

**HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP**  
**19 JANUARY 2021**

**HOUSING HOMELESS PEOPLE DURING THE PANDEMIC**

**Cabinet Member(s):** Councillor Bob Evans  
**Responsible Officer:** Mrs Claire Fry, Housing Services Operations Manager

**Reason for Report & Recommendation:** Members of the Homes Policy Development Group asked for more information about how the Housing Options Team had been working to resolve homelessness during the pandemic.

**Recommendation:** That members of the PDG note the report.

**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.

**Budget and Policy Framework:** The housing functions relating to the prevention and management of homelessness are statutory obligations. The Housing Act 1996, as amended by other legislation including the Homelessness Act 2002 and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, applies. The Council has a Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping strategy which covers the period from 2020 to 2025.

**Legal Implications:** 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.

**Risk Assessment:** 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:** As stated, 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

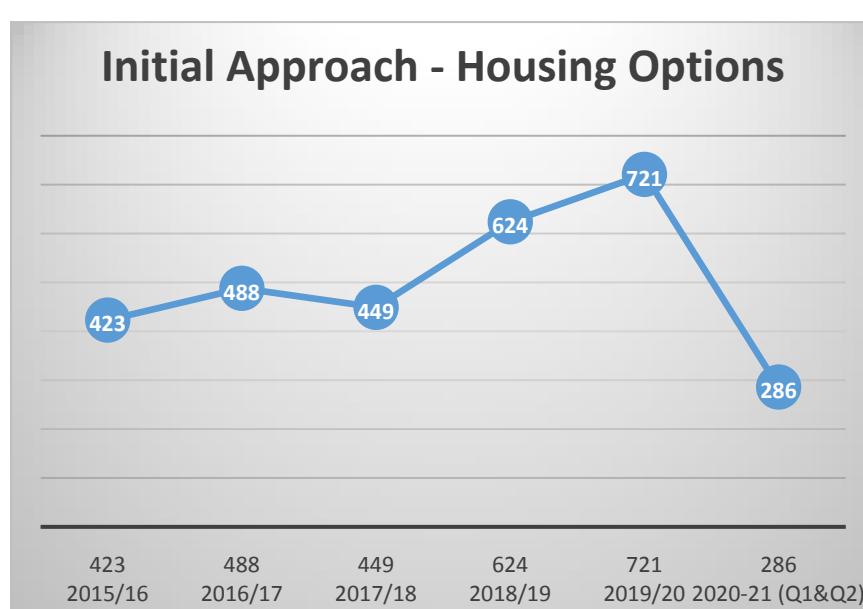
**Relationship to Corporate Plan:** Work to prevent homelessness is a priority for the Council

**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.

## 1.0 Introduction/Background

- 1.1 Since the end of March, when the Government introduced restrictions on movement in response to the national emergency caused by the pandemic, members of our Housing Options Team, which is responsible for the prevention and management of homelessness, have been working predominantly from home. However, a small number of Officers are available at Phoenix House each working day to assist anyone who may arrive to seek assistance.
- 1.2 The team uses an electronic system which is cloud-based to record information about homeless clients and to assist with case management. This meant that the team could be quite agile with regard to the switch to home working and that there was minimal disruption to the service.
- 1.3 The work of the team is aligned with the objectives of the Council's [Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping strategy](#) which are:
  - Minimising rough sleeping
  - Maximising prevention activities & outcomes
  - Increasing accommodation options
  - Improving health & wellbeing by supporting those with complex needs
- 1.4 Due to the COVID19 pandemic, the number of homeless applicants approaching the service for homelessness assistance has dropped. This is due to landlords not being able to serve Notices to Quit. At the end of March 2020, the law changed to protect households being evicted during the pandemic. This allowed local authorities to focus on work with rough sleepers, with everyone being brought in, in accordance with the "Everyone in" campaign. The chart below demonstrates this drop in the number of those approaching for assistance:



1.5 During the first period of lock down, Officers undertook housing assessments by telephone. Since then, Officers meet with some clients face to face but still utilise other methods of communication in an effort to reduce the risk.

## 2.0 Statutory Obligations

2.1 The Council is duty bound to make investigations if someone who may be at risk of becoming homeless approaches for assistance. This is a requirement of the [Homelessness Reduction Act 2017](#). If it is established that there is a threat of someone becoming homeless, then the Council has a statutory obligation to work with that person for 56 days in order to prevent that homelessness. This may include helping them to find alternative accommodation.

