

REPORT TO CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meetings: 5 October 2023

Report of: Ian Collinson, Director

Title: Homelessness – Six month progress report

Is this a Key Decision?

No

Is this an Executive or Council Function?

Executive / Council

1. What is the report about?

1.1 Further to the report of the Homelessness Task & Finish Working Group (2nd Feb 2023) this report updates members on the following:

1.2 Key Issues in the last 6 months

1.3 Progress under the new Homelessness Strategy (including actions to progress the recommendations of the T&F group)

1.4 Key data reporting demand, outcomes and trends will be circulated via the new Housing Needs quarterly newsletter

2. Recommendations:

The report is for information only but members are advised to note the progress being made on the key recommendations, particularly those within the Council's locus of control.

3. Reasons for the recommendation:

N/A.

4. What are the resource implications including non-financial resources

At present no additional resource implications are noted.

5. Report details:

8.1 Key Issues in the last 6 months

The Council has faced a number of new homelessness challenges in the last 6 months, most significantly the unexpected announcement in February by Devon County Council of the proposal to cease funding adult homelessness support services across the County. This challenging prospect was followed in March by the Government's announcement that all bridging hotels accommodating Afghan Households since the evacuation in 2021 were to close by the end of August.

These two challenges have generated significant levels of additional work which, alongside new bidding programmes for targeted rough sleeper services and the purchase of additional housing, have been the main focus for staff working on homelessness development agendas. Progression of actions under the homelessness strategy have been impacted to a degree but numerous work streams have moved forward as reported below.

8.2 Progress under the new Homelessness Strategy (including actions to progress the recommendations of the T&F group)

Key points of progress:

- Revised ending rough sleeping action plan
- New (successful) bid for targeted rough sleeping work – additional staff posts for council and partners presently under recruitment
- Gap analyses co-designed with partners completed for both Rough Sleeping needs and high needs Young Persons services. This is a key partnership milestone in preparation for a November bid for capital and revenue to the Supported Housing Accommodation Programme (SHAP). The Council and partners including Exeter YMCA will be targeting funds for new supported housing units for homeless young persons including care leavers and also for homeless adults with complex or multiple need who struggle to sustain current local housing options and often end up street attached in the city.

8.3 The following Task and Finish Working Group recommendations were adopted by Council in February. These were divided into those relating to Government / external bodies and those more within the Council's sphere of influence. Progress is reported (*in italics*) below each as follows:-

8.4 Government/External Bodies:

- (1) To seek via the City's two MP's and the Local Government Association a fundamental review and overhaul of the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) Scheme with consideration to be given to the Allowance reflecting Exeter's circumstances as an urban area in its own right and not averaged with neighbouring authorities in the assessment of the allowance

The fundamental affordability issue resulting from the gap between market rents and LHA rates has been a repeated theme arising the Afghan bridging hotel resettlement programme work. Housing authorities up and down the country have repeatedly raised LHA as the key barrier to affordability and homelessness reduction with key ministers and in the presence of lead Home Office and DLUHC personnel. ECC council officers have lent support to this message to Govt during webinars and seminars. The response has been that the Govt is listening.

It was hoped that the high profile of the Afghan programme amidst the wider refugee resettlement challenges could be the vehicle that finally levers an uplift in LHA rates. However whilst this has not yet materialised the local action to propose a review of the Broad Market Rental Are via local MP offices is outstanding and will now be followed up by officers.

- (2) To lobby Central Government to increase the ability for local authorities to build social housing

Specific lobbying action has not yet been initiated due to other priorities. Elements of specific activity relating to this agenda remain in play through Planning and the HRA development programme. It is proposed that the Council feeds this and other nationally / regionally relevant lobbying actions via its engagement with the Devon Housing Commission.

- (3) To lobby Central Government for the funding of local authorities and agencies to be for a minimum of three years for projects relating to housing provision, as opposed to short term support
- (4) To lobby Central Government to support changes to the planning system to control/limit short term lets and holiday homes

- (5) To lobby Central Government to support the abolition of Section 21 evictions
- (6) To lobby Central Government to support the reform of the Business Tax and Council Tax regimes for an equitable contribution in respect of all properties
- (7) To seek a Government review of the current operation of the deposit system for private rented properties for mediation to get an agreement to last no longer than 28 days after which the full deposit is returned. This will assist the tenant to obtain a further deposit for an alternative property.

