

CABINET

19 NOVEMBER 2019

HOMELESSNESS AND ROUGH SLEEPER STRATEGY 2019-2024

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Howard Doe, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services

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Summary

This report presents the Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy 2019-24 to Cabinet for approval, The Strategy, which responds to the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, government guidance on homelessness and rough sleeping and current practice in Medway, replaces the previous Homelessness Prevention Strategy 2017-19.

1. Budget and Policy Framework

1.1 Approving the Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy 2019-2024 is a matter for the Cabinet.

2. Background

2.1 The Homelessness Act 2002 requires local housing authorities to carry out a Homelessness Review and formulate and publish a homelessness strategy based on the results of that review.

2.2 The Homelessness Prevention Strategy 2017-19 to cover the time while the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 was introduced and the government guidance was released and implemented. In the last two years the way homelessness services are provided has changed significantly. This has been driven by direction from the Portfolio Holder, changes in legislation and the rough sleeper initiative work. Some voluntary sector organisations have also changed the way they support homeless people and co-operation and collaborative working has been strengthened through the Homelessness Forum. Key achievements include:

- Developing, agreeing and reviewing protocols to support vulnerable people at risk of homelessness or who are homeless

- Providing all eligible households with housing options advice, including those with no local connection and the intentionally homeless
- Making the Landlords Hotline available to all landlords
- Updating the website with easy to understand information
- Ensuring the Homelessness Forum partners know how to identify households at risk of homelessness and how to refer them
- Agreeing a Homelessness Charter between statutory and voluntary sector organisations
- Creating a guide for young people to set up their home and budget
- Supporting households in temporary accommodation to understand their tenancy and to access a wide range of support services
- Working with the rough sleepers winter shelters to help signpost clients to relevant services and housing advice
- Continuing to work with developers to provide affordable housing
- Assessing the feasibility of a Housing First pilot and beginning the pilot
- Reviewing the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol with partners and using the big TV screen by Chatham Bus Station to tell people when it's running
- Commissioning floating support and supported housing to support vulnerable households maintain a home
- Using the Quality Assessment Framework to assess all commissioned supported housing providers and finding all services to be satisfactory
- Increasing the amount of preventative options available for households at risk of homeless and stabilising the amount of households in temporary accommodation.
- Successfully rolling out a range of initiatives associated with the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government's (MHCLG) Rough Sleeping Initiative contributing to moving over 90 people into accommodation.

2.3 Significant changes introduced by the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 were:

- to extend the duty to work with households at risk of homelessness to prevent homelessness to 56 days;
- to work with homeless households to help them relieve their homelessness for 56 days; and
- to create a personalised housing plan to help each household find settled accommodation.

2.4 The Government released its Rough Sleeping Strategy in 2018 which sets out its vision for halving rough sleeping by 2022 and ending it by 2027. This strategy includes the Rough Sleeper Initiative and Medway Council was invited to bid for funding. We were successful and a Rough Sleeper Initiative has been running in Medway since July 2018. The government's Strategy also required local housing authorities to call their new strategies Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategies and to have annual action plans. We have been aware of significant issues impacting on Medway's homeless situation and these have been included in our planning. For example; our day to day experience and periodic research shows that a significant proportion of people begging in Medway are not homeless. Housing Services are planning a communications campaign to detail the

range of provision available to people who are sleeping rough and so address the notion that people are begging in Medway due to lack of available food or lack of support. Ongoing concerns around people living in tents are recognised and a meeting is booked to seek a Council wide agreement on ways of tackling this. We accept the need for more support around mental health and are working with partners on ways to address this.

2.5 A Homelessness Review (Appendix 3) highlighted;

- The significant gap between the local housing allowance and the average private sector rents which creates affordability problems
- The increasing number of households seeking assistance from the homelessness service
- The significant increase in the number of households whose homelessness is prevented or relieved by Medway Council
- The large number and variety of organisations providing support to rough sleepers
- The new work of the Rough Sleeper Initiative

2.6 We have carried our further analysis since the Homelessness Review was completed and this shows these trends continue. There are 9% fewer households in temporary housing due to all the efforts of the housing service in preventing homelessness and helping households move on from temporary accommodation.

2.7 An engagement event was held with a wide range of partner organisations in October 2018. This identified what was working well, the challenges and areas to address and actions to complete going forward. The Citizens' Panel were consulted on their perception of homelessness and rough sleeping, the services available and how well they worked together.