2.2 After the expiry of the 56 days, and if the household becomes homeless, the Council is obliged to work to relieve the homelessness for a further 56 days. The aim of the legislation is to ensure that more prevention work is undertaken. Consequently, there is a duty on local authorities to work with clients to develop personal housing plans. These plans set out what both parties need to do to ensure that the client moves on to settled accommodation. These plans may include reference to the liaison required between the Council and the existing landlord, for example. However, they may also include actions for the client such as the need to contact local lettings agencies in order to find suitable alternative accommodation in the private sector. The Council may end the duty to the client if they fail to do what is required of them in line with the personal housing plan.

2.3 The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 also introduced a “[duty to refer](#)” which means that certain external agencies must refer people or households which they believe to be at risk of homelessness. In accordance with this, registered providers of social housing will refer cases where possession action is pending or where there is an eviction date in the diary to enable the Housing Options team to work to prevent that homelessness.

## 3.0 Temporary Accommodation Options

3.1 The Council has a number of units of accommodation in the retained stock which have been set aside for use as temporary accommodation. There is a service level agreement between the general fund and the housing revenue account which means that the general fund reimburses the rent and other relevant costs to the housing revenue account.

3.2 Homeless applicants who are symptomatic/test positive for Covid19 and/or are recovering from Covid19 (Covid-Care) have been accommodated within the Council’s own stock until move on options have been established.

3.3 The management of this accommodation can be quite problematic given the client group. Clients are licensees, rather than tenants, and therefore can be evicted with minimal notice should they behave in such a way as to cause nuisance and annoyance to other local residents.

3.4 The table below shows which of the Council’s own properties have been used to accommodate homeless people during the pandemic:

Homeless	Property Type/Size	Tiverton	Cullompton	Crediton	Halberton	Bradninch
	3 Bedroom House	2	1	1		
	2 Bedroom Bungalow	2				
	1 Bedroom Bungalow	2				
	1 Bedroom Flat	4	8	1		
	2 Bedroom Flat	1				
	Bedsit	4				
	Shared House (Own room)	2			6	
Housing First.						
	1 Bedroom Bungalow	2				
Refugee Accommodation						
Using private landlords	3 Bedroom properties		1	1		1

- 3.5 However, if temporary accommodation within our own stock is unavailable, due to the numbers of people already being accommodated, Officers are obliged to book clients into bed and breakfast accommodation. Notwithstanding the cost, using this type of accommodation is very much a last resort.
- 3.6 At the start of the pandemic, the “Everyone In” initiative meant that local authorities had to accommodate all rough sleepers and those at risk of becoming rough sleepers. This policy was introduced at the same time as providers of hotel accommodation were ordered to close down. It subsequently became clear that those establishments which were supporting local authorities in their role as strategic housing authorities could open to accommodate homeless clients.
- 3.7 The Council devoted resources at the beginning of the first lock down to sourcing accommodation which could be used to accommodate those in urgent housing need. Eventually, various providers agreed to work with the Housing Options team but this meant that some homeless people had to be accommodated out of area due to a lack of suitable available accommodation in Mid Devon. This increased expenditure because if someone is being accommodated out of the area, the Council must meet their travelling costs. However, there are wider implications with placing homeless clients elsewhere, in particular, it can distance them from their families, friends and support providers.
- 3.8 The tables below show who was accommodated in line with the aims of the “Everyone In” strategy:

	Female	Male
Accommodated Under COVID19 "EVERYONE IN"	8	21

END OF PLACEMENT REASON	Female	Male
Abandoned Placement	2	7
Evicted/Breached Rules	1	4

Into Private Rented Accommodation	1	1
Into Social Housing	3	5
Returned Home		2
Refused Offer	1	2

APPLICANTS WITH COMPLEX ISSUES	Female	Male
Mental Health	2	9
Prison Leaver	1	4
Domestic Abuse	2	2
Drug Use	3	10
Alcohol Use	2	8

- 3.9 In recent months, many local authorities across the country have retreated from this policy and now assess applicants under medical needs on the basis of whether or not they are symptomatic/test positive for Covid19. If someone is deemed to be vulnerable as a result of COVID19, then they are deemed to have priority need and therefore Officers will provide accommodation for the applicant.

