

**REPORT TO:** CABINET

**DATE:** 17 OCTOBER 2019

**TITLE:** HOMELESSNESS AND ROUGH SLEEPER STRATEGY

**PORTFOLIO HOLDER:** COUNCILLOR MARK WILKINSON, PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR HOUSING

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**This is a Key Decision**  
**It is on the Forward Plan as Decision Number I009104**  
**Call-in Procedures may apply**  
**This decision will affect all Wards.**

**RECOMMENDED that:**

- A The updated Harlow Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy and updated Delivery Plan is approved as attached as Appendix A to the report.

**REASON FOR DECISION**

- A The Council have a duty to carry out a homelessness review and formulate an updated strategy based on the results of that review.

**BACKGROUND**

1. Councils in the past were required by law to produce a Homelessness Strategy every five years with the last strategy for the Council being published in 2015.
2. The introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 increased the Council's statutory duties in tackling homelessness locally. This included a new statutory prevention duty, as well as the need to formulate a new rough sleeping strategy. The Prevention Duty requires earlier interventions which will involve the production of Personalised Housing Plans, additional support with the intention to meet the Government's targets to eliminate rough sleeping by 2027.

3. The revised strategy needs to set out how the review was completed, its findings, and how it intends to tackle issues in the local area, producing a wider inclusive partnership delivery plan. In reviewing the current strategy, Officers have undertaken a desk top analysis, a bench marking exercise, as well as wide ranging consultation with partners, users, and stakeholders.
4. The updated strategy needs to link to other relevant strategies and programmes. This allows for the opportunity to align the wide range of factors that could contribute to homelessness in Harlow, and target resources appropriately. These include health and wellbeing strategies, safeguarding strategies, Corporate Plan priorities, as well as Housing Revenue Account Business Plan objectives. The updated Homelessness Strategy and Delivery Plan are attached as Appendix A to the report.

## **ISSUES/PROPOSALS**

### **How Have We Reviewed?**

5. The review was extended earlier in the year, to take account of recent Government consultation around developing wider partnership working. A longer consultation period was undertaken to ensure the full range of local, regionally and national issues have been captured appropriately. The process concentrated on three main themes:
  - a) Desk top review
    - i) This included data on local and national priorities, demand for services locally, trends, increased prevention activities/effectiveness, performance, financial implications, as well as current and future Government funding.
  - b) Consultation with stakeholders
    - i) Workshops were held and attended by colleagues from a range of partner and support agencies. The workshops focused on identifying areas of concern, service gaps, as well as exploring innovative solutions, generating action points that can be concluded in the revised Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy/Delivery Plan.
  - c) Consultation with Service users
    - i) An on-line survey was hosted to enable service users to provide the Council with their personal experiences. This was imperative and enabled the revised strategy to be relevant, attempting to meet the needs of the people that find themselves homeless or threatened with homelessness. The survey covered different age groups, differing housing situations, experiences of housing

support provided, as well as any other comments. Paper copies of the survey were also available.

6. Thirteen Councillors attended a workshop held on 25 July 2019. The workshop focused on current legislation, changes in the approach to homelessness, changes required to local policy, practice and approach. Councillors inputted into formulating a set of principles to be adopted, the main challenges having to be faced, as well as developing a set of innovative initiatives to feed into the strategy. Details of consultation process and outcomes are attached as Appendix B to the report.
7. Findings and outcomes from the review were presented to Housing Panel and Standards Board in October 2019.