2.8 Key changes between the existing strategy and proposed new strategy reflect the new requirements of the Rough Sleeper Strategy, including the new title and annual action plan relevant parts of the Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities.

2.9 The strategy (Appendix 1) addresses five main themes, reflecting the advice of the current Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities on writing a homelessness strategy. These are:

- Providing advice and information to prevent homelessness
- Identifying households at risk of homelessness early
- Intervening before homelessness occurs
- Preventing recurring homelessness
- Working with partner agencies

3. Options

3.1 The options available are:

- To approve the Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy 2019-24 as attached at Appendix 1.

- To approve the strategy subject to amendments.

4. Advice and analysis

- 4.1 The Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy 2019-24 responds to the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, government guidance on homelessness and rough sleeping and current practice in Medway. It has an annual action plan (Appendix 4) to address each theme and progress will be monitored every three months.
- 4.2 A Diversity Impact Assessment (Appendix 2) has been carried out. It identified impacts for this strategy relating to people with the protected characteristic of pregnancy/maternity in that under the previous legislation and under the current legislation, pregnant women will be found to be in priority need when homeless. It also identified a potential benefit for rough sleepers as it may reduce stigma against them.

5. Risk management

- 5.1 Please see details of the risks below.

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
The strategy is not implemented	If the strategy is not implemented it will not meet the legal requirements of the Homelessness Act 2002 or the guidance in the government's Rough Sleeper Strategy	Implement the strategy and its annual action plan	D2
That the strategy does not remain relevant	New legislation or guidance could determine change is required	Regular contact with the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government will ensure we know of any changes early. The annual action plan allows the strategy to be highly responsive	D2
That the needs of vulnerable groups (Pregnant women, 16/17 year olds, those significantly more vulnerable than others if made homeless etc.) will not be met.	New legislation protects vulnerable groups to the same level as previous legislation. They will remain a priority across all services.	Housing Options Service to continue respond appropriately to vulnerable households.	D2

6. Consultation

- 6.1 The consultation is being carried out on the strategy and not the annual action plan as advised by Legal Services. This also allows the action plan to be updated quickly and maintain its relevance.
- 6.2 The Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government's rough sleeper initiative adviser has agreed the strategy is suitable.
- 6.3 A lunch and learn session was held in June 2019 with 19 colleagues from housing, public health, adult and children's services, town centre management and environmental services to inform them of the consultation and seek their feedback on the themes. We analysed the feedback to identify any matters that were not covered in the strategy or action plan and this led us to add more detail to the action regarding a communications strategy and to add actions on increasing the range of options we have to current temporary accommodation provision (including e.g. assessing the feasibility of the Council running a lettings agency) and exploring opportunities to work more closely with colleagues in Adult Social Care and Children's Services. The strategy remains unchanged.
- 6.4 In June 2019 we held a consultation session attended by 12 male and one female service users of a local charity which provides direct access accommodation to homeless single people and couples over 25. A short presentation was given on the need for a new strategy and the five themes and the group split into two to give verbal feedback to members of staff. All agreed with the five themes and the comments had either been addressed in the strategy or were not within the scope of the strategy.
- 6.5 The strategy consultation was posted on the Council's website from 5 July to 22 September 2019. A social media campaign was run to encourage the general public to respond to the consultation. All members of the Homelessness Forum were informed of the consultation and invited to respond. We received 90 responses including two from local organisations.
- 6.6 78% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the theme 'Providing advice and information to prevent homelessness', with 11% neither agreeing nor disagreeing and 10% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. Most comments were supportive with some suggesting ways to ensure all knew of the homelessness service.
- 6.7 88% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the theme 'Identifying households at risk of homelessness early' with 10% neither agreeing nor disagreeing and 1% disagreeing. One respondent suggested a way is found to store rough sleeper's possessions and an action will be added to the action plan to investigate options for doing this.
- 6.8 90% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the theme 'Intervening before homelessness occurs' with 9% neither agreeing nor disagreeing and 1% strongly disagreeing. One respondent suggested we work with people being evicted, supporting them to challenge evictions and help with eviction and rent arrear proceedings in Court. The homelessness team provide support for this and we will add an action to the action plan to review the

support provided and make recommendations. Many supportive comments were made and some suggested actions already in the action plan.

