

HOMELESSNESS AND ROUGH SLEEPING STRATEGY

Executive Summary

The Homelessness Act 2002 requires all local housing authorities publish a Homelessness Strategy following a review of homelessness in their area. The Council carried out a Homelessness Review in 2019 and this is available on the Council's website.

Since the Homelessness Reduction Act came into effect on April 2018, the Council's approach has placed customers at the centre of all it does. The focus is on supporting customers not just to resolve their housing issues, but also encouraging them to improve their wellbeing.

The Council's "Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2020-2024" sets out how it will work with partners to address homelessness in the Woking Borough and support residents in housing crisis. Actions will be targeted at delivering on the following four strategic priorities:

- To prevent homelessness and offer early help
- To provide a range of accommodation options
- To support vulnerable residents through partnership working
- To reduce rough sleeping

The Council will establish a Woking Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy Group to lead on monitoring delivery of the Strategy.

Recommendations

The Executive is requested to:

RECOMMEND TO COUNCIL That

- (i) **the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2020-2024 be approved; and**
- (ii) **the Director of Housing, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing, be delegated authority to make minor amendments to the Strategy and to update the action plan as required.**

Reasons for Decision

Reason: The Council has a legal duty to have an up-to-date Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy in place.

The item(s) above will need to be dealt with by way of a recommendation to Council.

Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy

Background Papers: None.

Reporting Person: Louise Strongitharm, Director of Housing
Email: louise.strongitharm@woking.gov.uk, Extn: 3599

Contact Person: Louise Strongitharm, Director of Housing
Email: louise.strongitharm@woking.gov.uk, Extn: 3599

Catherine Butler, Housing Solutions Manager
Email: catherine.butler@woking.gov.uk, Extn: 3618

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Debbie Harlow
Email: cllrdebbie.harlow@woking.gov.uk

Shadow Portfolio Holder: Councillor Liam Lyons
Email: clrliam.lyons@woking.gov.uk

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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Council has a legal duty to provide services to people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. The Housing Act 1996, Part 7, is the primary legislation governing homelessness. It has seen several changes over the years, but the most recent, fundamental and far-reaching are the amendments brought about by the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. This introduced new requirements to “Prevent” and “Relieve” homelessness and came into force on 3rd April 2018.
- 1.2 The Act represents a strategic change from the Housing Options model to an emphasis on improving how the Council engages with and supports its customers. The focus is on developing a more holistic approach to preventing and resolving homelessness. The main aim is to increase early interventions, which achieve more sustainable outcomes for customers.
- 1.3 The Homelessness Act 2002 requires all local housing authorities publish a Homelessness Strategy following a review of homelessness in their area. The Council carried out a Homelessness Review in 2019 and this is available on the Council’s website.
- 1.4 The Government’s Rough Sleeping Strategy 2018 sets out its plan to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and end it by 2027. The accompanying Delivery Plan includes an expectation that all local authorities update their strategies and rebadge them as Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategies.

2.0 Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy

- 2.1 Woking is an expensive housing market area and house prices have increased significantly over the last 5 years. According to the Land Registry, the average price of a home in the Borough was £415,171 in February 2019, significantly higher than the England average of £242,964. There are also very high rent levels in the private sector and even Affordable Rents (set at 80% of market rent) are out of the reach of many low-income households. The average private rent for a 2-bedroom property in Woking is £1,285 per month, compared to the Local Housing Allowance rate of £966 per month.
- 2.2 There is a steady demand for advice and assistance from the Housing Options Team, as it becomes increasingly challenging for residents to secure homes that are affordable for them. Affordability is becoming more and more of an issue, particularly for larger families with children affected by the benefits cap. Between April 2018 and March 2019, the Council undertook 282 homelessness assessments with 108 households being owed a duty (either prevention, relief or full).
- 2.3 People are often worried about being given notice to leave their homes in the private rented sector (29%), which together with relationship (8%) and family breakdown (23%), are the main reasons they approach the Council for housing advice and help. There are also risks to wider services associated with reductions in public spending, which have inevitably increased pressure on the Council’s services.
- 2.4 Since the Homelessness Reduction Act came into effect on April 2018, the Council’s approach has placed customers at the centre of all it does. The focus is on supporting customers not just to resolve their housing issues, but also encouraging them to improve their wellbeing.
- 2.5 Every person who is homeless or threatened with homelessness receives a written Personal Housing Plan (PHP) following a thorough assessment of their housing situation and support needs. The PHP sets out in detail the steps and actions required to be taken by both the customer and the Council in order to find a solution. The Housing Options team also works with partner agencies who have a “Duty to Refer” to help achieve the best possible outcome for customers at the earliest possible opportunity.

Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy

- 2.6 The Council has continued to prioritise its frontline services, has continued to invest in its Housing Services and is committed to improving the way it engages and supports people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless or rough sleeping.
- 2.7 The Council's "Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2020-2024" sets out how it will work with partners to address homelessness in the Woking Borough and support residents in housing crisis.
- 2.8 Actions will be targeted at delivering on the following four strategic priorities:
 - To prevent homelessness and offer early help
 - To provide a range of accommodation options
 - To support vulnerable residents through partnership working
 - To reduce rough sleeping
- 2.9 The Council will establish a Woking Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy Group to lead on monitoring delivery of the Strategy. This Group will meet at least once per year to review progress against the Strategy Action Plan and to respond to changes that emerge over the strategy period. Updates will also be provided to the Council's Housing Task Group.
- 2.10 The Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy Action Plan is intended to be a live document, which will be subject to continuous review and updating to ensure it remains effective and current. Updates will be published on the Council's website.

3.0 Implications

Financial

- 3.1 Tackling homelessness is the basis of the Council's Housing Needs Service Area. The total budgeted spend on Housing Needs is £1,170,494 in 2019/20, of which £700,000 comes from the Council and £470,000 comes from Government grants
- 3.2 The Council spent £526,386 on Bed and Breakfast (B&B) accommodation in 2018/19, of which it recovered £163,117. The net cost of B&B placements in 2018/19 was therefore £363,269 (equivalent to £73 per night) and £102,000 over budget. This trend is expected to continue without further action.
- 3.3 The Strategy itself does not commit the Council to additional expenditure. However, the focus on prevention, delivering more affordable homes and providing the new temporary accommodation scheme will all assist in containing expenditure on bed and breakfast accommodation.

Human Resource/Training and Development

- 3.4 The Strategy includes a specific action to continue to train Housing Options staff on the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 duties and update legislative training as required, in particular on new case law.

Community Safety

- 3.5 Preventing and tackling homelessness and rough sleeping will help to improve the health, well-being and quality of life for the people of Woking.

Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy

- 3.6 The Council's Housing Options team focuses is on supporting customers not just to resolve their housing issues, but also encouraging them to improve their wellbeing. Every person who is homeless or threatened with homelessness receives a written Personal Housing Plan (PHP) following a thorough assessment of their housing situation and support needs.

Risk Management

- 3.7 Failure to comply with homelessness legislation, including the requirement of have a Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy in place, could leave the Council open to legal challenge and place some households at risk.

Sustainability

- 3.8 A Sustainability Assessment has been completed.

Equalities

- 3.9 An Equalities Impact Assessment has been completed.

Safeguarding

- 3.10 Safeguarding issues may be identified through the housing advice and homelessness process. All staff receive training on safeguarding, including when and how to report concerns.

4.0 Consultations

- 4.1 On 7 November 2019, Housing Officers presented and consulted with the Housing Task Group and the Portfolio Holder for Housing on the draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy. The Task Group Members and Portfolio Holder for Housing were supportive of the proposed strategy.

- 4.2 The draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy was then subject to a wide consultation of external partners, as well as being made available on the Council's website. The consultation ran from 28th November 2020 to 6th January 2020.

- 4.3 Responses to the consultation from partner organisations included:

- Additional suggestions for data collection and monitoring of the action plan. This will be overseen by the Woking Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy Group and Section 7 of the Strategy has been amended to incorporate this.
- Suggestion that there could be further protocols between the Council and Thameswey Housing (i.e. around rent setting, notices, etc.). There is already closer working with Thameswey where issues do arise, but Action 1.7 has been amended to formalise this.
- Further certainty was sought about future funding of one local partner organisation. Community Grants are allocated through a separate, annual process and provides additional funding that can go towards homelessness prevention.
- Proposed a formal referral document be put in place with key local partners. This has been incorporated into the action plan (Action 3.17).
- Welcomed the provision of additional local temporary accommodation.

REPORT ENDS