

Wiltshire Council

Environment Select Committee

3 September 2019

Final Report of the Homelessness Strategy Task Group

Purpose of the report

1. To present the findings and recommendations of the Task Group for endorsement by the committee and referral to the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, Heritage, Arts, Tourism, Housing and Environment for a response.

Background

2. On 4 October 2018, the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, Heritage, Arts, Tourism, Housing and Environment, Cllr Richard Clewer, met with the former Chairman of the Environment Select Committee, Cllr Matthew Dean, to discuss Overview and Scrutiny (OS) involvement in helping the Cabinet to draft a Homelessness Strategy.
3. The Cllrs agreed that OS input could help to add value to the development and shaping of the Council's homelessness policies, through the work around the Council's Homelessness Strategy. Following this discussion, the Environment Select Committee endorsed the establishment of a Homelessness Strategy Task Group at their meeting on [6 November 2018](#).
4. During November 2018's meeting, the committee felt that the Task Group's remit should focus on how the Council can take preventative measures to reduce homelessness through:
 - Providing for the needs of Wiltshire's most vulnerable groups, who are most at risk of homelessness
 - The availability of a range of accommodation options
 - Projections of homelessness in the county and how the Council can forward plan to meet such demand.
5. The above bullet points link to the Council's Business Plan 2017-27 priority of 'Protecting the most vulnerable' and within this, the headings of: 'Early Intervention' and 'Empowering and Safeguarding Families and Individuals'.

Terms of reference

6. The following terms of reference for the task group were endorsed by the Environment Select Committee on [8 January 2019](#).

Terms of Reference:

1. To support the development of a Homelessness Strategy, which aims to prevent and reduce homelessness in Wiltshire by considering:
 - a) Partnership working arrangements - which can help to facilitate a holistic response to the causes of homelessness and the accessibility of advice and information around homelessness and housing options
 - b) Projections of homelessness in the county
 - c) The availability of suitable and appropriate accommodation
 - d) Provision for the needs of vulnerable groups deemed as most at risk of homelessness
 - e) The reasons why individuals become either at risk of or homeless.
2. To meet every 8 weeks or on an ad-hoc basis as appropriate, until the conclusion of the Cabinet's work in drafting a Homelessness Strategy in September 2019.

Membership

7. The task group comprised the following membership:

- Cllr David Halik
- Cllr Deborah Halik
- Cllr Gordon King
- Cllr Pip Ridout
- Cllr Tom Rounds
- Cllr Graham Wright (Chairman)

Cllrs Matthew Dean and John Walsh were originally members of the Task Group, but later stood down, due to other commitments.

Methodology

8. The Task Group decided that in order to successfully work through each of their Terms of Reference, it would be fundamental to speak to the partners that the Council's housing service work with, as well as independent private sector landlords.
9. As set out in the table below (and not including private sector landlords), the Task Group spoke to 23 witnesses in total: approximately 65 per cent of these witnesses were internal to Wiltshire Council and 35 per cent came from external organisations.
10. The Task Group is grateful to the following witnesses for providing them with evidence:

Cllr Richard Clewer	Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, Heritage, Arts, Tourism, Housing and Environment
Cllr Ashley O'Neill	Portfolio Holder for Housing and Electoral Review

Martyn Adrey	Homeless Prevention Officer, Wiltshire Council
Sam Brand	Homelessness Advice and Prevention Manager, Wiltshire Council
Ian P Brown	Head of Revenues and Benefits, Wiltshire Council
Verena Buchanan	Housing Director, Selwood Housing
Ashley Byers & Housing Options Team	Wiltshire Council Housing Options North, Team Leader
Heidi Clarke	The Big Life Group, Liverpool
Sally Cook	Employer and Partnership Manager, Department for Work and Pensions
Sue Cox & Housing Options Team	Wiltshire Council Housing Options South, Team Leader
Louise Davis	Project Leader, Salisbury Trust for the Homeless
Revd Barrie Dearlove	Breakthrough Trowbridge
Simon Hendey	Director of Housing and Commercial Development, Wiltshire Council
James Hudson	Private Sector Housing Manager, Wiltshire Council
Ollie LeCluse & Housing Options Team	Wiltshire Council Housing Options West, Team Leader
Jan Morse	Neighbourhood Operations Manager, Greensquare
Hayley Mortimer	Public Health Consultant, Wiltshire Council
Louis Shortall	Wiltshire Council Rough Sleeper Outreach Team, Team Leader
Nicole Smith	Head of Housing, Wiltshire Council
Louise Streater	Revenues and Benefits Operations Manager, Wiltshire Council
Gemma Syrett	Housing Income Manager, Wiltshire Council
Louise Thorpe	Head of Housing, Aster
Naomi Webb	Service Manager, Alabaré
Suzanne Wigmore	Chief Executive, Citizens Advice Bureau