- 6.9 86% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the theme 'Working with partner agencies' with 10% neither agreeing nor disagreeing and 4% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. Many supportive comments were made and some suggested actions already in the action plan.
- 6.10 None of the responses raised issues that required amendments to the strategy.
- 6.11 During the consultation period we have also received feedback from elected members raising concerns around the street population (people who sleep rough and/or beg) and we will ensure that this is included in the year 1 action plan.

7. Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee

- 7.1 The Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the draft strategy at its meeting on 24 October 2019 and the draft minutes of the discussion are detailed as follows:
- 7.2 Members considered a report regarding a draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy 2019-24, which responded to the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, Government guidance on homelessness and rough sleeping and current practice in Medway. It replaced the previous Homelessness Prevention Strategy 2017-19.
- 7.3 The following issues were discussed:
 - 7.3.1 **Reasons for homelessness** – a Member commented that the reasons cited in the Strategy why someone became homeless or was at risk of becoming homeless were often linked to Government guidance and policies. The concern was expressed that, although the Strategy contained some useful measures, it could not itself address the fundamental problems in Medway, and what was needed was more lobbying of the Government. The Head of Housing advised that the Strategy contained a commitment to lobby the Government about the challenges the Council faced.
 - 7.3.2 **Sustainability of the Strategy** – noting that Government funding for next year had not been confirmed, a Member questioned the sustainability of the strategy and whether it could be delivered. The Head of Housing advised that the Council had recently been made aware that Government funding for rough sleeping would be made available and he was confident the Council's bid would be successful. The risk remained though that the bid would not be approved, which was why a flexible one year action plan had been suggested.
 - 7.3.3 **Temporary accommodation** – a Member referred to a significant increase in the numbers of people in temporary accommodation in March 2019 compared to March 2018 and a lack of understanding about the needs of children in this group, what support they were receiving and what conditions they were living in. Another Member emphasised the need for the Council to place a higher priority on young people, particularly those who were vulnerable. The Head of Housing commented that, against a national increase of 5% in people in

temporary accommodation, there had been no increase in Medway, although the numbers of children in temporary accommodation would inevitably fluctuate. In Medway families in temporary accommodation were not housed in shared accommodation or bed and breakfast. He would consider adding to the Strategy a section on mapping the needs of these children.

7.3.4 A Member welcomed the move away from the reliance on nightly paid accommodation and find more long leases.

7.3.5 **Training for frontline staff** - a Member queried whether there were sufficient resources to deliver training for people with mental health needs and also whether this was in fact something that should be tackled as a Council wide issue. The Head of Housing commented that staff were encouraged to approach this sensitively but it was a challenge to link people to the right levels of support. Funding for this training would be included in the bid for rough sleeping funding. Discussions were taking place with colleagues across the Council and partners about how best to provide the right support for people with mental health needs.

7.3.6 **Rough sleepers in winter** – a Member asked what discussions had taken place with those organisations involved in the arrangements for rough sleepers in winter. The Head of Housing stated the Cold Weather Programme was comprehensive and involved a range of partners. A winter hostel would open at weekends and nights where the temperature was forecast to be freezing or below. From January the night shelter run by the churches would be open. The Council would also look to place rough sleepers in temporary accommodation in periods of extreme weather.

7.3.7 **Overlap between homelessness, rough sleeping and begging** - a Member asked how well the Council was communicating this complex message to the public. The Head of Housing said regular discussions took place with the Communications Team on suitable publicity and other events such as a stall in the Pentagon Centre for the public to ask questions had recently taken place. He would think about what more could be done. A Member welcomed this differential between homelessness and rough sleeping, given that these groups presented different challenges.

7.3.8 **Use of tents** - how the Council was tackling the use of tents by rough sleepers was queried. The Head of Housing commented this was a very complex issue and the presence of a barrier could make it difficult to engage with the rough sleeper inside and potentially place them at greater risk of abuse. Some tents were provided by voluntary organisations and the Council tried to encourage them to provide alternative, sustainable solutions.

7.3.9 **Code of Practice** - a Member suggested that the Council should draw up a Code of Practice aimed at signposting those who wanted to help tackle rough sleeping to those organisations who were operating the most effectively. The Head of Housing undertook to raise this idea with the Homelessness Forum.

7.3.10 **Survey questionnaire** - it was agreed that a copy of this would be sent to all Members of the Committee.

7.3.11 **Resilience of Third Sector** - a Member queried what would happen if a partner helping with rough sleeping decided they could no longer continue.