### **Tackling Homelessness at Harlow**

8. The main causes of homelessness locally are loss of accommodation in the private sector, the loss of an assured shorthold tenancy, relationship breakdown, and eviction from the homes of relatives/friends. In addition, there are a number of other complex issues that contribute to homelessness that are outlined in the Strategy.
9. The Council's Corporate Plan identifies more and better housing as being a top priority. A major objective for the updated Strategy is to demonstrate how it intends to tackle homelessness.
10. Since the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, the service has made changes to its approach to meet its statutory responsibilities, increased resources, reviewing private sector initiatives, revised relevant policies, and procedures. In reviewing its business processes, Officers have also taken advantage of Government grant funding. This has been in relation to general homelessness/prevention, as well as providing additional support for rough sleeping.
11. The Council has increased the number of bed spaces available in its Temporary Accommodation. This will result in an additional one bed unit, a two bed unit and four additional bedrooms, for both general needs and temporary accommodation. The work commenced January 2019 and will complete in 2019/20. In addition, during this period, the Council has established a new specialist Housing Support Scheme at Bromley Cottages, bringing an empty property back into use. This was opened on 9 May 2019 and is an example of effective partnership working with the targeting of national and local resources, using Streets2Homes specialist services, meeting the acute needs of vulnerable people. This was recognised in a recent ministerial visit by the Housing Minister where an opportunity was given for the residents of the scheme to discuss their experiences, and how the scheme has made a difference to their lives. The Council will continue to seek grant funding for these types of schemes whenever they become available.

12. Records indicate, the Council has received 408 homelessness applications in 2018/19. This was an increase from previous years. The number of households accepted as homeless and in priority need during 2018/19 was 80. In addition, the number of households living in temporary accommodation in Harlow in April 2019 was 284, an increase of over 100 per cent over the last five years. However, the number of people identified as sleeping rough has fluctuated seasonally.
13. At the start of the year, more households were successful in securing accommodation to avert homelessness, with only a minority becoming homeless. In 2018/19, the Council housed 434 households, of which 18 per cent were allocated to homeless applicants. In framing the Allocations Policy, the Council has to take regard of statutory legislation which includes the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, the Localism Act 2011, as well as Government guidance for local authorities in England. The Council's tenancy strategy is available as a background paper.
14. Records indicate, that following the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 the number of homeless applications have increased significantly. This trend is outlined in detail within the Homelessness Strategy under homelessness applications and decisions analysis. Over the course of the year, however, the number of successful prevention cases seems to have significantly reduced despite the efforts. This has resulted in a corresponding increase in the number of households becoming homeless. The demand for services remains high therefore, with future trends identifying this to continue into the future recognising the acute shortage of housing being genuinely affordable.
15. The Council remains in the top quartile for the requirement for use of temporary accommodation. Recent national coverage has also identified the growing concern with increased number of families/children living in unsuitable temporary accommodation. The Council reviews its use of temporary accommodation annually which involves the development of a Temporary Accommodation Usage Plan. This involves an analysis of forecasted demand, available supply, aligning to other corporate/housing priorities.
16. The Council has made known its need for law in relation to permitted development and office conversion to be changed, as some local authorities have been using them to discharge their homelessness duty, where placements are housed in unsuitable housing conditions which have an impact on local services.
17. It is expected that when Council's undertake their homeless duty there is consideration given to the accommodation suitability which includes space design, facilities, and location. Due to the on-going increase in local housing need and the acute shortage of suitable housing, the Council currently uses a very small number of studio and two bedroom flats in a Permitted Development at Templefields. This is interim accommodation where applicants are placed temporarily while they wait for either a more permanent housing solution or pending a homeless decision. As part of the Council's Temporary Accommodation Usage Plan, the Council are looking to eliminate the use of

office conversions and permitted developments over a two year phased period. The updated Temporary Accommodation Usage Plan 2019-22 is attached as Appendix C to the report.

