

**RICHARD CROMPTON – CITY COUNCIL SERVICE LEAD – HOUSING NEEDS
AND HOMELESSNESS**

The statement covered existing practices and those proposed in the Draft Homelessness Strategy. His responses to Members' questions are set out below:-

- Chair - does the service have the capacity to deal with an expected increase in homelessness?;
- the annual increase in presentations over December to February is anticipated again. This is usually a 5%-10 % increase but if exceeded and/or prolonged, people will not be seen as quickly as hoped. There is a statutory requirement to assess homeless applicants and determine the duties owed if there is a reason to believe they may be homeless within 56 days. Spaces in hotels/B&B's are limited and there is also the risk of legal challenges because of a failure to meet duties including housing. The service needs to show it can provide a personal housing plan within the set period, although there can be some leeway in timing;
- Chair - is it an issue of finance or more the availability of personnel?;
- it is process driven and largely dependent on the availability of staff to deliver assessments and take on additional cases. It is also partly driven by the availability of additional temporary accommodation;
- Chair - can you outsource?;
- outsourcing already occurs to some degree with assessment information and funding opportunities are constantly sought to facilitate the leasing of additional properties or the purchase of properties. Outsourcing housing advice to partners requires significant investment in knowledge and skills and is therefore a more resource-heavy option. However, partners also do not possess the same legislative jurisdiction, that is, legal obligations upon local government;
- Chair – is the rough sleeping picture in Exeter atypical?;
- it reflects the national picture but Exeter is in the top 20 (the upper quartile) for the rough sleeping count figures. Six years ago it was 70th. DLUHC seek reduced national figures i.e. the best available and offer support through its Homelessness Assessment Support Team. The count that is undertaken reflects the availability of resources across all partners but is very thorough involving a number of teams. In essence, the figure provided is an estimate, in that it only reflects the actual number contacted on the night of the count;
- Chair - is the target of no homeless by the end of 2024 likely to be achieved?;
- the programme was on course in 2021, particularly as additional dedicated units for supported accommodation were in the pipeline. However, increased numbers in the last six months indicate that the target will be harder to meet and, although the Council and partners are identifying bed spaces through leasing additional properties, essentially the challenge has heightened in terms of higher numbers of rough sleepers new to the city. Whilst the Government aspiration of ending rough sleeping is admirable, the overall housing and support scenario is so complex that the actions to address rough sleeping can be viewed as simply “greasing the smallest cog in the mill”
- Chair - is the doorstep perception of Exeter being “trapped” as a rough sleeper destination accurate or a mythology?;
- whilst smaller urban areas such as Barnstaple and Newton Abbott also experience significant numbers of rough sleepers there are fewer facilities in most Devon County districts to support the homeless. Exeter is certainly a greater attraction because of the number of services available which seek to help the wide range of issues associated with homelessness and rough sleeping. This is commonly seen with Exeter's comparator cities set in rural counties;
- Councillor Pearce - there are now global issues at work with the Ukraine war as well as the recent cost of living crisis and Exeter also has the largest travel to work area in the UK outside London;

- Councillor Sutton - Exeter also has a large number of charitable organisations which attract the homeless and free food is widely available throughout the day;
- Chair - what is the nature of the relationship with the RD&E and the Prison?
- Exeter Prison is short term remand and, consequently, there is a constant flow to the Council some of whom go onto the streets. The private sector has been approached to provide accommodation for this cohort but with little success. At present, there is a three year, year on year funding support for a small number (6) of accommodation units for ex-offenders up to 2025 and a further funding bid option is being assessed;
- for the RD&E it is understood that the Julian House support is on a two year basis, the NHS providing support on a national basis;
- Councillor Wardle - a recommendation to Government is needed for vast public money input to mirror that provided during the Covid Pandemic. What is the criteria in the formal count for identifying a homeless person rough sleeping?;
- they have to be bedded down or evidently about to bed down - not standing in a doorway - some may be begging and then returning to accommodation;
- following on from the success of the Rough Sleeper bid, work is being scoped to prepare for a further round of support from DLUHC via its Supportive Housing Access Programme, through which £10 million is to be made available nationally. Bids will be prioritised to those areas assessed on as having the highest level of rough sleeping need;
- Chair - in terms of Priority 5 - Systems and Partnerships - which lists examples of effective partnership - how will this approach be progressed going forward?
- the Government is focussing on joined up working and, for Exeter, it is hoped to identify an appropriate strategic forum which will come under the umbrella of, and report to, a body other than just the City Council alone - Exeter Wellbeing or the Place Board are potential bodies. The forum would have representatives from the various homelessness partners and include City Councillors and senior officers. There is a proposal contained within the draft Homelessness Strategy;
- Chair - with the personnel budget set, what will be the knock on effect of increased presentations on the overall budget?
- two extra posts covering rough sleeping and domestic violence are now filled following additional grant funding received so there is not at present a clear need for additional resources given the current workload of 40-50 cases per member of the nine person team. However, any maintained increase in presentations to 50 cases will impact on team capacity and also client through-flow. Hotel and B&B accommodation is the current default position when temporary units are full. This option is unsuitable from a mental health point of view as well as potential legal challenge and, in particular costly, with a current average of 10 units at £300+ net cost totalling over £3,000 a week. These costs are reported in the Council's Welfare and Benefits Budget and are a net cost to the Council;
- obtaining properties to lease is more cost effective, and three properties have been obtained in the last 18 months. There is also a programme of buying back Council flats also contributing to housing rough sleepers;
- Chair - what are the funding figures, including grant support?;
- £3.5 million grant funds received, of which £2.9 million is short term, with approximately 20% helping fund the homelessness team and 80% to providers. £1.4 million from the Council budget of which up to £400,000 goes towards Hotel and B&B accommodation;
- Chair - Torbay have a £20 million commitment to buy properties as a longer term capital investment;
- a similar policy would help and a number of authorities do go down this route. Investment in bricks and mortar is the preferred approach and leasing can offer a full cost recovery, including option to buy as in Torbay. This is being examined through current work to put together a business case. Rises in interest rates need to be included in the equation;
- Chair - is there a role for private sector developers?;