The Head of Housing advised this was not covered by the Strategy and he would consider what options might be available were it to happen.

7.3.12 **Night Shelter** - The Head of Housing undertook to look into comments that volunteers for the Shelter had received parking tickets when arrangements had been made for them to park for free.

7.3.13 **Affordable homes** – a Member noted the number of times the low level of affordable rental properties was mentioned in the Strategy as a key reason why people were turned out of accommodation they could not afford and queried what was being done to change the Council's 25% affordable housing target. The Head of Housing commented that the supply of affordable homes was a challenge and also a driver behind a number of issues including homelessness. There was a balance between what level of affordable housing developers could be persuaded to agree to without restricting the number of new homes being built. The housing team worked with registered providers to ensure the 25% target was achieved. The Council was looking to reduce the reliance on the private sector to provide temporary accommodation and also increase the number of tenancies in the private sector.

7.3.14 **Care leavers** – noting care leavers were more vulnerable to becoming homeless and that landlords often required a 2 month deposit, a Member stated that at a recent meeting officers had been unable to confirm how the Council could help care leavers with this. The Head of Housing advised the Council had helped care leavers with paying this deposit for some time but he would look at cases where young people had not been aware of this to see if the pathway could be improved. A Member commented this pathway should have been in place already and the Council needed to do more to place care leavers at the centre of its thinking.

7.3.15 **No recourse to public funds** – in response to what support was provided to the children of people in this category, the Head of Housing commented that vulnerable children and adults would hopefully be identified and supported by social services.

7.3.16 **Paramount Property Services** – a Member referred to an increase in concerns from constituents about a reduction in standards in these properties. The Head of Housing assured Members he was aware of this and was taking action to improve matters.

7.3.17 **S.21 eviction notices** – a Member asked how many people the Council had helped to avoid being evicted since the law in this area had changed. The Head of Housing advised the Council had had some success in this area and undertook to provide Members with the details.

7.4 The Committee agreed to:

- a) note the report;
- b) forward Members' comments to Cabinet, and
- c) recommend that the Head of Housing takes steps to further raise awareness amongst relevant teams across the Council of the existence of the Council's rent deposit guarantee scheme for care leavers.

8. Financial implications

- 8.1 The Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy does not entail any budgetary commitments above those already planned for. However, it should be noted that the review of ways to increase alternative provision may propose a 'spend to save' model at a future date.
- 8.2 The profile of funding for homelessness and rough sleeping services has changed considerably since the implementation of the previous 2017/19 document. The Council, through its medium term financial strategy, has sought to address the inherent demographic pressures associated particularly with the provision of temporary accommodation, a trend also seen nationally. This increase to base budget funding has allowed for further investment in preventative services the outcome of which has been an increase in preventative outcomes and a stabilising of the number of households in temporary accommodation.
- 8.3 Significant additional funding has also been attained from MHCLG in relation to Rough Sleeping (£478,000 in 2018/19, £767,500 in 2019/20) for an in-house Rough Sleeper Coordinator, an Outreach team, specialist workers for vulnerable females, people accessing the private rental sector, people with mental health support needs, additional funding to assist people into accommodation and commissioned supported accommodation services. There is, however, a challenge in terms of future funding for these initiatives. Whilst positive comments have been made by the MHCLG there is still a risk their funding will cease for this activity.

9. Legal implications

- 9.1 The Homelessness Act 2002 requires all local housing authorities to carry out a review of homelessness and provide and publish a strategy based on its findings.
- 9.2 This strategy meets that requirement and is named and planned in accordance with the government's Rough Sleeper Strategy 2018. There are no other legal implications for this strategy.

10 Recommendations

- 10.1 The Cabinet is asked to note the comments of the Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee as set out in section 7 of the report.
- 10.2 The Cabinet is asked to approve the Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy 2019-24 as set out at Appendix 1 to the report.

11 Suggested Reasons for Decision

- 11.1 The Homelessness Act 2002 requires all local housing authorities to carry out a review of homelessness and provide and publish a strategy based on its findings. This strategy meets that requirement and is named and planned in accordance with the government's Rough Sleeper Strategy 2018 and is considered suitable by the Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government's rough sleeper initiative adviser.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy 2019-2024
Appendix 2 - Diversity Impact Assessment
Appendix 3 - Homelessness Review 2018
Appendix 4 - Year 1 Action Plan

Background papers

None