

Report to:	Scrutiny and Overview Committee 15 February 2024
Lead Cabinet Member:	Councillor John Batchelor – Lead Cabinet member for Housing
Lead Officer:	Peter Campbell – Head of Housing
Key Decision:	Yes The key decision was first published in the September 2023 Forward Plan.

Homelessness Strategy

Executive Summary

1. Every five years, the Council completes a review of homelessness within the district to help determine trends and needs in relation to homelessness. From this a homelessness strategy is developed setting out the Council's aims to help prevent homelessness and assist those who are or become homeless.
2. Many of our trend's mirror those we are seeing nationally, including the main causes of homelessness which are family and friends no longer being able to accommodate, end of an assured shorthold tenancy and domestic abuse. We are also seeing an increase in the numbers in temporary accommodation.
3. Affordability within the district affects all households regardless of their employment status with more applicants being in work rather than solely on benefits. Both house prices and private sector rents are unaffordable for most people on a low income.
4. The aims within the new Homelessness Strategy focus around Homeless Prevention and Housing Options.
5. To prevent homelessness, we want to focus on earlier intervention to increase the chances of resolving applicants' difficulties. This will include specific money advice to help with affordability issues as well as ongoing work with partner agencies to address the needs of those at risk of rough sleeping, those with physical and mental health issues and those at risk of domestic abuse.
6. Housing options will include both social renting and privately renting, including through Shire Homes Lettings to increase the availability of affordable

accommodation. We will be aiming to increase the supply of single person accommodation through both shared and self-contained accommodation.

Recommendations

7. It is recommended that the Scrutiny and Overview Committee reviews and comments on the new Homelessness Strategy 2023-2028 and makes recommendations to Cabinet where it considers appropriate.

Details

8. The Homelessness Act 2002 places a statutory duty on all Local Authorities to undertake a review of homelessness in their area and, based on the findings of this review, to develop and publish a strategy to tackle and prevent homelessness. This new Homelessness Strategy will cover 2023 to 2028 and the strategy is reviewed and renewed every five years. Since the last review and strategy were written there have been significant external factors affecting the homeless services, including the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the ongoing economic situation continues to place increased pressure on household budgets.
9. Following on from the Homelessness Review the priorities for the next Strategy are grouped into two main aims, which are detailed further later in the report:
 - To provide homeless prevention, early intervention, and support.
 - To provide suitable housing options.
10. Key findings from the homelessness review:
 - Homelessness in the district remains high, with on average 453 homeless applications each year. In recent years, more people are approaching us once they are already homeless rather than when they are threatened with homelessness.
 - The main causes of homelessness at prevention stage are end of an assured shorthold tenancy, family or friends no longer being able to accommodate and domestic abuse.
 - The main causes of homelessness at relief stage is family and friends no longer being able to accommodate and domestic abuse, followed by non-violent relationship.
 - Overall the main cause of homelessness is family and friends no longer being able to accommodate, followed by end of an assured shorthold tenancy with domestic abuse being the third highest cause of homelessness.
 - This is the same nationally.
 - The highest household type to approach us at prevention stage is female single parents, closely followed by single males.
 - At relief stage the largest household type is by far single males.
 - Applicants tend to be of working age, with very few applications from those under 18 or over 65.
 - More applicants are employed than in receipt of benefits.
 - The ethnicity of our applicants matches the proportions within the 2021 census.

- The sexual identification categories of our applicants are also similar to the census however, a greater proportion 'prefer not to say'.
- The highest support need for our applicants is mental health, followed by physical health and disability.
- 65% of those who approach us at prevention stage are successfully prevented from becoming homeless.
- In most cases this is due to securing alternative accommodation, similar to the national picture.
- An offer of social housing is the main means of preventing homelessness, followed by the private rented sector.
- At relief stage, whilst a high proportion secure alternative accommodation, the highest proportion end relief due to 56 days having been elapse and therefore moving onto the main duty stage.
- Like at the prevention stage, an offer of social housing is the main means of relieving homelessness, followed by private rented.
- Where a main duty decision is made, in the vast majority of cases this is to accept the main duty.
- Where a main duty is accepted the reason for priority need is largely due to the household including dependent children, followed by mental health and physical health.
- The main means of discharging a main duty is through an offer of social rented accommodation.
- Levels of rough sleeping within the district are low, but have increased recently, which is the same nationally.
- Since December 2019 to August 2022, 55 referrals had been made to the P3 outreach service for rough sleepers in South Cambridgeshire.
- Due to vague or unclear information about the location of a rough sleeper, only 33% of referrals were located.
- However, the service has a high success rate with regards to engaging with people with 89% of those found, engaging in a needs assessment and support plan with the Outreach Service.
- Temporary accommodation increased during the pandemic and remains high and numbers are increasing nationally.
- Shire Homes Lettings has housed over 150 households and as of March 2023 had 67 self-contained properties and 5 houses of multiple occupation providing 21 rooms.
- As at March 2023, there were a total of 1738 applicants on the housing register. The highest proportion of these were single people.
- Over the last 3 years (up to March 23) on average 318 allocations have been made each year from the housing register into Council stock, 24% of which are generally for sheltered accommodation.
- Between 2018/19 and 2022/23, 318 council owned properties have been built including rented and shared ownership.
- Since the last strategy, there have been on average 371 new affordable homes completions each year.
- The number of lettings made to Registered Social Landlords (RSL's) on average each year is 93.

