

**HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP
03 DECEMBER 2019**

DRAFT HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY 2020-25

Cabinet Member(s): Councillor Simon Clist
Responsible Officer: Mrs Claire Fry, Group Manager for Housing Services

Reason for Report: The existing homelessness and rough sleeping strategy requires review

RECOMMENDATION: That the PDG recommends to Cabinet that the Policy be adopted as amended

Financial Implications: The prevention and management of homelessness is accounted for within the general fund and there are budgets set aside to support this work. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has provided additional funding to the Council in relation to this in recent years but this funding is not guaranteed going forward. The Council has recently been involved in successful bids for monies from Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government associated with initiatives to reduce rough sleeping

Legal Implications: In accordance with the Homelessness Act 2002, the Council must undertake a review of homelessness in the District on a five yearly basis and is required to have a homelessness strategy. The existing strategy covered the period from 2013 to 2018 and was extended by delegated decision made by the Cabinet Member for Housing to run until the end of 2019. The new draft strategy also includes actions associated with rough sleeping.

Risk Assessment: Failure to agree a new homelessness strategy for the period from 2020 to 2025 before the end of 2019 would result in the Council failing to meet a statutory obligation arising from the Homelessness Act 2002. Non-compliance with relevant legislation could result in a judicial review. There is a reputational risk associated with this and the resources needed to respond to such a challenge would be extensive.

Failure to meet statutory obligations relating to the prevention and management of homelessness could result in judicial review which could prove costly. Such an outcome also has the potential to impact the reputation of the Council in a negative way.

Equality Impact Assessment: The Council has a number of statutory obligations arising from the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and therefore all those presenting as homeless to the Council must be assessed regardless of the section of society from which they come to see whether or not the duties apply. Failure to treat homelessness clients fairly could result in judicial review. The Council requests diversity information from clients but this is not always forthcoming.

Relationship to Corporate Plan: Work to prevent homelessness is a priority for the Council

Impact on Climate Change: Officers sometimes have to respond to emergencies associated with the prevention and management of homelessness. In such cases, safeguarding concerns will take priority in order to minimise risk and it is accepted that the ability to manage such issues effectively may have an environmental impact which would not occur if work can be planned in advance and managed in a more co-ordinated way.

1. Background

- 1.1 The existing homelessness strategy originally covered the period from 2013 to 2018 and this was extended earlier this year because resourcing issues had impacted the review of this. The Cabinet Member for Housing made the delegated decision on 10 July 2019 and the relevant page on the Council's website was updated to explain that the existing strategy has been extended until the end of 2019.
- 1.2 Since the last review of homelessness in the District in 2013, the Council's approach to the prevention and management of this area of work has changed to ensure compliance with the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. This legislation was implemented with effect from April 2018 and the Council now has a number of legal obligations which were designed to increase the amount of work undertaken to prevent homelessness occurring. The revised draft strategy contains more information about the requirements of the new legislation.
- 1.3 The revised draft homelessness and rough sleeping strategy contains three main sections; a review of homelessness in Mid Devon, a discussion of the challenges and an identification of strategic aims and priorities. It also contains a detailed action plan. Progress reports relating to projects contained within this will be provided to the Policy Development Group (PDG) on a regular basis. The Housing Options team has responsibility for this work and will be delivering the actions required to address the issues identified.
- 1.4 There is a link to the housing pages of the Council's website within the revised draft strategy which will be activated once the revised draft strategy is adopted. This link directs readers to the full review of the evidence relating to homelessness in Mid Devon and the data held there will be updated quarterly. This will ensure that the information is more relevant and can be used to inform the further development of our homelessness strategy. There is another link to the most recent review of the local housing market undertaken by the Local Government Association (LGA, 2019).
- 1.5 A consultation with stakeholders informed the review of the homelessness strategy. Officers in the housing options team were consulted, as were other colleagues within the Council. A meeting for Councillors was held on 4 March 2019 and external stakeholders were invited to another meeting which took place on 8 March 2019.
- 1.6 The revised draft homelessness and rough sleeping strategy was circulated to local partners at the beginning of November 2019 and one responded saying that they felt that it was a good strategy. Another partner told us that the document set out our strategy very well. Their feedback included a suggestion that the strategy had an overarching aim relating to the combat of homelessness by 2022.

- 1.7 The Council's response to this suggestion was: "The Council is working to support the Government's aim of eliminating street homelessness, halving it by 2022 and eliminating it by 2027". Reference was made to the work undertaken by the Navigators, supported by Government funding streams, which seems to have had an impact with the recent count showing a significant reduction in the number of people sleeping rough in the District over the last year. In addition, it was noted that our strategy has to be realistic and that since the suggested aim is likely to be unachievable, a decision had been taken not to accept this recommendation.
- 1.8 In response to feedback about the targets contained within the action plan in the draft revised strategy, the Council responded with an acceptance that the action plan needs to be reviewed and that achievable targets are required. It is hoped that the commitment to regular reports contained within the draft revised strategy will facilitate the drafting of work-plans, which set out the projects required to deliver each part of the action plan with relevant dates. The agency was advised that the reports associated with this would be published in advance of each meeting of the Homes Policy Development Group as part of the agenda.

