

BUSINESS SUPPORT OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

4 DECEMBER 2014

HOMELESSNESS

Report from: Robin Cooper, Director Regeneration Community and Culture

Author: Matthew Gough, Head of Strategic Housing

Summary

A report to provide Members with details of the Council's approach to Homelessness.

1. Budget and Policy Framework

1.1 This report provides Members with information on various aspects and issues in relation to homelessness in Medway, responding to issues previously raised by Committee. The Council's overall approach to dealing with Homelessness is set out within legislation, within its Homelessness Strategy, which was adopted in February in 2014, and within its Housing Strategy. A separate report regarding the Housing Strategy is also on the agenda for this meeting. This report is therefore for information and is outside the Council's policy and budget framework including the Council Plan.

2. Background

2.1 The Council has various duties and obligations in respect of those households who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. This reports provides Members with information about a number of specific areas:

- ❑ Details of the evidence gathering undertaken, including the surveys undertaken of street homelessness
- ❑ Migration of households to Medway seeking Housing Assistance
- ❑ Details of the support provided for street homeless
- ❑ Supported accommodation for Homeless Households
- ❑ Numbers of Households who are Homelessness
- ❑ Number of Households placed in temporary Accommodation

3. Details of the evidence gathering undertaken, including the surveys undertaken of street homelessness

- 3.1 Since Autumn 2010, all local authorities have been required to submit an annual figure to Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) to indicate the number of people sleeping rough in the area on a typical night. This figure can be arrived at by means of an estimate or a count. This annual rough sleeping figure allows local authorities to track progress, consider whether current measures are effective in tackling rough sleeping and if new approaches are needed.
- 3.2 Unlike most other authorities Medway has opted to undertake an actual count, an approach which has been supported and independently validated by Homeless Link, the agency funded by DCLG to oversee the assessments and to advise nationally on Homelessness. A representative of Homeless Link assisted in the actual assessment, which took place from midnight into the early hours of the 12 November 2014.
- 3.3 The assessment was planned based on information provided by a range of local agencies including those within the Council, the police and voluntary sector, who have contact with those who are sleeping rough, to help identify locations to be visited. The count found 2 individuals sleeping rough that night. This was despite visiting locations across Medway in which rough sleepers had been reported over the preceding months. This was less than had been expected and was less than the six, which had been found in November 2013.
- 3.4 Feedback from Homeless Link has confirmed that the reduction in street homeless locally was a reflection of their experience across the country in the current round of counts. It is not suggested that there are currently only 2 people sleeping rough in Medway, but that this provides an indication of the overall number and trends in relation to rough sleeping.

4. Migration of Households to Medway seeking Housing Assistance

- 4.1 Where a household approaches the Council as homeless the homelessness legislation sets out a number of tests that the Council is required to apply before accepting a duty to provide accommodation to them.
- 4.2 The Council that is first approached by a household when homeless the Council must look into their homelessness application and decide if it has to provide them with emergency accommodation if the criterion are met.
- 4.3 Following enquiries, the Council will then decide if it has to provide longer-term accommodation or if responsibility for this lies with another council. To do this, the Council will look into whether the household have a local connection to the area.
- 4.4 Before the Council looks at whether the household has a local connection with the area, it must first consider the following questions:
- Is the household legally considered to be *homeless*?
 - Do they have a right to live in the UK and are *eligible* for help?

- Are they in *priority* need?
- Have they made themselves *intentionally* homeless?

4.5 If the Council decides the household has a local connection with the area it must continue to provide the household with somewhere to live and, in time, must make the household an offer of long-term accommodation.

4.6 Local Connection in this respect is defined within the legislation as:

Living in the area - If the household has lived in the area for 6 months out of the past 12, or 3 years out of the past 5, it has a local connection. To have a local connection, they must have lived in the area by choice. It is unlikely they will qualify if they have only lived in an area because they have been in prison or in hospital there. However they will have a local connection if they were posted there by the armed forces.

Have close family in the area – If the household have close family who have lived in the area for at least 5 years. Close family is usually limited to mother, father, siblings or children.

Work in the area – If a member of the household works in the area. Self-employed people can have a local connection if they mainly work in the Council's area.

Other reasons - There are other special reasons that the Council will consider as a local connection. For example, they may need to live in an area to receive specialist health care or because in the past they lived in the area for a long time.