The Members of the Task Group also conducted independent interviews with private landlords and some homeless people in their division. In the interests of confidentiality, these witnesses will not be listed; notwithstanding, the Task Group is grateful for the input from private landlords and homeless individuals in the following areas:

- Calne
- Salisbury
- Trowbridge
- Warminster
- Westbury

11. Alongside interviewing those listed above, the Task Group considered a range of sources of information. This related to:

- Desktop Review: Homelessness Application Process in other Local Authorities (Bath & North East Somerset, Devon, Dorset, South Gloucestershire, Swindon and Wiltshire)
- Desktop Review: Homelessness Outreach in other Local Authorities (Bath & North East Somerset, Devon, Dorset, South Gloucestershire, Swindon and Wiltshire)
- [Homelessness Reduction Act](#), 2017
- Housing Income: Number of Evictions and Arrears from 2013 to Jan 2019 for Wiltshire Council's Housing Stock
- [Government's Code of Guidance for Local Authorities: Homelessness Strategy](#)
- [Government's Rough Sleeper Delivery Plan](#)
- Wiltshire Council's Homeless Data Review, December 2018
- Wiltshire Council: Homelessness Health Needs Assessment
- Wiltshire Council: Homelessness Strategy 2019
- Wiltshire Council: Reconnection Protocol
- Wiltshire Council: Rough Sleeper Policy

12. The Task Group met nine times between December 2018 and September 2019. This report and its recommendations have been discussed with the Executive and Officers.

Evidence

Reasons for Homelessness

13. The Task Group looked at those individuals most at risk of homelessness. When it comes to social housing evictions, both in Wiltshire and across the whole of England, rent arrears is one of the main reasons behind why an individual/household becomes homeless and the Task Group saw how the transition to universal credit had exacerbated tenants building up rent arrears. Significantly, in the majority of cases, those with rent arrears also had Council Tax arrears and were in receipt of a range of social security benefits.
14. Although appropriate partner bodies such as Alabaré, Aster Housing, Greensquare Housing, Selwood Housing and White Horse Housing were part of the Wiltshire Information Sharing Charter, the Task Group were informed that it was not possible for the Council to capitalise on this agreement and share data with partners for those with Council Tax arrears and in receipt of Housing Benefit. The Task Group felt that this information could help highlight to partners those individuals most at risk of homelessness, so that preventative strategies could be put in place. However, due to Housing Benefit legislation, the Council is unable to provide details to partners of those in receipt of the benefit.

Accommodation

15. On average, the Council lets 1500 social rented properties to individuals who have completed a housing application for housing. All of Wiltshire's social housing providers offer their properties through the Homes4Wiltshire scheme. Accommodation can also be sourced from the private rented sector. Despite all of these options, the Task Group were informed that demand for housing outstrips supply and that there is a lack of one-bedroom properties in the county.
16. When it comes to providing housing to those approaching the Council for support and assistance, Housing noted that two-bed flats and bungalows are in very low demand, however, offering a single individual a two-bedroom property can be problematic; because a reduction to the person's Universal Credit payment will be applied via the Spare Room Subsidy. This would often make the property unaffordable, so it couldn't be offered to the client. Alongside this, some accommodation is hard to let and unsuitable, because it is based in a rural location with poor transport links; which does not support the tenant(s) in securing and maintaining employment which, again, contributes to homelessness.
17. On the whole, private landlords reported that they did not want to let their properties to Wiltshire Council clients because, historically, some of the Council's clients were known to not look after properties adequately. This often resulted in the landlord incurring additional and unforeseen expenses at the end of a tenancy. The Task Group was encouraged to hear that Housing were aware of these issues and actively working to build positive and strong relationships with the private rented sector.
18. Additionally, some private landlords stated that they were disinclined to let their properties to Wiltshire Council clients because of a lack of tenant history. For example, some landlords explained that they always like to collect references for any potential tenants and, often, the Council's clients were unable to provide such documentation. The Task Group felt that Housing needed to establish a process whereby the Council could vouch for a tenant and thus, provide the tenant with a reference, when they are seeking to move on. This could be facilitated by Housing keeping a record of how the individual took care of their accommodation whilst in Temporary or Emergency Accommodation.
19. Largely, private landlords reported that they felt the duty to prevent and reduce homelessness rested with Wiltshire Council. This was one reason why many landlords only chose to accept tenants who were not in receipt of benefits.