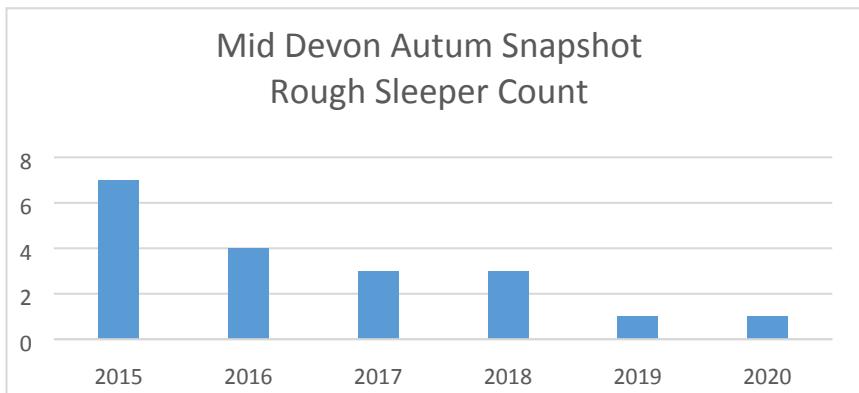
#### 4.0 Prevention Options

- 4.1 When someone applies for assistance because they are about to become, or are, homeless, the priority for Officers in the Housing Options team is to work to assist the household concerned to remain in their existing home. This may involve negotiating with the landlord and offering mediation, or repayment plans, if they are in rent arrears. In addition, Officers will offer the applicant access to the deposit and advance rent scheme (DARS), if necessary, because this has the potential to enable them to secure alternative accommodation.
- 4.2 Our landlord service has made a 6-bedroom property available for use as accommodation for homeless clients which is used as a shared house to support the work associated with the prevention and management of homelessness. Support at this scheme is provided to those with low- to medium-risk needs who are experiencing homelessness.
- 4.3 In order to mitigate the risk of Covid-infection, the number of occupants at this scheme has been limited and our cleaning contractor visits on a regular basis to clean the kitchen and other communal areas. Each bedroom currently in use has a dedicated bathroom, most of these are en-suite. We provide cleaning materials to residents and advice on how to minimise their risk of infection. The support provider is contracted to provide 20 hours of support to clients in total on a weekly basis and has a permanent base at the scheme which enables them to reinforce messages relating to the need to maintain social distancing, wash hands etc.

#### 5.0 Partnership Working

- 5.1 The Council works in partnership with other housing authorities in Devon in order to prevent homelessness and to reduce the number of rough sleepers.

- 5.2 The Devon and Cornwall Housing Options Partnership involves all authorities in Devon and Cornwall and delivers a consistent approach to the prevention and management of homelessness across the peninsula, and this also includes the Devon and Cornwall Rough Sleepers Partnership. The Partnership has agreed joint protocols and policies and also arranges training to ensure that Officers have the appropriate skills, knowledge and understanding to enable them to work effectively.
- 5.3 In addition, the Council is currently working in partnership with East Devon District Council and jointly obtained grant funding under the [Rough Sleeping Initiative](#) which falls within the remit of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). This funding supports various projects within our District but is time-limited. It is unlikely that this will be carried forward after the end of 2020/21. However, Officers are working on a strategy to enable the work to continue.
- 5.4 Using the funding, Navigators have been recruited who provide assertive outreach. This involves intercepting and engaging with those who are sleeping rough in order to direct them into services away from the street.
- 5.5 Three units have been established for use by those engaging with the Housing First initiative. As part of this service, enhanced floating support is provided which is designed to assist those with complex needs who require intensive on-going support. The aim is to support those in the homes provided by the project to address multiple need such as mental ill health or substance and alcohol misuse.
- 5.6 The Housing Service has recently appointed a Private Sector Accommodation Officer on a temporary basis using the funding from MHCLG. Their role is to work with landlords in the private sector to increase the flow of temporary accommodation, establishing stronger links with agents and landlords across the District. They work directly with landlords offering incentives for clients seeking accommodation in the private sector, using the Council deposits/ bonds/ advance rent options, and, access to an Officer for advice and support, should the tenancy fail. This Officer supports tenancy sustainment, and provides help and advice for rough sleepers throughout their initial tenancies.
- 5.7 The funding is also used to help rough sleepers to secure housing; and for the prevention of homelessness for those at risk of returning back to the streets. In addition, it is used to provide access to training for frontline Officers enabling them to develop greater awareness and understanding with regard to rough sleepers with complex needs.
- 5.8 It should be noted that these interventions have led to a situation where the incidence of rough sleeping in Mid Devon is very low with only two being reported following the Official Count which took place in November.



