclusion

- 9.1 The Housing Options Service has continued to maintain its excellent record in homeless prevention and has risen to the considerable challenges presented by COVID-19.
- 9.2 The key to maintaining this success will be having sufficient staff and accommodation resources to avoid even greater costs of providing emergency accommodation.

Background Papers

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

CONTACT OFFICER:

Name: Michael Rivers
Housing Needs Manager

Telephone: 01483 523013
E-mail: michael.rivers@waverley.gov.uk

Andrew Smith
Head of Housing Delivery
and Communities

Telephone: 01483 523096

E-mail: andrew.smith@waverley.gov.uk