Emergency Accommodation and the Rough Sleeper Outreach Team

20. When it came to Emergency Accommodation, the Task Group was pleased to learn that Wiltshire has not had to rely on hotels or B&Bs for temporary accommodation provision. This is a significant achievement, with many local authorities across the country relying heavily on such options. That being said, Wiltshire's funding from Central Government for several emergency accommodation placements and the Rough Sleeper Outreach Team was only guaranteed for two years (until 2020).

21. At present, Wiltshire currently has rough sleeper emergency accommodation in Trowbridge, Chippenham and Salisbury. Temporary Accommodation is available in Amesbury, Bemerton Heath, Chippenham, Durrington, Melksham, Salisbury, Trowbridge, Warminster and Westbury.
22. Both the work of the Rough Sleeper Outreach Team and increasing the amount of emergency accommodation units, helped to ensure that rough sleepers across Wiltshire had options to come off the streets and the Council was able to adhere to the Government's 'No Second Night Out' policy, which formed part of the Government's Rough Sleeper Strategy 2011. This policy is designed to reduce rough sleeping, by ensuring that no individual has to spend a second night sleeping on the street.
23. Since the Rough Sleeper Outreach Team became operational, rough sleeping had decreased by 52 per cent across the county. The Task Group learnt that this team was integral in helping those rough sleepers who traditionally chose not to engage with Housing, to transition out of homelessness.

Projections of Homelessness

24. The Task Group were informed that homeless applications had been increasing from veterans in the South of the County and there was concern among Housing Options that this would further grow, as the Army Rebasing 2020 Scheme is completed.

Accessibility of Advice and Information

25. When considering the accessibility of advice and information for those facing homelessness, local authorities differed in how they publicised their information, as well as the information provided. Although not fully investigated, the Task Group considered whether the Councils whose information was harder to access and more limited had higher levels of homelessness. Devon County Council was seen as an example of good practise in this area. The Executive stated that making homeless advice and information readily accessible from the Council's website was a priority.

Conclusions

Reasons for Homelessness

26. As the Council holds all the data for council tenants, including which households have rent arrears and Council Tax arrears, as well as the details of those tenants in receipt of welfare benefits, the Task Group felt that it would be a 'quick win' for the Council to use this data to design an enhanced preventative process. The Task Group agreed that the Council's preventative homelessness service was already operating well and this activity could help to further enhance the service.
27. One way in which the Task Group felt that the current process could be improved, is if Revenues and Benefits and Housing met together regularly, to discuss vulnerable households. This could be facilitated similarly to how the MAPPA

(Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements) meetings are carried out; these meetings are used to inform Housing of any offenders due to leave prison, who would require assistance in securing accommodation. MAPPA effectively reduces the likelihood of an ex-offender becoming homeless and a similar set-up between Revenues and Benefits and Housing, could help to further prevent homelessness in Wiltshire.

28. As touched on above in paragraph 14, the Task Group wanted to include a recommendation for the data of those with Council Tax arrears and those in receipt of Housing Benefit to be shared with partners. The aim of this recommendation is to help facilitate further preventative work, so that those most at risk of homelessness (and living in non-Wiltshire housing stock) could be identified earlier. Unfortunately, due to Housing Benefit legislation, it would not be possible for the Council to share the details of those in receipt of this benefit with partners.

Accommodation

29. The Task Group were concerned that Wiltshire's accommodation options were limited because private landlords often chose not to rent to those in receipt of welfare benefits. Also, the Homelessness Strategy spoke of relying on the private sector to help combat homelessness, yet, many landlords stated that the responsibility to reduce homelessness fell solely on the Council.
30. Therefore, the Task Group concluded that it would be beneficial if Housing could make it more attractive for private sector landlords to let their properties to Wiltshire Council clients. Furthermore, Housing could play a central role: working with both these landlords and their tenants, to facilitate smoother tenancies.