2. The Data Review

- 2.1 As reported to the last meeting of the PDG, the evidence has revealed some issues associated with a lack of affordable accommodation in the District. The cost of purchasing a home can be prohibitive for some local people and rents in the private sector are also relatively high (LGA, 2019).
- 2.2 The Council works in partnership with other local authorities and other registered providers of social housing to assess housing need and there is reference in the draft revised strategy to this. A reference to the data source for relevant evidence has been provided.
- 2.3 The Housing Service uses an electronic system to manage homeless cases and some interesting trends have been identified using reports created using the data held. The number of people presenting as homeless is increasing with a rise of 70% following the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 at the beginning of April 2018.
- 2.4 As reported to the last meeting of the PDG, the majority of those approaching the Council for assistance because they are homeless or at risk of homelessness is now made up of those who have lost a tenancy. The loss of a tenancy in the private rented sector is increasing as a trigger for homelessness but those who have lost a tenancy in the social rented sector also make up a significant number of those approaching for assistance.
- 2.5 Unfortunately, the number of cases where homelessness has been successfully prevented or relieved is decreasing. In addition, the use of temporary accommodation has increased but this is due to the provisions of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 which introduced more statutory obligations to those who approach the Council as homeless. The period over which local authorities are expected to work with homeless people or those who may be at risk of homelessness has been extended and this is having an impact.

- 2.6 As part of the review, it was also noted that working with rough sleepers can be difficult in a rural District such as Mid Devon. The distances involved mean that it can be challenging to identify and support those sleeping outside.
- 2.7 Other challenges identified include a lack of short-term temporary accommodation in the local area for use by homeless households. The Council's housing options approach is an important strand of our strategy to tackle this and Officers will offer loans via the Deposit and Advance Rent Scheme (DARS) in order to assist clients into homes in the private sector thereby avoiding the need to accommodate them in temporary accommodation for long periods.
- 2.8 Finding suitable homes for those vulnerable clients with support needs can also be difficult and this is why the Council places great importance on partnership working. Loans made through the DARS can also be important in cases where someone is unable to access the private rented sector due to the fact that they have a poor credit history which means that it is unlikely that they would be able to obtain the necessary finance to enable them to take on a new tenancy.

3. The Draft Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy

- 3.1 In the revised draft strategy, four key priorities have been identified.
- 3.2 These are listed below with a brief description of the key actions required to address each.

3.3 Minimising rough sleeping

- 3.3.1 During 2018/19, the Council was able to obtain funding from central government to support work to minimise rough sleeping. Two funding streams were obtained working in partnership with other Devon authorities but this funding is time-limited. Although the Council has been invited to bid for funding from the Rough Sleeping Initiative for a further twelve months, a need to identify other funding streams to continue this work should grant funding not be available in future years is seen as a priority.
- 3.3.2 The Council has responsibilities to rough sleepers during periods of severe weather and has agreed an approach to this which is replicated across Devon and Cornwall. The need to further develop this approach to the provision of night shelter accommodation for rough sleepers during the winter months is seen as another important strand of the homelessness strategy going forward.
- 3.3.3 Working with rough sleepers can be resource intensive because of the highly complex nature of their needs. For this reason, working in partnership to improve outcomes for those who are sleeping rough or at risk of it is seen as priority action.

3.4 Maximising prevention activities & outcomes

- 3.4.1 In accordance with the provisions of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, the Council must do what it can to prevent homelessness and therefore a key priority must be to seek to continue to provide or facilitate support for all households at risk of homelessness. Due to the shortage of temporary accommodation, it is felt

that there is a particular need to ensure that there is sufficient accommodation available to all priority households that are unable to find their own solution.

3.4.2 For this reason, a need to engage with local landlords has been identified. Associated with this, is a requirement to offer support to enable these landlords to help their tenants to better sustain their tenancies. It is hoped that landlords will be more inclined to offer their accommodation to more vulnerable people if they know that the tenancies are less likely to fail. Tenancy failure can result in increased void costs, unpaid arrears of rent and tenant damage; by intervening at an earlier stage, it is hoped that the Council can prevent this happening. Furthermore, the improved offer of support should also encourage new landlords to make more accommodation available to our clients.

3.4.3 Partnership working enables the Council to benefit from opportunities to undertake joint working initiatives, share best practice and training and is a key theme throughout the revised draft homelessness strategy.

3.5 Increasing accommodation options

3.5.1 Given the shortage of affordable homes in the District as evidenced by the review of homelessness, increasing the supply of homes available to those in housing need is seen as a key priority. In addition, it is important to ensure that any homes available are of a good standard and fit for purpose. For that reason, the Housing Options team must work in partnership with other professionals to ensure that those with health needs who are in housing need due to the fact that their home is unsuitable, are aware of the potential to adapt their home, as necessary. In such cases, potential homelessness can sometimes be relieved by ensuring that any necessary adaptations are made.

3.5.2 In addition, a review of the procedures relating to the DARS has been identified as a priority given that loans can also be used effectively to relieve homelessness.

3.6 Improving health & wellbeing by supporting those with complex needs

3.6.1 The Council often works with vulnerable people who have a wide range of complex needs. Finding suitable accommodation for such people can be challenging and it can be difficult to ensure that their support needs are met. Partnership working is viewed as a key priority to deliver the aim of this particular strand within the revised draft strategy and to help such people to better sustain their tenancies. In particular, a number of actions have identified which should strengthen the links with local partners ensuring that the outcomes for those who are vulnerable are improved.

4. Recommendation

4.1 Members are asked to agree to recommend that the Cabinet adopts the revised draft homelessness strategy for 2020-25.

Contact for more Information: Mrs Claire Fry, Group Manager for Housing Services, telephone 01884 234920, email: cfry@middevon.gov.uk

Circulation of the Report: Cabinet Member seen and approved [yes/no – Councillor Simon Clist, Cabinet Member for Housing], Leadership Team seen and approved [yes/no]

List of Background Papers:

LGA (2019), Understanding Local Housing Markets, Local Government Association, 29 July 2019

<https://www.local.gov.uk/understanding-local-housing-markets>

Devon Home Choice, Quarterly monitoring report, April 2019

<https://www.devonhomechoice.com/useful-information-0>