- The lower quartile house price to income ratio is 11.4 for South Cambridgeshire (Oct 2022) – generally house prices of 3 to 3.5 times income are considered affordable.
- The difference between the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rate for private rent and the median rent payable represents an average shortfall of £65 per week (Oct 2022).

11. The priorities for the next Homelessness Strategy come under two headings:

Homeless prevention, early intervention and support

- The need to promote early intervention to increase the opportunities to prevent homelessness, including family breakdown and other forms of insecure housing.
- Ensuring we prevent and intervene to resolve rough sleeping.
 - Early intervention through protocols and pathways including the criminal justice system and care leavers.
 - Access to private rented accommodation including a rent deposit scheme and our private sector leasing scheme, Shire Homes Lettings.
 - Street outreach service provided by P3
- Early and targeted money advice for those on a low income, including those in employment, to help with affordability.
 - Include training package for tenancy responsibilities.
 - Include review of energy efficiency to increase affordability (through links with our Net Zero Carbon Strategy).
- Ongoing support and assistance for tenants and landlords in the private rented sector.
- Ensuring we provide an inclusive service, taking account of all protected characteristics, particularly due to the increase in domestic abuse and high levels of homeless applications from those with mental and physical health needs.
 - Rectify the high number of 'not known' recordings.
- Further work to build on the improvements to the Council's response to domestic abuse.
- Joint working with health services to improve early intervention for those with mental and physical health needs.

Housing options

- Improve the housing options available for single people including those who are unsuitable for shared accommodation.
 - Project with Ermine Street to provide additional single person self-contained accommodation.
- Reducing the use of B&B, which is unsuitable as a form of temporary accommodation.
 - Monitor effectiveness of the change of working practice within the service

- Increase provision of access to privately rented accommodation including through Shire Homes Lettings.
- Council and Housing Association new build programmes
- Joint work through the Home-Link partnership to reduce affordability concerns preventing offers of social housing.
- Ongoing work to support government refugee schemes including guests from Ukraine.

Reasons for Recommendations

12. The draft Homelessness Strategy includes a homelessness review of the district identifying the main issues leading to housing need. From these, priorities for the next five-year strategy are outlined.

Implications

13. In the writing of this report, taking into account financial, legal, staffing, risk, equality and diversity, climate change, and any other key issues, the following implications have been considered:-

Financial and Fraud Risk

14. Financial implications: Generally, within ongoing budgets, however, there is a risk that increasing levels of homelessness will have high financial implications and therefore it is important to invest time and resources in preventative work.

Legal

15. Legal implications: There is a legal requirement to have a Homelessness Strategy and we have a statutory responsibility to provide assistance to those who are threatened with homelessness and who are homeless.

Risks/Opportunities

16. As with the financial implications, there is a risk of homelessness increasing due to a number of external factors – the actions within the Homeless Strategy will help to mitigate these risks.

Equality and Diversity

17. Equality and diversity – an equality impact assessment has been completed.

Consultation responses

18. A 12-week consultation period has taken place between October and the beginning of January. This was available through the website, and a leaflet was produced to encourage applicants and members of the public to respond (including the option to request a hard copy of the documents). Details were also

sent to partner organisations, Councillors, colleagues and a tenants meeting was attended. 13 responses were received.

19. Out of the 13 responses 11 strongly agreed, 1 agreed and 1 strongly disagreed with Aim 1. For Aim 2, 10 strongly agreed, 2 agreed and 1 strongly disagreed. (in relation to the responder that indicated they strongly disagreed, the comments suggest this may have been completed incorrectly as the comments are supportive of the aims).
20. Out of the 13 responders, 8 were members of the public and 5 were partner organisation or local agencies. No-one claimed to have experienced homelessness, although one had experienced some housing difficulties.
21. Comments relating to the aims of the homeless strategy are included in Appendix C.

Alignment with Council Priority Areas

Housing that is truly affordable for everyone to live in

22. The homeless strategy relates to those in housing need and who are either homeless or at risk of homelessness. The aims of the homeless strategy are to prevent homelessness or provide sufficient alternative housing options. All options and prevention outcomes must be affordable, including those in the private rented sector.

Being green to our core

23. There are links with the Council's Net Zero Carbon Strategy which we will explore further with the aim of making existing homes more energy efficient and affordable.

A modern and caring Council

24. As well as providing affordable housing solutions, applicants will often need support and assistance beyond the bricks and mortar to help them to prevent homelessness and maintain their homes successfully in the future. The homeless strategy incorporates support services and assistance that is available such as money advice, outreach services and protocols and pathways with other agencies.

Appendices

Appendix A: Homelessness Review

Appendix B: Homelessness Strategy

Appendix C: Consultation responses to request for any further comments relating to the priorities identified.

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