4.7 Of those 614 households who made a homeless application between September 2012 and September 2014, 33 were found not to have a local connection, or were ineligible for assistance due to residency issues including having no right to remain within the UK, subject to immigration control and not habitually resident.

4.8 For those seeking to join the Council's housing waiting list, there are different requirements and the Council's Allocation Policy confirms that a person is not eligible if they are:

- Subject to Immigration Control (within the meaning of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996) and not otherwise re-included by regulations made by the Secretary of State
- A person from abroad excluded by regulations made by the Secretary of State
- Not habitually resident in the United Kingdom (other than EEA/EU workers or those covered by an EEA/EU Directive) or required to leave the UK by the Secretary of State.

4.9 In addition they are required to meet a residency criterion, that the household should have lived within the Medway boundaries continuously for the 2 years prior to the application being made. Residency in Medway must be by the applicant's own choice and that they have not been placed within Medway

boundaries by another local authority. Medway is therefore not seeing a large number of households without this connection accessing social housing. There are certain specific exceptions in which this criteria does not apply. Medway is seeing an increasing number of households wishing to join the register, but who do not meet these criteria and in many cases are seeking to challenge this position.

- 4.10 The population of Medway continues to grow and as such new households will continue to move into the area, and some of these households will encounter problems with their housing. The number of households who are rough sleeping has decreased. Whilst the overall number of households approaching for assistance is increasing, most of these households are resident in Medway and, for the purpose of the legislation, are considered to have a local connection.
- 4.11 The main impact of households moving into Medway is increased demand for rented accommodation. The effect of this has been to reduce the ability of vulnerable households to effectively secure and maintain private rented accommodation.

5. Details of the Support Provided for Street Homeless and Rough Sleeping

- 5.1 Those sleeping rough are able to approach the Council directly for advice. The Council probably will not help the rough sleeper with emergency accommodation if they are a single person, in good health and do not have any dependent children. If they are pregnant, have children or have serious health or mental health issues, the Council could find them emergency accommodation if it is believed that they are homeless and in priority need as part of its legal assessment of homelessness.
- 5.2 The Council, working in association with the other Kent local authorities, has secured additional funding from central Government to provide a specialist service for single homeless people to whom the Council would not have a duty to accommodate. The service has been commissioned and is provided by Riverside Housing Association.
- 5.3 The focus of this service is to help prevent homelessness among single men and women who are at risk of becoming homeless because they are facing eviction from a private rented property, or are sofa-surfing, or who have slept rough already. The team provide a single service offer which can include emergency accommodation, help with reconnecting to someone's family or home area or a range of other options to prevent single people becoming homeless.
- 5.4 The Council also offers additional support through its Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) for rough sleepers. In line with the Government Guidance this will be activated by a weather forecast predicting three consecutive nights, or more, of a temperature of zero degrees Celsius or lower. During this period any person approaching the Council that would otherwise be sleeping rough on the streets during the SWEP activation period

should be accommodated. This is an emergency provision that overrides the need to prove eligibility.

- 5.5 There are other local organisations that provide assistance to those sleeping or at risk of sleeping rough. There are also rough sleeper alerts, which are available through various websites, which are monitored by local and national organisations. For those rough sleepers who may be eligible for assistance they should contact Customer First or visit the Chatham Contact Centre.

6. Supported Accommodation for Homeless Households

- 6.1 In 2009 a Task Group was set up by the Business Support Overview & Scrutiny Committee to consider the use of Temporary Accommodation. As part of this report Members identified areas of good practice and opportunities for the development of services.
- 6.2 Officers were asked to investigate schemes operated in Southampton to support those in need of accommodation, and this included a visit to a scheme that provided housing related support for households. Particular areas of practice were identified including:
- ❑ Individual needs assessments
 - ❑ Planned programme of moving on tenants
 - ❑ Facilitating access to other services including health, education and employment opportunities.
 - ❑ Access to IT
 - ❑ Optimum stay of 6/8 weeks
- 6.3 This service is provided in Southampton in a 56-unit accommodation, with 24 hour on site support and a named Key Worker and was commissioned through the Supporting People regime.
- 6.4 Following a review of services and building on recommendations made as part of the Supported Housing Task Group set up by the Regeneration, Community and Culture Overview & Scrutiny Committee in 2013, the Strategic Housing Service has recommissioned a range of services including those that provide that type of Housing Related Support in Medway.
- 6.5 Services now available include the provision of some 93 units of accommodation for homeless clients, these all provide:
- ❑ Support in a safe and stable environment
 - ❑ Assess the needs of individuals and provide an agreed planned programme of support, detailed in a support plan, working with the service user and other agencies as applicable to enable holistic service delivery
 - ❑ Enable individuals to move on and maximise their independence and maintain a tenancy
 - ❑ Facilitate access to other services as appropriate such as health related services, benefits, education, employment and social care

- Facilitate access to rehabilitation/specialist services dependent on need.
- Provide 6 weeks floating support when clients leave the service when a positive move on has been achieved

6.6 The Council has also commissioned a range of other services including floating support and further accommodation based schemes for offenders, and young people.

