

Part A

Report to: Cabinet

Date of meeting: Thursday 6 July 2020

Report author: Head of Housing

Title: Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy

1.0 Summary

1.1 All local authorities are required by S1 of the Homelessness Act 2002 to produce a Homelessness Review and on the basis of that formulate and consult on a Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy. This report sets out the key issues from the Homelessness Review, the key findings from the Equalities Impact Assessment, and the findings from the consultation on proposed key priorities for the council's new Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy covering the period 2020-25.

2.0 Risks

2.1 Risk 1: the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy is not implemented

Consequence: Non-implementation will mean the council does not comply with legislative requirements set out in the Homelessness Act 2002 or guidance in the government's Rough Sleeper Strategy. A lack of a current Strategy may also impact on the council's ability to apply for future government funding.

Suggested control measures: implement the strategy and its associated action plan which will be monitored annually.

Response: Treat

Risk Rating: 4 (Severity: 4; Likelihood: 1)

2.2 Risk 2: The Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy does not remain relevant because of new national or local environmental or governance conditions or new legislation or guidance requiring a change in the way services are delivered

Consequence: The Strategy is no longer fit for purpose

Suggested control measures: Regular review of the action plan by the Watford Strategic Homelessness Forum as well as an annual review to ensure the Strategy is

still fit for purpose. Maintaining regular contact with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will ensure the council is aware of any planned changes in legislation or guidance.

Response: Treat

Risk Rating: 4 (Severity 4; Likelihood 1)

2.3 **Risk 3: Rough sleeping will not be eradicated by the government's deadline of 2024**

Consequence: Significant numbers of rough sleepers remaining on the streets of Watford may become a reputational issue for the council.

Suggested control measures: work with external partners to implement a complex needs housing scheme; service standards in place that ensure homelessness prevention remains one of the council's key priorities and in line with legislation

Response: Treat

Risk rating: 6 (Severity 2; Likelihood 3)

2.4 **Risk 4: there are insufficient financial and other resources to implement the key priorities of the Strategy**

Consequence: A significant number of rough sleepers may remain on Watford's streets; a lack of local affordable housing may increase the numbers of households in the council's temporary accommodation portfolio and who may remain longer, at a significant cost to the council, before accessing affordable sustainable accommodation.

Suggested control measures: continue to apply for a range of relevant government funding to support measures set out in the Action Plan attached to the Strategy; continued commitment for General Fund financial support for particular homelessness prevention activities.

Response: Treat

Risk Rating: 8 (Severity 4, Likelihood 2)

3.0 **Recommendations**

- 3.1 Cabinet are asked to agree the draft Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy and associated documents

Further information:

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Report approved by: Tom Dobrashian, Group Head of Place Shaping

4.0 **Detailed proposal**

- 4.1 Local authorities are empowered by S1(1) of the Homelessness Act 2002 to carry out a homelessness review in their districts every 5 years and on the basis of that review, formulate, consult on and publish a homelessness strategy. In addition, the government's Rough Sleeping Strategy published in autumn 2019, required that rough sleeping be a major component of local authorities' new homelessness strategies. This report sets out the key findings from the Homelessness Review completed in 2019/20, the Equalities Impact Assessment and consultation which has informed the draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2020-25.

4.2 Homelessness Review – key findings

- 4.3 The current Homelessness Review covers a period of major change for local authorities in the way they assisted households who were threatened with homelessness or actually homeless. This was brought about by the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (HRA17) the focus of which is early intervention to prevent homelessness if at all possible, and if not, to provide relief, that is, assistance with accommodation, and then only deciding a main duty to house as was the case before HRA17. The Act meant the end of the practice of gatekeeping, replaced with the requirement to put in place a personal housing plan for each household threatened with being or actually homeless which took a more holistic understanding of their housing and support needs. Other major changes included those around welfare benefits, most notably the introduction of the benefit cap which has created considerable difficulties in relation to housing affordability
- 4.4 The top reasons for homelessness until the HRA17 were loss of a private rented tenancy, parental eviction, family or friend eviction and relationship breakdown. Data collection since the HRA indicates the top reason for homelessness during

2018/19 was family or friends no longer able to accommodate followed by the loss of a private rented tenancy.