- 5.9 Officers also liaise with other agencies including the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), which administers the Universal Credit scheme. Other advice agencies which support the work undertaken by the Housing Options team include Citizens Advice and Age UK. For example, the Court desk provided by Citizen's Advice at Exeter County Court is supported by a small grant from the Council. Although possession action and evictions were paused during the pandemic, this is a valuable resource which supports people across all tenures who may be at risk of losing their homes.
- 5.10 [StreetLink](#) is a non-profit organisation managed and delivered by Homeless Link in partnership with [St Mungo's](#). It is principally funded by MHCLG with additional funding from other Government agencies. StreetLink operates a service which enables members of the public to report any rough sleepers. StreetLink alerts the Council to any incidences of rough sleeping and these are all investigated by our own staff.
- 5.11 The Council funds [Wiser£money](#), which provides local welfare assistance to those residents in the District who are experiencing exceptional financial difficulty. Navigate Community Interest Organisation provides this service which is free, confidential and tailored to meet individual needs. There is provision for money and debt advice, help with income maximisation and signposting and referral to other support agencies, as required. The Council has a contract with Navigate which will come to an end in April 2021.
- 5.12 [The Churches Housing Action Team](#) (CHAT) is an important partner based in Tiverton. Advisors at CHAT liaise with the Housing Options team regarding clients they are supporting. CHAT runs the foodbank in Tiverton and supports the Wiser£money scheme to provide emergency food packs to rough sleepers and others in urgent need. In Mid Devon, CHAT also assist rough sleepers with seeking accommodation and helping them to secure homes in the private sector.
- 5.13 Since the pandemic started, both CHAT and Navigate have been involved in supporting work associated with the delivery of the objectives of the Council's Covid19 Financial Hardship Fund.

## **6.0 The Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP)**

- 6.1 The Council works in partnership with all the other authorities in Devon and Cornwall to agree a Severe Weather Emergency Protocol which has two aims. First, it is designed to ensure that no one dies on the streets due to extreme cold or severe weather. It should also ensure that every effort is made to engage with rough sleepers and to encourage them to work with support services during the winter months from 1 November to 31 March. Extreme cold is defined as when the Met Office has forecast

that the temperature will be at zero or below for three consecutive nights. Severe weather is defined as when the Met Office issues a red warning for the local area in relation to rain, snow or wind. Local authorities may activate the protocol when there are amber warnings and the Council usually does in these circumstances.

- 6.2 The Council is therefore committed to providing shelter to rough sleepers during the winter months. Previously, accommodation was made available which involved rough sleepers assessed as having low-risk needs sharing a small flat where they could bed down for the night. Given the need to ensure that any accommodation provided is Covid-secure, this year, qualifying applicants are being accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation in order to minimise the risk.
- 6.3 The protocol operates outside of the usual eligibility and entitlement frameworks which govern access to housing. In line with the provisions of it, we are obliged to identify and to target those who are rough sleeping.
- 6.4 If a rough sleeper cannot be persuaded to access accommodation, the Housing Options team must provide them with information about the health risks associated with sleeping out during severe weather. Officers must also monitor their wellbeing and continue to offer support, provisions and information on services available to assist them. We are also obliged to give consideration to their mental capacity working in partnership with the Police and other services.

## 7.0 Social Housing

- 7.1 Social housing is limited in Mid Devon. The Council has approximately 3000 units of accommodation and other RPs have approximately 1500. During 2019/20, 248 general needs homes were let in Mid Devon and a further 33 accessible homes, which are those available to those people with vulnerabilities by virtue of age or other special need.

## 7.2 Recommendation

- 7.3 Members of the Homes Policy Development Group asked for more information about how the Housing Options Team had been working to resolve homelessness during the pandemic. This report is for noting.

**Contact for more Information:** Mrs Claire Fry, Housing Services Operations Manager, via call back on 01884 255255, [cfry@middevon.gov.uk](mailto:cfry@middevon.gov.uk)

### Circulation of the Report:

Members of the Housing PDG  
Cllr Bob Evans, Cabinet Member for Housing and Property Services  
Leadership Team  
Corporate Management Team and other Service Managers  
Legal Services

### List of Background Papers:

MDDC Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeper Strategy 2020-25  
<https://www.middevon.gov.uk/residents/housing/housing-strategy/>