

HOMELESSNESS UPDATE FOR MID DEVON

Cabinet Member Cllr Ray Stanley
Responsible Officer Nick Sanderson, Head of Housing and Property Services

Reason for Report: Members requested an update on Homelessness within Mid Devon.

RECOMMENDATION(S): For information purposes only.

Relationship to Corporate Plan: Mid Devon District Council is committed to reducing and preventing Homelessness.

Financial Implications: There is a budget set aside within the Council for the Housing Options Service.

Legal Implications: The Council duties are governed by the Housing Act 1996 as amended under the Homelessness Act 2002 Part VII (The Act). This legislation sets out what a Council must provide and what duties it might owe a homeless applicant.

Risk Assessment: The Council is responsible for ensuring that the Act is adhered to. Failure to provide advice and assistance under the legislation could have financial implications, due to legal challenge.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Homelessness across the country is predicted to increase over the next few years with soaring private rental house prices and lack of social housing. The Council is starting to see an increase in the total numbers approaching the Housing Options team for housing advice.
- 1.2 Applicants presenting to the Council recently appear to have more complex needs, with the involvement of mental health services, drug and alcohol services; and there has appeared to be an increase in the numbers of private and social landlords issuing Notice To Quits due to the complex needs of tenants. This is common across the Devon and Cornwall network.
- 1.3 So far this year (2016/17) the service has had 347 approaches for housing advice compared to 299 this time last year. (Appendix 1)
- 1.4 The Housing Options team has taken a more proactive role in dealing with applicants approaching the service. The team will engage with applicants and landlords at an early stage to prevent the person from becoming homeless and attempt to retract any notices served by landlords.

1.5 The Housing Options team is fully dedicated to helping households and landlords to resolve their housing difficulties. The team has been more successful with homelessness preventions this last year by helping clients to secure alternative accommodation. (Appendix 2)

1.6 However, over the last few years we have seen an increase in the number of households going into temporary accommodation due to the threat of becoming homeless. This can be attributed mainly to households leaving it to the last minute to approach the Service for help. (Appendix 3) (Appendix 4).

2.0 Partnership Working

2.1 The Housing Options team already works in partnership with some other social landlords who work in the District. Where possible, individual officers engage in joint visits with landlords to help with preventative work at the stage when possession proceedings are being considered. This involvement can deliver positive outcomes because individual team members can have realistic conversations with tenants about what will actually happen once a Possession Order is made. This can prompt the tenant to work with the landlord to find a way forward, in order to avoid the possible disruption and other stress associated with eviction.

2.2 The Council belongs to the Devon and Cornwall Housing Options Partnership which comprises all the local housing authorities in Devon and Cornwall. This group works in partnership to deliver strategies to reduce homelessness and to ensure that there is a consistent approach to homelessness across the peninsula. This is useful because it ensures that there is clarity for clients. The partnership approach also delivers savings due to the fact that there is a co-ordinator who is able to identify good practice, coordinate joint responses to relevant issues, disseminate relevant information and organise training.

3.0 Action Planning

3.1 Mid Devon has joined up with East Devon District Council, Exeter City Council and Teignbridge District Council and together applied for a bid from DCLG for the Homelessness Prevention Trailblazers Application. Through this network, Mid Devon is working on an action plan to help deal with the impact of homelessness across the district.

3.2 The four districts were awarded a grant of £359,000 to help prevent homelessness over the next 3 years (2016/17-2018/19). The grant has been split into different areas for homelessness prevention.

3.3 Voluntary Sector MDDC: The successful bid was to include working more with the voluntary sector such as Churches Housing Action Team (CHAT) and Citizen Advice Bureau (CAB). These organisations also offer housing advice and therefore see many people whose cases are not reported in any government statistics, in relation to homelessness. This would enable the local groups to also help prevent homelessness and to access some funding for the work which they complete to prevent homelessness. These statistics would then be used as part of MDDC returns.