- 4.5 The predominant group to whom the council owes a homeless duty has been families with children headed by single women. The second largest group is couples with dependent children. This has not changed with the advent of the HRA17. The number of single homeless applicants being assisted has grown significantly particularly since the HRA17 which is in line with predictions showing the legislation is enabling a better outcome for this group. The number of single women for whom a homelessness duty is owed has been much smaller than the number of single men.
- 4.6 Personal housing plans has introduced a better understanding of support needs of homeless households to whom the council has a homelessness duty. The most predominant support issue found amongst homeless households is having a history of mental health problems. This is followed by physical health and disability and alcohol dependence.
- 4.7 Levels of rough sleeping in Watford varied over time with a high of 22 found at the rough sleeper count in November 2014 to a low of 6 in 2017 which has since increased in the years since to 19 in November 2019. In reality the cohort of rough sleepers is much larger, usually by 3-4 times higher than count numbers. Since July 2019 a multi-agency, proactive street outreach service has been operating comprising workers with mental health and substance misuse recovery expertise, engaging with rough sleepers where they are on the streets. Since April 2017 there has also been a multi-agency, multi-disciplinary intervention team working with individuals who are either rough sleeping already or are in danger of doing so with the aim, respectively of getting them into accommodation or sustaining current accommodation. Many rough sleepers have complex needs as well as being homeless. A complex needs housing scheme has been identified as a council priority to assist this group. Two night shelters for rough sleepers have run between December 2018 and March 2019 and December 2019 to March 2020.
- 4.8 The supply and affordability of homes to assist homeless households has remained a major issue over the last five years. Whilst the government increased local authority homelessness duties, additional resources to meet these housing needs was not provided. Local Housing Allowance (LHA) levels were frozen from 2016 till April 2020, producing a gap of 33% between median private rents and LHA. As a result fewer and fewer private rented homes were available for homeless households to access who were usually on low incomes (whether through benefits or earned). For someone earning the net monthly median income in Watford (£1,967 per month (that is after tax and national insurance) it was found that only a room or a home with one bedroom was affordable in Watford. The council's HomeLet scheme has enabled increasing numbers of homeless households to access more affordable private rented homes elsewhere in the country. A number of housing association homes being let at "affordable rents" (which can be up to 80%

of local private rents) have been found to be unaffordable for many homeless households. The number of housing association homes becoming available to let over the last five years has ranged from 217 and 267. This is compared with 2012/13 and 2013/14 when there were respectively 471 and 397 housing associations lettings. The demand for housing association homes continues to far outstrip supply. The council is supporting Watford Community Housing (WCH) with its right-sizing policy to reduce an estimated 40% of their homes which are under-occupied.

- 4.9 The council has been very successful in reducing the number of households it has in temporary accommodation from a high of 233 in November 2016 to around 110 in January 2020. This was achieved through actively working with households to minimise the time they spend in temporary accommodation before moving into a settled home.
- 4.10 Partnership working in Watford on the issue of homelessness is very strong shown through the well-attended Watford Strategic Homelessness Forum which comprises partners from the voluntary sector, health sector, Hertfordshire County Council, faith-based groups, and housing associations. Working together has also led to successfully gaining government grants for multi-agency, multi-disciplinary work with rough sleepers in the town.
- 4.11 The Homelessness Review 2020 is set out in Appendix A
- 4.12 Consultation on the draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy – the findings
- 4.13 Consultation on the mission and key priorities for the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy took place between 10 February and 22 March 2020. Awareness of the consultation was raised in a variety of ways including a consultation mini-website, a lunch and learn session with staff, discussion at Watford Strategic Homelessness Forum and Housing Policy Advisory Group, emails to all Housing Register applicants, to housing sector bodies, to charities in the town, special interest groups, the Homelessness Forum, an article in the resident e-newsletter on the weekend of 29 February/1 March, electronic adverts throughout the town centre, all WBC elected members and local MP were contacted and a full social media campaign was conducted.
- 4.14 Sixty three people responded to the survey, of which 38 said they were residents, two said they were private or third sector organisations and two council employees responded. Females made up 65% of respondents and nearly half of respondents were aged between 25 and 54. In terms of ethnicity, 80% of respondents were from English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British heritage and Any other White background.
- 4.15 There was overwhelming agreement for:

