

**Report for: Homes Policy Development Group**

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Date of Meeting:	19 <sup>th</sup> November 2024
Subject:	<b>HOUSING INITIATIVES PLAN UPDATE</b>
Cabinet Member:	Cllr Simon Clist - Cabinet Member for Housing, Assets and Property and Deputy Leader
Responsible Officer:	Simon Newcombe – Head of Housing and Health
Exempt:	None
Wards Affected:	All
Enclosures:	Annex A - Housing Initiatives Plan Annex B - LAHF Members Presentation 11/6/24

**Section 1 – Summary and Recommendation(s)**

This report provides an update on activities and initiatives undertaken by the Housing Initiatives Officer and Housing Options Team relating to homelessness prevention, and to introduce the need to develop a new homelessness policy.

**Recommendation(s):**

- 1. That the PDG notes the updated Housing Initiatives Plan as set out in the report and Annexes A and B attached.**

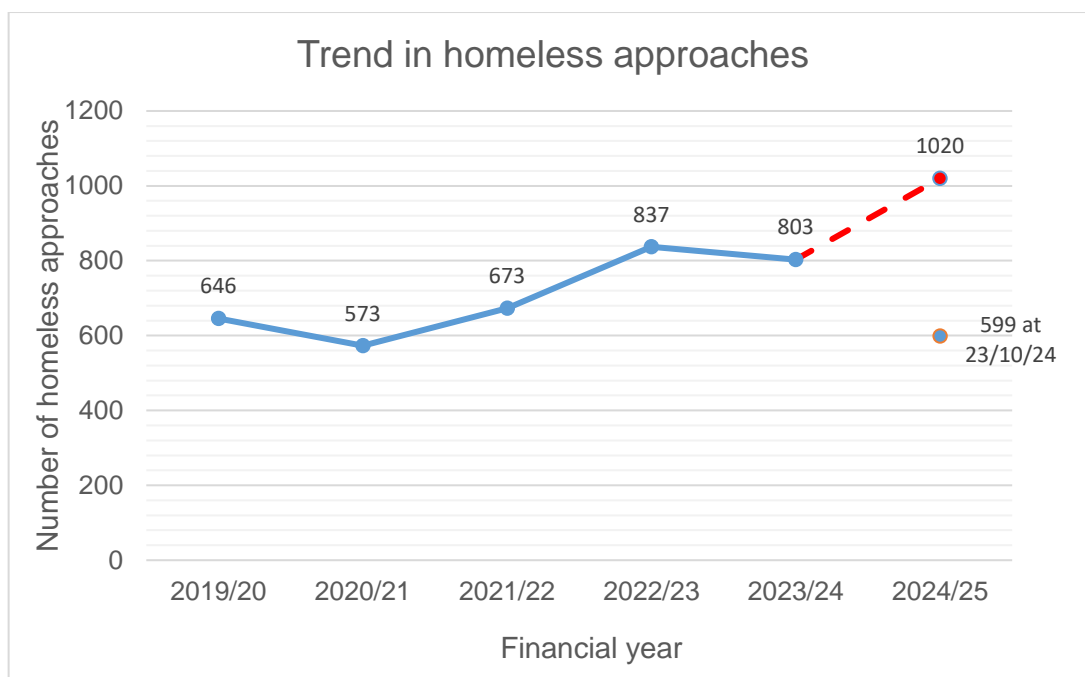
**Section 2 – Report**

**1 Introduction**

- 1.1 The Homeless Prevention & Rough Sleeping Strategy 2020-2025 provides insight into the complexities surrounding Homelessness in Mid Devon and gives a summary of the legislative background. The document highlights the increase in homeless approaches to the Council and sets out the likelihood that this trend would continue. The published document can be viewed on the Mid Devon website:

<https://www.middevon.gov.uk/media/206529/homelessnesstrategy2020-25.pdf>.

- 1.2 As predicted, the increase in homelessness approaches has continued and the below illustrates the trend since the strategy was introduced.



- 1.3 The Strategy introduced four agreed objectives for the Council's focused work in this area which offered the opportunity for developing the existing service. The Strategy objectives are:

- Minimising rough sleeping;
- Maximising prevention activities and outcomes;
- Increasing accommodation options; and
- Improving health and wellbeing by supporting those with complex needs.

- 1.4 In order to meet the aims of the strategy, in 2022 a new Housing Initiatives Officer post was introduced. The role has a wide-ranging remit, spanning all of the above strategy objectives. This includes investigating ways to provide accommodation options, enhance partnership working, and review emerging issues in order to propose projects and schemes to deal with those issues.