7. Numbers of Households Homeless

7.1 Where a household is homeless or at risk of being homeless within 28 days, the Council has a duty to assess a homeless application to determine if the Council has a duty to provide accommodation. During this period, in many instances, the Council has a further duty to provide accommodation until that investigation can be completed. There are also further duties in respect of assisting households to prevent homelessness.

7.2 Due to a number of factors it is becoming increasingly difficult to assist vulnerable households to secure suitable affordable accommodation and prevent their homelessness.

7.3 The situation is not the same across the country and there is a very strong regional element with the situation in London having an impact regionally and locally.

7.4 Locally the number of households who are approaching the Council for advice and assistance is increasing. Since 2012 the number of households that the Council has accepted as eligible, intentionally homeless and in priority need, has increased by 93% in Medway. A review of the available data has shown that such levels are not uncommon across the southeast, with Dartford, Swale and Sevenoaks experiencing growth at similar levels. Across many areas in the Home Counties increases have been in excess of 150%, rising to more than 250% in some areas. In London increases have been of up to 267%.

7.5 Of those households that did make a homeless application,

- Medway accepted having a housing duty to 43% of these households over the last 2 years, with results for the last quarter being slightly lower at 42%.
- This is lower than the national average of 49%.
- For the remaining households that the Council did not accept a duty to, 10% were found to be intentionally homeless, compared to the current national level of 8%, 23% were not in priority, compared to 18% nationally and 21% of those applying to Medway were found not to be homeless compared to 26% nationally.

The trends locally generally reflect the wider national picture with Medway accepting fewer households as homeless when compared to the national level.

7.6 This pressure is expected to continue for coming years as demand for housing continues to increase and as house prices increase. This situation is likely to

be further compounded if mortgage rates start to rise and housing continues to be increasingly unaffordable for many households. This will continue to increase the challenges that households experience when seeking to secure accommodation.

- 7.7 It is therefore expected that the number of households approaching the Council for assistance will continue to increase and that of those households, an increasing number will meet the criteria for being accepted as homeless by the Council.
- 7.8 In these cases the Council accepts a duty to provide accommodation. The increase in households approaching as homeless and then being accepted will result in more households needing to be provided with accommodation.

8. Number of Households placed in Temporary Accommodation (TA)

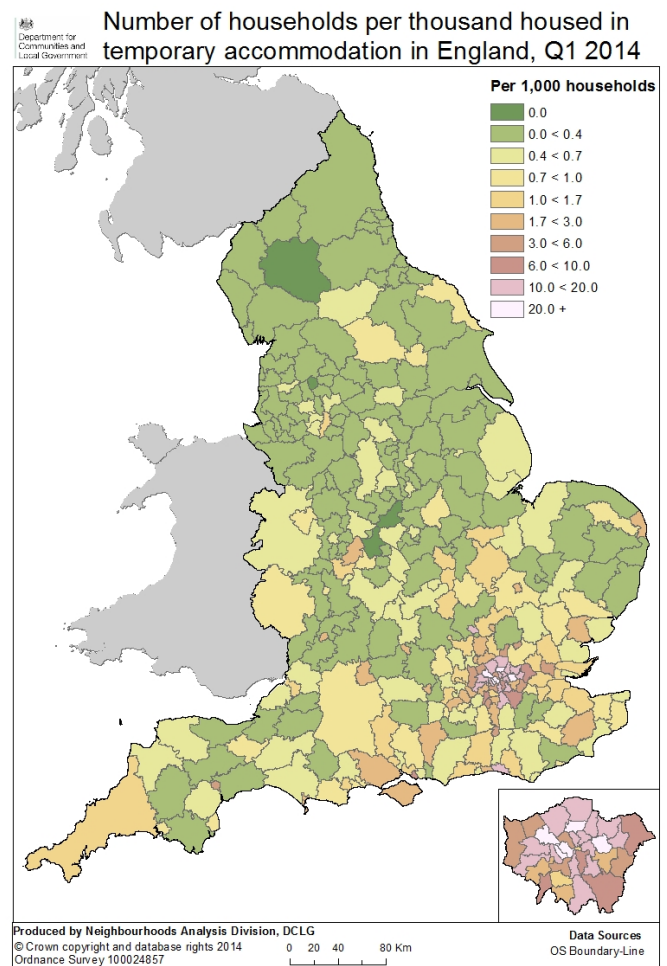
8.1 Since the economic downturn the use of temporary accommodation (TA) has increased in many parts of the country, although these increases have been focused in London and the southeast. In Medway since 2010 the increase has been 23% overall. Although increasing, these levels are below the 307 households in temporary accommodation in 2008 and more than 700 in 2006.