- The proposed mission statement: “Watford will be a place where no-one needs to sleep rough and there is support available for everyone threatened with being or actually homeless”
- Key Priority 1: Preventing homelessness
- Key Priority 2: Provide services to homeless households and vulnerable adults relevant to their needs

4.16 The consultation outcomes are set out in more detail in Appendix B

4.17 The Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2020-25

Appendix C contains the draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2020-25 which includes an Action Plan that reflects on continuing actions as well as new actions planned for the next 5 years. The Action Plan will be reviewed annually to ensure it continues being relevant and fit for purpose.

4.18 Under each Key Priority there are two objectives, as follows:

- Key Priority 1: Preventing Homeless
 - **Objective 1:** Tackling the causes of homelessness and rough sleeping and improving the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act
 - **Objective 2:** Improving access to affordable and sustainable housing options

4.19 Key Priority 2: Providing services to homeless households and homeless vulnerable adults relevant to their needs

- **Objective 1:** Responding to rough sleeping
- **Objective 2:** Providing individualised support for families with children and vulnerable adults

Each objective has a range of actions against it showing how it will be delivered. The key priorities and the objectives take account of national and regional as well as local objectives around preventing homelessness and eliminating rough sleeping.

4.20 As the consultation showed support for the mission statement and key priorities, it is recommended these remain unchanged. The consultation did not indicate that any of the planned actions needed to be changed or that new actions be considered. The Equalities Impact Assessment showed that the planned actions will assist with meeting equalities requirements.

5.0 Implications

5.1 Financial

5.1.1 The Shared Director of Finance comments that there are no financial implications.

5.2 Legal Issues (Monitoring Officer)

5.2.1 The Group Head of Democracy and Governance comments that the legal comments are contained within the report and appendices

5.3 Equalities, Human Rights and Data Protection

5.3.1 Under s149 (1) of the Equality Act the council must have due regard, in the exercise of its functions, to the need to –

- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by the Act
- advance equality of opportunity between persons who share relevant protected characteristics and persons who do not share them
- foster good relations between persons who share relevant protected characteristics and persons who do not share them.

5.3.2 As this is a new strategy an equalities impact assessment has been undertaken, the key findings for which comprise the following:

5.3.3 In terms of ethnicity, White households were under represented in the cohort of homeless households when compared with their representation in the Watford population. Black homeless households, by contrast, were over-represented. The representation of Asian, Mixed and Other homeless households were similar to their representation in the general Watford population

5.3.4 The most common age range for homeless households is between 25 and 44 years old whilst those between 16 and 24 years of age was the next most common age group. The age groups which face homelessness most are those between 25 and 44 years

5.3.5 In terms of gender, the most predominant type of household for whom the council owed a homelessness duty is single women with dependent children.

5.3.6 There is insufficient data on disability across Watford's population and within the homeless household cohort to be able to draw out any findings.

5.3.7 A range of planned interventions may mitigate the impact for the groups identified above including increased communications and identifying upstream avenues to reach homeless households as early as possible with the aim of averting their

homelessness. Ways of addressing the housing needs of under 35s will also be looked at.

5.3.8 The Equalities Impact Assessment is set out in Appendix D

5.4 **Staffing**

5.4.1 There are no staffing implications

5.5 **Accommodation**

5.5.1 There are no accommodation implications

5.6 **Community Safety/Crime and Disorder**

5.6.1 Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 requires the council to give due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of its functions on crime and disorder in its area and to do all it reasonably can to prevent these. The Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy and its action plan takes into account issues of anti-social behaviour, cuckooing, begging and other activities related to rough sleeping in particular.

5.7 **Sustainability**

5.7.1 There are no sustainability implications

Appendices

- Appendix A: Homelessness Review 2020
- Appendix B: Consultation outcomes for draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2020-25
- Appendix C: Draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2020-25
- Appendix D: Equalities Impact Assessment for draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2020-25

Background papers

No papers were used in the preparation of this report.