- 3.4 Community Based Services: Assisting with services at the local Court desk, to help applicants seek additional help when required, and money advice services such as Moneywise.
- 3.5 Tenancy Passport Coaching MDDC: Working with agencies like St Petrock's and Julian House which are both based in Exeter, and which currently offer tenancy passport coaching, with the intention of extending this service to Mid Devon. This will help tenants learn what is required when they take on a tenancy and also how to maintain that tenancy.
- 3.6 Landlord Incentives MDDC: Working with new landlords to help them to promote private sector rented accommodation and allowing more properties to be let to applicants who are threatened with homelessness. Currently, most landlords will not let to applicants who approach them having first visited the Council, due to previous issues with tenant neglect associated with some of our clients.
- 3.7 Tenancy Rescue Scheme MDDC: Working with social sector landlords and also private landlords, getting in early when the threat of homelessness is present. We need landlords to talk to the service about tenancy issues, so that the team can prevent homelessness and solve any problems that the landlord might have. This could be arising from housing benefit issues, rent arrears or generally any problems relating to the tenancy not being sustained. Exeter City Council will be recruiting a Homeless Prevention Champion to help advise local authority and other landlords of good practice. This worker will also work with the other 3 authorities, providing advice and assistance.
- 3.8 Targeted Help MDDC: Helping with issues that might cause homelessness at an early stage, helping with financial advice and guidance at places or stages where changes happen which could lead to homelessness. For example: redundancy, disability, illness, relationship breakdown, or bereavements.
- 3.9 Other areas currently being reviewed at present include closer working with Julian House, which is based in Exeter, to extend the Rough Sleeper outreach service to MDDC. This service would enable a member of their team to respond to service requests from rough sleepers possibly sleeping in the area. The Housing Options team would then be able to access the rough sleeper provisions in Exeter.
- 3.10 All of these changes that the four districts are implementing might become part of the response to the new legislation relating to Homelessness Reduction due in 2017/18.

4.0 **The Homelessness Reduction Bill 2016-2017**

- 4.1 The Bill is seeking to introduce a new duty on local authorities to prevent homelessness for all eligible applicants threatened with homelessness and a new duty to relieve homelessness for all eligible homeless applicants. These duties will involve helping all eligible people, whether they are single or a family.

4.2 For more information on the government publications site:

<https://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/lbill/2016-2017/0096/17096.pdf>

4.3 The Homelessness Reduction Bill 2016-2017 was introduced to Parliament as a Private Member's Bill by Bob Blackman, MP on 29 June 2016. It has now completed its progress through the House of Commons and is awaiting consideration of amendments before Royal Assent.

4.4 The Bill is set to change the way that English Councils respond to homelessness issues. It was informed by the work of an independent panel of experts, established by Crisis (a charity which assists single, homeless people). The aim of this panel was to review the current legislation affecting this client group and to identify improvements to the legal framework relating to the prevention of single homelessness in England.

5.0 **Changes expected**

5.1 When a person is homeless or threatened with homelessness, the Council is currently obliged to deal with them in accordance with the duties set out in Part VII of the Housing Act 1996, as amended by Homelessness Act 2002. Section 175 of the Act states that a person is threatened with homelessness if it is likely that they will become homeless within 28 days.

5.2 Under the new legislation, the number of days will increase to 56.

5.3 In addition, there will be further guidance relating to the action which an authority should take in relation to someone who applies for assistance after they have been served with a valid section 21 notice (of intention to seek possession from an assured shorthold tenancy). The Council will have to take reasonable steps to try and persuade the landlord to delay an order for possession or to agree not to pursue the notice.

5.4 The Bill is also seeking to introduce a new duty on local authorities to prevent homelessness for all eligible applicants threatened with homelessness and a new duty to relieve homelessness for all eligible homeless applicants. These duties will involve helping all eligible people, whether they are single or a family.

5.5 Other agencies working in the public sector will also be required to notify the Council if they come into contact with someone that they think may be homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

6.0 **Impact**

6.1 On 17 January 2017 it was announced that £48 million would be made available to help local authorities to meet the additional costs required as a result of the changes to the legislation. Currently, there is no indication as to how this will be allocated to specific regions or to individual authorities.