8.2 The level of use of temporary accommodation varies across the country with the largest use of this type of accommodation in the southeast as illustrated in the adjacent diagram.

8.3 In the southeast 18 authorities have experienced an increase of more than 100%, and 9 with more than 200%. In London some authorities have seen an increase of more than 150% over the same period.

8.4 More recently the level of usage in other areas of the southeast has risen at an increasing level. In Medway since 2012 numbers have increased by 36%, compared to 59% in Gravesham and 43% in Swale.

8.5 In other southeast authorities the increase has been 68% in Brighton, more than 50% across the urban areas of south Hampshire, 66% in Reading, 75%



across Surrey. In London rises have been seen of up to 267% in Hillingdon, 217% in Greenwich, 140% in Enfield and 34% in Bexley.

- 8.6 Outside London the highest usage in the southeast is in Brighton with 1,266 households in TA. In London 19 authorities have more than 1,000 households placed in TA, of which 8 authorities have more than 2,000 households.
- 8.7 Although increasing, the number of households placed in TA in Medway have been at a lower rate than the number of households approaching the Council as homeless, and below the number of households which the Council is accepting a duty to accommodate. This suggests that clients are being helped to move into alternative permanent accommodation, and so helping to limit the usage of temporary accommodation.

9 Homelessness Prevention Budget

- 9.1 Where possible the Council will work with households, landlords, support providers and voluntary organisations to prevent households from becoming homeless. This includes the payment of rent in advance, deposits, agents fees and in some cases the settlement of arrears. Service budgets include allocations for the provision of assistance. Despite efforts by officers to deliver support to prevent homelessness, in many instances landlords are not willing to accept the Council's Homebond or to settle arrears and so allow households to either secure or maintain accommodation.
- 9.2 For this reason the homelessness prevention budget is currently underspent. However, there is an increasing pressure on the number of households being placed into temporary accommodation and a corresponding budget pressure in this area. The expected underspend in housing prevention is therefore used to support these additional costs. There is no overall saving or reduction in homelessness related budgets.

10. Service Response

- 10.1 Due to the increased demand for homeless services and for temporary accommodation in Medway, a range of steps and initiatives have been delivered to help respond to increased demand, improve efficiency and maximise the number of households who are assisted.
- 10.2 These have included:
- ❑ Revision of the Council's Allocation Policy to reduce the priority awarded to homeless households, by removing the incentive to make a homeless application.
 - ❑ Targeting rogue landlords with a history of poor management, housing conditions and illegal evictions.
 - ❑ Reviewing officer decisions to ensure compliance with the legal framework.
 - ❑ Providing support to those suffering domestic abuse and so prevent homelessness where appropriate.

- ❑ Re-commissioning Housing Related Support with an increased focus of preventing homelessness and to improve the support to tenants moving into private sector accommodation.
- ❑ Improve the support and advice available to young people approaching for assistance.
- ❑ To reviewing and updating Homebond our deposit and rent in advance scheme to help prevent homelessness.
- ❑ Ensuring the service structure is adequate to meet identified priorities.
- ❑ Working with providers of affordable housing to deliver additional affordable homes.
- ❑ Providing debt and financial advice and assistance.
- ❑ Provision of a dedicated Specialist Housing and Mental Health Link worker.

11. Financial implications

11.1 This report is for information only and there are not direct financial implications for the report.

12. Legal implications

12.1 This report is for information only and there are not direct legal implications for the report.

13. Recommendations

13.1 That the report be noted

Lead officer contact

Matthew Gough, Head of Strategic Housing, Tel: 01634 333177, email: matthew.gough@medway.gov.uk