For actions 3 to 7 it is proposed that the Council also feeds these through the Devon Housing Commission.

- (8) To seek the support of the Crown and Magistrate Courts for the use of Plain English regarding paperwork relating to court proceedings

Not yet actioned.

- (9) To align with the County Council webpages to ensure linkage on information and advice that helps people to find early help and prevent people from becoming at risk of homelessness wherever possible

Focus on this action has to date been joint working with DCC Children's Services and Corporate Parenting directorate to finalise the working protocols between County and District / City housing authorities in homelessness 16-17 year olds and Care Leavers aged 18-25. The Care Leaver protocol has been approved by the leading District officers (including Legal teams) as at w/b 11.09.23. This is a key milestone in establishing an improved robust joint prevention approach across both authority tiers. Alignment of communication and marketing of the protocol alongside key information to young persons and representing agencies has been agreed by all partners. The expectation is that revised information will go live by the end of the calendar year.

Alignment of wider homelessness advice and help information including website content and format is outstanding and to be agreed once the local homelessness funding position is finalised post-December.

- (10) To work with Devon County Council's Children's Services, to ensure the Homelessness Prevention Worker function is able to help young people earlier and prevent them becoming at risk of homelessness wherever possible including young people leaving care and making better use of existing tools like Positive Pathways to improve supporting young people earlier on)

This action is part of the overall work with Corporate Parenting and to be developed within the new best practice Champion model due for Cabinet sign off this September. It is proposed that County and Districts will review the homelessness prevention resources under the "Care For Me" subgroup in order to focus on current delivery and gaps in accommodation and support services. The HPW function is to be reviewed alongside the current capacity for personal assistant casework with key focus on improving tenancy rescue. The Council is assessing options to work with County on the Supported Housing Accommodation Programme which will include an assessment of potential use of local County land / buildings for new housing for care leavers. Additional funding for support and earlier intervention work is to be deployed to care leavers through the "Staying Close" fund.

The above work is being progressed under the joint countywide approach to the Corporate Parenting duty which is currently a central priority on the monthly Team Devon CEX agenda.

- (11) To seek increased/joint service contributions from Devon County Council in co-production areas of work e.g. substance misuse services, social care, young persons including care-leavers etc.

Action relating to young persons and care leavers is reported as above. In relation to the needs of the wider cohort, having played a key role in the submission of data and impact information to the recent homelessness funding consultation, the Council is engaged with County in the co-design of a position statement on homelessness. This work is scheduled to produce an integrated view of homelessness need including multi-disciplinary funding models and proposals by the end of November.

Outside of this the Council has been working with local substance misuse and social care partners to develop new capacity for support to adults and young persons with complex and multiple need. This is being co-ordinated under the local joint working with Public Health drug and alcohol funding to grow additional capacity within services aligned to the model of trauma-informed relational practice as delivered by the (award winning) ECC-led Navigator service.

- (12) To seek increased capacity around mental health services including support for the newly formed Mental Health Alliance and building on existing City Council officer support in this area

Work to develop more capacity and improved delivery / outcomes for homeless people in Exeter is being led by Colab with support from the Council. One recent focus has been the recruitment of the mental health navigator and re-establishing the model of pathway interface with the statutory mental health service. Further work is required in this area to drive up capacity beyond what is currently a very limited resource in relation to need and demand.

The Council continues to fund via RSI grant monies the psychological wellbeing support service Real Life Psychology which supports clients and staff with key coping skills and reflective practice.

Exeter City Council responsibilities:

- (13) To undertake a city wide response to homelessness, through a more formalised partnership approach building on the city's social capital and developing flourishing communities - this could be via the proposed Homelessness Housing Forum (HHF) comprised of local accommodation and support providers to see the system as a whole and address blocks and barriers. The HHF will build on learning from the Exeter Homelessness Partnership Alliance as well as from national examples of good practice e.g. Homeless Link. This will build on the existing co-production mechanisms and with the ultimate aim of offering accommodation on first presentation. The involvement of the business/private sector will also be sought.