## **2 Housing Initiatives plan**

- 2.1 A draft Housing Initiatives (HI) plan was developed at the introduction of the post, giving direction to some of the key activities. This plan feeds into the successful Rough Sleeping Initiative (RSI) bid. The Council were awarded three years of funding to deliver a specific package of projects between 2022/23 - 2024/25.
- 2.2 A copy of the HI plan can be found in Annex A. It provides an overview of the aims of the service and directly links to the plan that was developed for the RSI

bid. These plans have been kept under constant review and regularly updated as different schemes have become available and priorities have changed.

- 2.3 Section 3 of this report outlines the main achievements against the plan and any new opportunities that have become available.

### **3 Achievements to date**

#### **Temporary accommodation project - HMOs**

- 3.1 Two empty former Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) properties have been purchased to provide temporary accommodation for both rough sleepers and homeless individuals. The Housing Initiatives Officer has been responsible for the management of these projects.
- 3.2 The properties required significant renovation to enable them to be used to their full potential and to meet the decent homes standard. One of them was made temporarily safe to provide limited bed spaces and income while the other building was renovated.
- 3.3 The full renovation of the first HMO was completed in June 2024. The property provides six en-suite rooms with a fully equipped kitchen including individual fridge and cupboard space. The property has been fully re-wired, with a new door entry system for security and a fire alarm system along with fire protection measures. The property has been fully decorated, and furnished along with access to a renovated communal, outside space. Open days were organised to allow both Councillors and the neighbours to view the transformation and ask questions about its use and management. The property has been fully in use since July 2024.
- 3.4 The second full renovation is currently underway, which, subject to planning, will provide eight en-suite rooms and temporary accommodation for up to 10 people.

#### **Local Authority Housing Fund delivery**

- 3.5 In 2023 a new funding opportunity presented itself that had been unknown when the initial work plans were outlined.
- 3.6 The Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF) (Round 1) provided an allocation to local authorities to purchase properties for the purposes of temporary accommodation for a specific cohort of people.
- 3.7 The Council were awarded funding to purchase 10 properties in total. The Housing Initiatives Officer has managed this project by finding 10 empty family sized homes to purchase and renovate of 10 empty homes to be made available for displaced Ukrainian nationals and Afghan refugee families.
- 3.7 The aim of the project is to prevent homelessness within this cohort and provide temporary accommodation for wider use in the future.

- 3.8 A presentation of the LAHF project was given to the PDG on 11<sup>th</sup> June 2024 a copy of which has been included at Annex B.
- 3.9 All 10 properties have been fully renovated and are now complete.

### **Financial assistance for tenants**

- 3.10 In February 2023, an updated Housing Assistance Policy was adopted that was split into two parts. Part One refers to the Better Care Fund and the grants available to help disabled and vulnerable people, but for the first time Part Two was introduced to cover the assistance available to prevent homelessness.
- 3.11 As part of the policy development the Housing Initiatives Officer reviewed the scope of the existing Deposit and Rent Scheme (DARS) and provided recommendations for the changes implemented in the policy.
- 3.12 As a result of this work the following assistance was included in the adopted policy:

**Home Start Grant** - A one off grant to help those that are moving out of an unsustainable housing situation into the private rented sector. This grant can be used to cover, the deposit for the applicants first suitable private rented home, rent in advance as required, and top up to initial rent shortfall while benefits or wages are being organised.

**Home Start Loan** (also known as DARS) – A loan to cover the deposit for the applicants private rented home, rent in advance as required, and top up to initial rent shortfall while benefits or wages are being organised. As this is a loan the applicant will be required to make monthly repayments.

**Rent Arrears Grant** – A grant to support households in the private rented sector who find themselves in rent arrears. The aim is to help those households on low incomes avoid eviction from their homes by using the grant to pay the rent arrears and prevent homelessness. If a private tenant has accrued rent arrears as a result of circumstances beyond their control then they may be eligible to apply for this grant.

**Landlord Incentive Grant** – A grant to encourage landlords in the private rented sector to accept tenants that do not have a reference, may have been homeless or rough sleeping, or evicted from another rented property.

- 3.12 Alongside the overarching Housing Assistance Policy, this role also developed procedures and implementation processes for the Homes for Ukraine Ukrainian Guest Grants. These are similar to the above and assist displaced Ukrainian nationals leaving host placements in Mid Devon to secure private rental accommodation.

## **Landlord engagement**

- 3.13 The successful annual Landlord Networking Event was first introduced in November 2017. There were three events in total until 2020 when events had to be paused due to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 3.14 The landlord networking event will be reintroduced for 2025, however as an interim approach we have collaborated with other local councils on the annual Rent Smart Devon Event for Devon landlords in 2024. This has enabled Mid Devon to be represented across the private rented sector and maintain communication with local landlords.
- 3.15 In addition we have continued to ensure that both national and local campaigns are supported, encouraging landlords and managing agents to regulate themselves, reducing the reliance on formal intervention. Topics of recent publications of the Pin Point news-bite bulletins include GDPR for landlords and Gas Safety week. The publications can be viewed on the Councils website: [Pin Point news-bites for landlords - MIDDEVON.GOV.UK](https://www.middevon.gov.uk/pin-point-news-bites-for-landlords). There are 365 landlords signed up to receive these online bulletins.