- seeking private sector involvement is very challenging, the planning mechanism for social housing provision being through Section 106 Agreements but this relates to new housing developments. Involvement with Exeter City Living is being explored for meeting homeless-specific need;
- Councillor Jobson - what is the role of other social housing providers – Housing Associations?;
- there are limited opportunities to house rough sleepers due to risk and support issues, although they do sometimes get offers under Devon Home Choice, though mainly from City Council stock;
- Councillor Rees - Rowan Livingstone of St. Petrock's had remarked that the system was failing to prioritise the homeless;
- Councillor Wardle - what action would you recommend with a free hand ?
- change in legislation to make action on rough sleeping a priority combined with additional housing and greater support from other social housing providers and health and treatment services including social services;
- there are currently 62 empty homes and some are long term of over two years. Many have complications such as overseas ownership, joint ownership and probate etc. although compulsory purchase could be exercised;
- Councillor Wardle - is there a need for a robust overall control mechanism?
- whilst the national homeless figure is around 4,000, rough sleeping support tends to operate in a bubble;
- Chair – how can the co-ordination of groups be progressed to include Member involvement?
- the Forum approach is included within the draft Strategy and, when up and running, partners will receive regular reports. Ideally, membership should include Devon County Council officers and Members also;
- Chair - can answers be provided to Councillor D. Moore's questions around sleeping in vehicles and the D category please?
- Yes;
- Chair - what would be the impact of a 10-15% budget cut?
- a 15% cut would be the equivalent of £220,000 from the general budget fund but the knock on impact on front line services, maintaining accommodation options and potential legal challenges would be an approximate higher cost of £3 for every £1 saved. This would also be against the background of a potential impact of a 5+% increase in presentations;
- Chair - has consideration been given to leasing outside the City Council area?;
- there would be a statutory duty to inform other Districts but this option has not been fully used as most Exeter applicants want/need to stay local to services. Occasionally homeless households are placed out of area, sometimes out of County if no other option available;
- Councillor Rees - some of the partners referred to the benefits of collaboration – are there plans to build on what has already been achieved?
- co-production with providers such as Julian House, Bournemouth Churches Housing Association and CoLab is well embedded but further work can be done across the wider homelessness spectrum with County Council involvement seen as beneficial under the banner of homelessness although their services are wider than this one issue. The Rough Sleeping Drug and Alcohol Steering Group encompasses practitioners and middle managers, although more senior representation such as Member involvement could be of benefit;
- Councillor Rees - the Council does not fund St. Petrock's;
- there used to be support via a social letting service but there remains continued contact and Council resource such as for move on housing;
- Chair - those for whom the agencies are most concerned are at the top of the pyramid but there remains a silent majority with no vocal group to support;

- Councillor Rees - a recurring theme was the need for face to face contact and the difficulty of phone conversations. St. Petrock's are very grateful for support and their work, and that of CoLab and the other groups is greatly valued;
- Councillors Sutton and Jobson - echo difficulties of those in need in communicating when distressed and/or with learning difficulties, issues which are sometimes more evident when sitting face to face;
- the homelessness team are very dedicated but it is acknowledged that reference to the "yellow phone" outside the Civic Centre can be problematic. A further issue can be assessments at different stages of the process and the work of the CoLab based navigation team who maintain contact with clients is very beneficial. This support can be as long as five years;
- sharing the Council's database with Julian House has proved partially beneficial and further work in this area to extend to other agencies may add value;
- Chair - a Member homelessness briefing once a year would be beneficial; and
- one (rough sleeping) was recently cancelled and will be re-arranged - it can cover a number of areas - rough sleeping, general homelessness and Devon Home Choice

The Chair thanked Richard for his input.