A number of work development areas have been in progress over the last 6 months:

- *The renewal of a revised Exeter Homelessness Forum, building on the work of the 3-year funded Exeter Homelessness Partnership. The key focus to date has been co-ordinated response to the DCC homelessness funding consultation but other priority work is to revise the alternative giving scheme, raise resource for basic need / survival facilities (toilets, shelter, drinking water etc.) and develop wider service co-production with lived experience including education, training and employment pathways*
- *Meetings with key civic partners to develop the action plan around relieving street-attached need including city centre ASB. This is a multi-agency partnership including the Council, police, civic partners such as Education, Commerce and businesses.*
- *The Council has continued to lead the Ending Rough Sleeping forum with homelessness and housing partners including some wider stakeholders. Part of the agenda is the*

development of wider engagement of partners such as Public Health with a view to build strategic consensus toward a wider Homelessness Reduction board

The governance model proposed in the new Homelessness strategy has not yet been established due to other pressing priorities and is now set to be road-tested over the next 6 months by diverging the above key stakeholder meetings to pilot one strategic homelessness forum for Exeter.

- (14) To maximise renewal of the City Council contract(s) with providers with Member involvement to add greater focus on key areas and targets, including analysis of the evidence base

Contract renewals are in progression with temporary accommodation providers as a key priority given the pressure of statutory accommodation demand and the current squeeze on funding for housing-related support. The Council is prioritising the more risk-tolerant higher performing providers whilst assessing ongoing improvement agendas with other services alongside alternative service models (including in-house provision).

Contracts with young person's services for Homeless Prevention Workers were renewed in February but are now subject to the overall review with Corporate Parenting before any extension or procurement decisions will be taken for April 2024 onwards.

The Council has recently undertaken a contract review and negotiated a funding extension with MOJ/Probation services for its prison resettlement service.

The Council and Citizens Advice Exeter have continued with review meetings (CAE with new CEO from April) focusing on current trends and practice issues with a view to prioritise work streams in time for contract renewal in 2024. Demand on services sub-contracted to CAE and Homemaker SW remain high especially in areas such as household affordability, income maximisation, and arrears and debt management. Next steps will include further relationship building (referrals and communications) with the Council's housing advice services and strengthening of prevention-focused activity.

- (15) To seek the involvement of a third party organisation in statutory homelessness mediation cases

The Council has maintained contact with the Shelter (Plymouth) lead officer. Reviews and appeals of homelessness decisions have remained stable in number. The majority are appeals against social housing banding decisions and predominantly appear to be reflective of personal frustration (lack of housing availability and waiting lists) as opposed to incorrect decisions by the Council. The Council has recently proposed a policy amendment regarding appeals whereby (subject to Devon Home Choice approval) those that are not supported by additional supporting evidence or a change in circumstances following the initial decision may be rejected.

The Council plans to invite a third party advocacy service to monitor these cases as a first check and balance into this area of work. This is also for the purpose of trialling a new partner relationship wherein a mediation option may be developed for challenging prevention cases.

- (16) To welcome and support the In Exeter commitment to the provision of drinking fountains in the city centre and seek the review of the 24/7 provision of public toilets in the city

This action has not yet been progressed. It is likely to be on the priority agenda for the Exeter Homelessness Forum as per point 13.

- (17) To welcome and support One Exeter's review of the use of Plain English for Council tax and other written communications rather than by telephone

This action has not yet been progressed to completion. An option to add a summary statement to the letters atop the necessary policy and legal-led statutory language to be taken to Council Tax lead officer.

- (18) To seek City Council commitment to a continuation of funding for the leasing and purchasing options programme for the supported and temporary accommodation programme

To date the development of leasehold options to relieve pressure on temporary accommodation has not required additional budget from the Council general fund. Since February eight properties (7 new builds and 1 private market) have been purchased and added to the Council's HRA stock under the Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF) programme. An additional 5 properties are currently under offer / conveyance under LAHF round 2. These properties alongside 3 new PSL properties have been instrumental in ensuring no families were without a housing offer or made homeless as a result of the closing of the bridging hotels in Exmouth and Exeter in August.

In the last few weeks three new properties (16 units) have been leased by the Council for additional temporary accommodation housing. The transfer of some households into these properties will temporarily reduce the cost to the Council of use of hotel and B&B accommodation. This is key to the Housing Needs savings plan under the mid-term financial plan. However a combination of continuing pressures on statutory homelessness demand plus the limited existing capacity in housing-related support have not yet resulted in equivalent lasting reductions in hotel and B&B use. The Council is planning to combat this through increasing the number of leased units plus bidding into the SHAP fund respectively.