## **Energy Efficiency grants and advice**

- 3.16 A delivery method has been established allowing the Council to participate in the ECO4 Flex element of the Energy Company Obligation (ECO) scheme.
- 3.17 This enables more Mid Devon residents to benefit from flexible routes into funding for energy saving measures. This not only works towards energy efficiency aims but helps occupants to reduce their energy bills. More information can be found at [ECO4 - Flexible Eligibility - MIDDEVON.GOV.UK](https://www.middevon.gov.uk/eco4-flexible-eligibility).
- 3.18 To date the Council has authorised 130 ECO Flex declarations for a range of energy efficiency measures.
- 3.19 The Council is also part of the Energy Saving Devon partnership, delivering other grant programmes such as the Home Upgrade Grant (HUG2) for residents within the Mid Devon area.

## **4 Next steps**

- 4.1 The initiatives plan is a dynamic document that is being used to focus resources to meet the wider housing aims as detailed within the Corporate Plan. The following outlines the planned areas of focus up to March 2026:

**Homelessness Policy** - As the existing homelessness strategy comes to an end in 2025 there is a need to review its aims and achievements, and to incorporate updated initiatives into a new policy. The aim is to bring a draft policy forward in March 2026.

**LAHF Round 3** – Funding has been allocated to us to provide two more family homes for temporary accommodation. This must be delivered by March 2026 and the team are working to acquire two new-build properties.

**Former HMO project** – Ensure the delivery of the second former HMO property. We are aiming to have this ready for occupation by October 2025.

**Landlord Event** – Reintroduce the successful Mid Devon Landlord Event for May 2025.

**Review Housing Assistance Policy and Debt Recovery** – Specifically looking at the types of assistance provided for homelessness and our approach to debt recovery.

**Empty Homes** – To review the schemes and incentives available to encourage empty homes back into use as an affordable housing option.

## **Financial Implications**

The Homelessness Prevention Grant is available specifically to deliver initiatives to prevent homelessness and is being utilised to support these activities.

2024/25 is the final year of the funding provided by the Rough Sleeper Initiative (RSI) which is being utilised to deliver existing projects.

There may be a potential requirement for capital funding to support future property purchase projects.

## **Legal Implications**

The Council have a statutory duty to deliver a homelessness function under Section 182 of the Housing Act 1996, the Homelessness Act 2002 and the Homeless Reduction Act 2017. Other significant areas of legislation are The Equality Act 2010, the Human Rights Act 1998, the Children Act 2004 and the Health & Social Care Act 2012.

Due to the complex nature of the homelessness duties, a statutory Homeless Code of Guidance for Local Authorities has been issued which provides full details of associated legal responsibilities, a copy of which can be found on the Gov.uk website: [Homelessness code of guidance for local authorities - Download this guidance - Guidance - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/674244/Homelessness_code_of_guidance_for_local_authorities_-_Download_this_guidance_-_Guidance_-_GOV.UK_(www.gov.uk).pdf).

## **Risk Assessment**

The activities associated with this report and the wider housing options service are linked to Corporate Risk numbers CR4 – Homes for Ukraine Scheme, CR11 – Cost of Living Crisis, and CR12 – Housing Crisis. All the activities detailed in this report are aimed at reducing the risks identified.

## **Impact on Climate Change**

Collaboration with the wider energy partnerships aligns with Council climate change objectives. Where appropriate, the renovation works under the various projects have improved the energy performance of the properties, thereby reducing the carbon footprint of the home.

## **Equalities Impact Assessment**

This report is for noting and therefore there are no policy decisions that have an impact on equality. An EIA will be undertaken as and when policies and strategies mentioned in the report are taken forward for decision.

## **Relationship to Corporate Plan**

This report directly relates to the Homes theme within the Corporate Plan 2024-2028.

## **Section 3 – Statutory Officer sign-off/mandatory checks**

**Statutory Officer:** Andrew Jarrett

Agreed by or on behalf of the Section 151

**Date:** 11.11.24

**Statutory Officer:** Maria de Leiburne

Agreed on behalf of the Monitoring Officer

**Date:** 11.11.24

**Chief Officer:** Simon Newcombe

Agreed by or on behalf of the Chief Executive/Corporate Director

**Date:** 29 October 2025

**Performance and risk:** Steve Carr

Agreed on behalf of the Corporate Performance & Improvement Manager

**Date:** 01 November 2024

**Cabinet member notified:** Yes

## **Section 4 - Contact Details and Background Papers**

**Contact:** Tanya Wenham - Operations Manager for Public Health and Housing

Options or Simon Newcombe – Head of Housing and Health

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**Background papers:** None