18. Working together with Essex councils, the 'Future of Essex Vision' has identified the prevention of homelessness as a key priority. This wishes to develop an approach to homelessness reduction in which partners will work together to improve the flow of information, and streamlining the way work is undertaken between organisations. Recognising those groups most at risk of homelessness and to develop earlier interventions. Improved communication, and understanding between partners will improve outcomes and effective multi-agency workings, pooling resources, and developing protocols.
19. Services have been focused on meeting its increased statutory duties, taking advantage of grant funding where appropriate. A major piece of work has also included the reinvigorating of local partnership working. The following themes are outlined:
  - a) Early intervention/prevention;
  - b) Signposting to support services;
  - c) Enhanced severe weather emergency provision;
  - d) Personalised Housing Plans (money advice);
  - e) Provision of high quality and suitable accommodation;
  - f) Increasing supply of accommodation;
  - g) Access to funding;
  - h) Reinvigorating private rented section with incentives (eg Rent Deposit Guarantee Scheme);
  - i) Negotiation and mediation with Landlords, and friends/families;
  - j) Working with agencies to support (eg suffering domestic abuse and hate crime); and
  - k) Advice on sourcing accommodation in the private sector including home ownership.
20. The new Local Development Plan is going through its examination process. Once agreed will set out the framework and associated targets to guide and shape amongst other things housing delivery in Harlow to 2033. It will be a key vehicle in delivering the Council's corporate strategies.
21. In addition, in December 2018, the Cabinet approved a pipeline of house building schemes for commencement as part of the creation of HTS (Housing

and Regeneration) Company. As part of this, as well as the framework for the Local Development Plan, the Council will explore options for developing Council owned temporary accommodation units in suitable locations.

## **Taking the Strategy Forward**

22. The Council operates in a changing environment which has to take regard of both national and local priorities. Assumptions have been included within the revised strategy and resource plan which takes regard of future demand levels, resource levels, recognising that grant funding will be ceasing in March 2020. Latest Government thinking has advised for a one year spending programme which may have an impact on future grant funding and overall funding levels for housing.
23. Once the updated strategy is approved, the delivery plan and its actions will be taken through the Harlow Homeless Partnership. The key themes identified for joint working include prevention, intervention, recovery and partnerships.
24. Since the success of the new strategy depends on the wider engagement of all stakeholders which included the County Council, Probation, National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders, Streets2Homes, Peabody, Social Services, Citizens Advice Bureau, Housing Providers, Mental Health, Princess Alexandra Hospital, Domestic Abuse services, Police and Department for Work and Pensions. Effective delivery will be essential for the targeting of scarce resources to be successful.
25. Progress will be reported to the Council as part of its wider performance management framework. In addition, the Delivery Plan will also be closely monitored by Harlow Homelessness Partnership which has been widened to include all relevant stakeholders such as health, probation, the County Council, charities. Recognising that effective delivery can only be achieved by working in partnership, with the sharing of limited resources to tackle local needs.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

### **Environment and Planning (Includes Sustainability)**

None specific.

**Author: Andrew Bramidge, Head of Environment and Planning**

### **Finance (Includes ICT, and Property and Facilities)**

The Strategy highlights financial issues relating to associated costs and current government support available for dealing with the issue of homelessness and homelessness prevention. Changes to the costs of supporting and delivering the strategy along with variations in government grant will featured within the development and refresh of both the councils 30 year HRA Business Plan and the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

**Author: Simon Freeman, Head of Finance and Deputy to the Chief Executive**

## **Housing**

The Homelessness Strategy is a key framework for the Housing Service and it is important that progress in achieving the tasks detailed in the action plan is continued in response to the challenging climate both nationally and locally. Recognising the national, regional, and local priorities, challenging and funding constraints.

**Author: Andrew Murray, Head of Housing**

## **Community Wellbeing (Includes Equalities and Social Inclusion)**

As contained within the report.

**Author: Jane Greer, Head of Community Wellbeing**

## **Governance (Includes HR)**

The Strategy sets out the Council's response to statutory duties set out in the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. The governance implications are set out within the report and strategy.

**Author: Simon Hill, Head of Governance**

## **Appendices**

Appendix A – Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy and Delivery Plan

Appendix B – Details and Outcomes of Consultation Process

Appendix C – Temporary Accommodation Usage Plan

## **Background Papers**

Allocations of Accommodation – Guidance for Local Housing Authorities in England

– <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/allocation-of-accommodation-guidance-for-local-housing-authorities-in-england>

Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities –

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/homelessness-code-of-guidance-for-local-authorities>

Tenancy Strategy – <https://www.harlow.gov.uk/sites/harlow-cms/files/files/Tenancy%20Strategy%202013-18.pdf>

## **Glossary of terms/abbreviations used**

None.