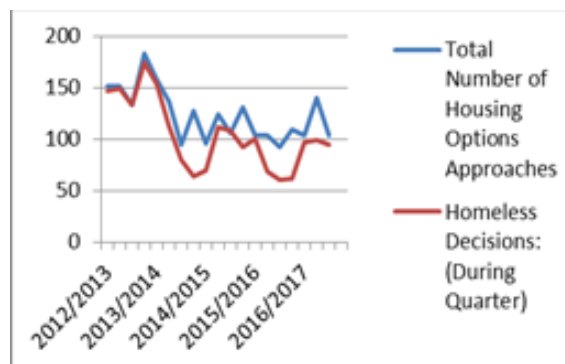
- 6.2 On 17 January 2017, the Local Government Association released a statement which said that: “Councils have concerns that initial costings will inevitably be based on assumptions which will be difficult to predict. For example, it is impossible to know how many people will come forward to access the new duties, what the impact of the Bill will be on different groups over time, and therefore the funding councils need to deliver duties that reduce homelessness.”
- 6.3 An increase in the numbers of people presenting to the Council for assistance in connection with homelessness or threatened homelessness once the new legislation is adopted is being assumed. The cost of temporary accommodation also needs to be taken into account. The Council already has a duty to secure accommodation for those applicants where it has reason to believe that the person may be homeless, eligible for assistance and has priority for assistance under the legislation, pending a decision on whether or not they are actually homeless. If the numbers of those presenting as homeless at Phoenix House increase, then it can be argued that the budget for temporary accommodation will need to be increased. The Council has a limited supply of temporary accommodation available but there is a heavy demand for this. Therefore, bed and breakfast accommodation does occasionally have to be used, which is more expensive. Further, there is only a limited supply of this in the District. This sometimes necessitates clients having to be placed in accommodation outside Mid Devon, away from their support networks, local schools, employment and so on, with the resulting anxieties associated with that, when they are already experiencing difficulties and stress.
- 6.4 In anticipation of the increased workload, new strategies are being devised with the aim of mitigating the risks associated with this.

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Circulation of the Report: Councillor Ray Stanley, Cabinet Member for Housing, Management Team

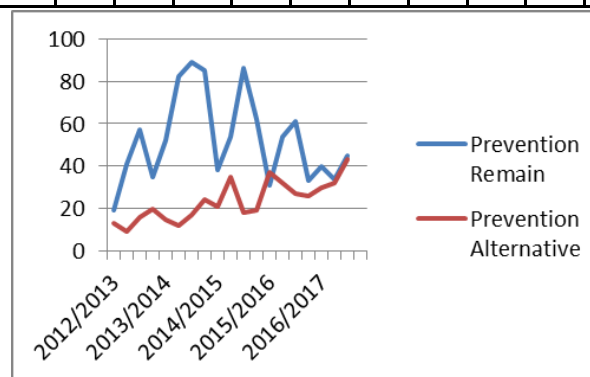
Appendix 1 - Number of approaches for housing advice

	2012/2013				2013/2014				2014/2015				2015/2016				2016/2017			
Total Number of Housing Options Approaches	151	151	133	183	158	136	94	127	95	124	108	131	104	108	92	109	104	140	103	
Homeless Decisions: (During Quarter)	147	148	133	174	153	113	80	64	69	111	108	92	100	68	60	62	97	99	95	

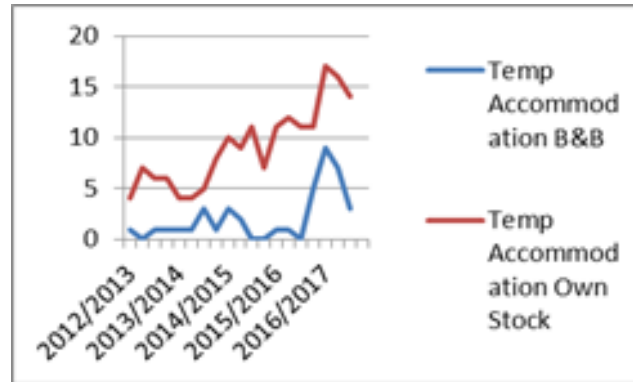


Appendix 2 - Number of Homeless Preventions

Homelessness Prevention	2012/2013				2013/2014				2014/2015				2015/2016				2016/2017			
Prevention Remain	19	41	57	35	52	82	89	85	38	54	86	62	31	54	61	33	40	34	45	
Prevention Alternative	13	9	16	20	15	12	17	24	21	35	18	19	37	32	27	26	30	32	43	



Appendix 3 - Number of Homeless Households Placed in Temporary Accommodation



Appendix 4 – Expenditure of homeless service (B&B, DARS, Removals)