- (19) To seek City Council commitment to the expansion of the Housing First model particularly through local registered social landlords

As a first step the Council has led by example and committed to resource five existing 1-bed flats as additional Housing First (HF) tenancies to the existing 15 within Council HRA stock. Whilst one local housing association has also provided 7 units of accommodation under the HF model the scheme will be taken to wider partners as part of the leading Homelessness Reduction Board operational action plan.

6. How does the decision contribute to the Council's Corporate Plan?

9.1 Exeter City Council's Corporate Plan has the following priorities:

- Delivering net zero Exeter 2030
- Promoting active and healthy lifestyles
- Building great neighbourhoods
- Providing value-for-money services
- Leading a well-run council

Reducing homelessness is central to the key corporate strategic priority of “Housing and Building Great Neighbourhoods and Communities” through the tackling of social inequality and maximising homelessness preventions and reliefs. This is primarily achieved through the provision of housing advice and multi-faceted support and assistance. And through the supply of emergency, first and second stage housing options with suitable personalised support to address single and multiple needs. The priorities of the new homelessness strategy are reflected in the following 2022-26 Corporate Plan commitments:

Housing advice and homelessness support - We play a leading role in ensuring that the most vulnerable citizens receive the best advice and, where possible, an accommodation offer at the earliest opportunity with ongoing bespoke support.

We will:

- *Publish and implement a new Homelessness Strategy that supports our ambition to reduce rough sleeper numbers, and end rough sleeping where possible by 2025.*
- *Increase integrated offers of accommodation and treatment to build better recovery from homelessness as well as homelessness prevention in the first place.*
- *Continue co-production and partnership work with the voluntary sector to provide accommodation units with tenancy training and support where needed*

10 . What risks are there and how can they be reduced?

10.1 The main risk is the internal capacity to deliver on the recommendations. This is mainly mitigated by the number that can be reasonably integrated into the planned actions under the homelessness strategy. However those recommendations likely to require additional officer / other party input will need to be assessed on a potential cost: benefit basis.

10.2 Other risks are that a failure to progress the recommendations and effect positive change (e.g. new capacity in homelessness prevention or relief) will expose the Council to increased statutory homelessness presentations. This will include households requiring homelessness relief (i.e. already homeless) and requiring emergency accommodation and support plus statutory case management. This is highly likely to present costs to the general fund in excess of the current homelessness budget, therefore wielding a greater financial cost to the Council’s overall budget.

11 Equality Act 2010 (The Act)

11.1 Under the Act’s Public Sector Equalities Duty, decision makers are required to consider the need to:

- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other prohibited conduct;
- advance equality by encouraging participation, removing disadvantage, taking account of disabilities and meeting people’s needs; and
- foster good relations between people by tackling prejudice and promoting understanding.

11.2 In order to comply with the general duty authorities must assess the impact on equality of decisions, policies and practices. These duties do not prevent the authority from reducing services where necessary, but they offer a way of developing proposals that consider the impacts on all members of the community.

11.3 In making decisions the authority must take into account the potential impact of that decision in relation to age, disability, race/ethnicity (includes Gypsies and Travellers), sex and gender, gender identity, religion and belief, sexual orientation, pregnant women and new and breastfeeding mothers, marriage and civil partnership status in coming to a decision.

11.4 In putting forward recommendations no potential impact has been identified on people with protected characteristics as determined by the Act because: because

11.4.1 The report is for information only and the parties likely to be affected by implementation of the recommendations are included in the EQIA submitted with the homelessness strategy report to Executive.

12 Carbon Footprint (Environmental) Implications:

12.1 Important to complete this section in light of the Council declaring a Climate Emergency. Consider whether the recommendations you are making in the report will help, hinder or have no direct impact on delivering our carbon reduction target (carbon neutral by 2030).

12.2 You should think about things like:-

- Travel (and, if travel is unavoidable, whether lower carbon options will be pursued e.g. walking, public transport, electric car);
- Infrastructure (e.g. LED lighting, energy efficient heating/hot water, solar panels, electric car charging points);
- Waste (e.g. recycling, composting, reducing non-recyclable waste); and
- Any other specific carbon reduction initiatives.

12.3 If there are no direct carbon/environmental implications for the decision please state:

No direct carbon/environmental impacts arising from the recommendations.

13 Are there any other options?

All recommendations and ensuing actions are optional but failure to progress the majority is likely to result in greater levels of local homelessness and increased cost to the Council in relation to its duties to assist, accommodate and resettle homeless households.

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Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1972 (as amended)

Background papers used in compiling this report:-

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