Emergency Accommodation and the Rough Sleeper Outreach Team

31. The Task Group concluded that both Emergency Accommodation and the Rough Sleeper Outreach Team were vital components in the Council's work in combatting homelessness. Interestingly, desktop research demonstrated that having in-house rough sleeper outreach hugely improved the support provided to rough sleepers/non-engagers and, in this respect, Wiltshire appeared to be following delivering best practise.
32. The Rough Sleeper Outreach Team also acted as the focal point for integrating and joining-up services, such as Public Health, Social Care and Housing. The Task Group felt this was an innovative approach, which should continue to be capitalised on going forwards.
33. The Task Group's concern was that funding for both elements (Emergency Accommodation and the Rough Sleeper Outreach Team) was not guaranteed from 2020 and this needed to be addressed; as without these two entities, the Council's outstanding work would slip backwards. The Task Group felt that the continuation of overnight shelter in each area where need has been proven was

fundamental. As noted above, this provision formed part of the Council's on-going social care role.

Homelessness Strategy

34. Overall, the Task Group supported the content of the Homelessness Strategy. Throughout the scrutiny review, the Executive had been forthcoming in sharing information and discussing contentious matters. As a result, the Task Group were able to conduct a comprehensive piece of work, yielding a suite of evidenced-based recommendations.
35. Finally, despite the challenges that the service area faces, the Task Group was impressed with the work of the council's Housing team. From management to Revenues and Benefits to Housing Options and the Rough Sleeper Outreach Team, officers demonstrated an outstanding level of dedication, knowledge and enthusiasm for supporting the needs of those most vulnerable to homelessness. With such committed individuals, the Task Group is confident that the priorities set out within the Homelessness Strategy can be implemented successfully.

Proposal

36. To endorse the report of the Task Group and refer it to the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, Heritage, Arts, Tourism, Housing and Environment for response at the committee's next meeting.

Recommendations

That the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, Heritage, Arts, Tourism, Housing and Environment implements the following recommendations:

- 1. For the Environment Select Committee to welcome the positive and proactive engagement from the Executive throughout this important review.**
- 2. In order to ensure that intervention takes place at the earliest possible stage and that vulnerable clients have the best chance of maintaining appropriate accommodation, to consider implementing a "Passport to Housing" scheme, whereby the following are undertaken:**
 - a) Internal Data Matching: those on welfare benefits, those who have Council Tax arrears and rent arrears have their details centralised. This information to then be discussed, so that all appropriate Council departments are aware of the individuals/households most at risk of homelessness; leading to a process of earlier intervention**
 - b) Wiltshire Council's Departments, Wiltshire's main Social Housing providers, private landlords and the third sector forge a partnership working arrangement, so that housing stock is better co-ordinated and different agencies become more aware and responsive to the needs of Wiltshire's tenants.**

3. The council to consider all the ways of encouraging and supporting private landlords to rent their properties to those in receipt of welfare benefits and wider use of the 'Discretionary Housing Payment', in order to increase the housing options available to this group and reduce their vulnerability to homelessness.
 4. In order to ensure that Wiltshire Council can continue its positive work reducing homelessness in the county, to prioritise sustaining both the Emergency Accommodation provision (in each town where need has been proven) and Rough Sleeper Outreach Team for a significant period of time through, for example:
 - a) Regularly recording data that evidences the need for, and impact of, the Emergency Accommodation provision and the Rough Sleeper Outreach Team
 - b) Continually seeking funding opportunities to help maintain these services.
 5. In light of the Army Rebasing 2020 Scheme and to help manage the workload of Housing Options South, to consider establishing a "prevention partnership" network with the Ministry of Defence and appropriate partners, which would enhance the housing support offered to those leaving the armed forces.
 6. For the Council's homelessness webpages to be better publicised and more easily accessible from the Council's homepage, so that those who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, can more easily remotely access the support and advice that they need.
 7. For the Environment Select Committee to consider a report in 12 months' time, updating on how the Executive have implemented the recommendations set out above. *(This report would only relate to recommendations that the Executive accepted, as detailed in the 'Executive Response to the Homelessness Strategy Task Group's final report' – due to be received on [5 November 2019](#)).*
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Cllr Graham Wright, Chairman of the Homelessness Strategy Task Group

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Appendices

None

Background documents

Links are listed within the report to non-confidential material. Paragraph 11 of the report's 'Methodology' section also sets out a list of background documents.