

OVERVIEW OF HOMELESSNESS

Meeting: **Communities and Housing Scrutiny Committee**

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Will the decision be open for call in? Yes No

Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? Yes No

1.0 Purpose of Report

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of Homelessness at Woking Borough Council.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 The Committee is requested to:

RESOLVE THAT

i. **The Report be noted.**

3.0 Proposal and Outcome

3.1 The Committee is invited to note the update on homelessness in Woking.

3.2 The desired outcome is that through scrutiny and oversight, residents and the Committee will have an improved understanding of homelessness services provided and in turn support the achievement of the service aims to:

- Reduce the time spent in temporary accommodation, particularly for families with children.
- Reduce the number of nights households stay in Bed and Breakfast (B&B) accommodation.
- Eliminate the use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation for families with children as far as possible.
- Move households out of temporary accommodation into settled homes as quickly as possible.

- Reduce the time period between Advice given and Assessments completed with the intention of preventing more homelessness.

4.0 Background

- 4.1 Homelessness is a statutory responsibility for local authorities and is governed by legislation.
- 4.2 The Housing Options Team provides Advice through several ways, including in person at the Civic Offices and at other locations (such as, local refuges and at the York Road Project). It responds to emails and phone contact from anyone who needs any advice or information about housing. It triages customers and books appointments with the Assessment Team for anyone likely to become homeless within 56 days. It also books emergency B&B for people who are already homeless.
- 4.3 The team also includes two Floating Support Officers whose role is to give housing support to households. In the first instance, they contact, usually in person, the family or single person/couple who are struggling with their housing – quite often at risk of eviction because of rent arrears. The Floating Support Officers are very experienced with working with people who are often at their wits' end, distressed, angry and unable to cope with many aspects of daily living. This initial contact may discover that something as simple as not completing a form or ticking the wrong box has delayed housing or benefits' payments. These circumstances can quickly be resolved by contacting the third parties involved (e.g. Job Centre Plus or the landlord of their home). However, they also work with families with complex, multiple needs such as poor health, substance misuse, criminality, severe mental health issues (including hoarding), disability and mobility difficulties. Supporting people with these issues can take several months - signposting to, and persuading other agencies or organisations to engage can also take quite some time.
- 4.4 Last year, the Assessment team carried out 503 assessments and made 167 bookings to B&B. The average time spent in B&B was 11 weeks per household, but this ranged from 1 night to 44 weeks. The main reasons for longer stays are a household waiting for supported housing or larger families waiting for suitable family homes. Three of the longest waiting times in B&B were people waiting for Private Sector Leased (PSL) homes, which are identified at an early stage but take several weeks, sometimes months, to process to the letting stage via legal, inspections and repairs. The B&B figures includes rough sleepers who have to be offered emergency accommodation during extreme weather.
- 4.5 The homelessness service includes the Let's Rent Team, which finds and procures properties for homeless households in B&B/Temporary Accommodation (TA). It manages the Council's Private Sector Leased (PSL) properties, as well as the Core and Connect homes. There are currently 67 PSL properties under management. The landlords are paid on an annual basis, costing £1,031,199 last year. The majority of this cost is recovered from homeless households through their rent. It is a far more cost-effective temporary accommodation solution and provides a self-contained home for the homeless household.
- 4.6 The Council has a dedicated Rough Sleeping Team, made up of a Team Leader and three Tenancy Sustainment Officers (TSO) – currently carrying one vacancy. The TSO's support residents/tenants who are former rough sleepers. This group of

people comes with many challenges for the team and themselves as they battle ill health, previous traumas, substance misuse, leaving prison or hospital and finding themselves on the streets of Woking. This is the most acute form of homelessness. The team works very closely with the York Road Project, which offers services and accommodation in the borough for rough sleepers, including a hostel and several move-on properties with medium to low support. Each TSO carries a caseload of about 40 (with the current vacant post) – good practice shows that they should be working with a maximum of 12 people each. The team is fully-funded by Government grants.

5.0 Options Considered

5.1 This report is an overview of existing activity and progress. As such, there are no alternative options put forward for consideration.

6.0 Reasons for Homelessness

6.1 On 31 December 2024, there were 40 households in B&B. Of these, 23 were families with children. There were 204 households in TA, which breaks down to 105 in the Council's own stock on non-secure tenancies, 67 PSL's, 23 in the Council's TA which is accommodation with shared facilities (such as, bathrooms and kitchens) and 8 flats with support for rough sleepers and 1 Assured Shorthold tenancy.

6.2 There are many reasons for homelessness, including:

- Notice to Quit (from parents/family/friends)
- S.21 Notice (from a private landlord)
- Domestic Abuse
- Landlord selling
- Relationship breakdown
- Overcrowding
- Rough sleeping
- Asylum seekers leaving Home Office-funded accommodation
- Fire/Flood/other emergency
- Release from prison
- Discharge from hospital
- Return from abroad

6.3 A further reason for homelessness is extreme weather (either hot or cold). The Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) is activated when the "Feels Like" temperature is predicted to be 0 degrees or below for three consecutive nights and during other extreme weather events. SWEP is a locally agreed procedure and offer, followed to minimise harm or death to anyone who might be sleeping rough in severe weather, through the provision of emergency accommodation.

6.4 There is no legal requirement for Local Authorities to provide shelter for everyone during severe weather. However, it is widely accepted that there is a humanitarian obligation to provide SWEP and prevent death. The Local Authority commissions SWEP and is responsible for opening it.

6.5 SWEP in Woking was activated on 2 January 2025 and so far, 17 rough sleepers have been accommodated. The weather is monitored daily and the team will offer anyone rough sleeping emergency accommodation with the aim to preserve life.

7.0 Homelessness Service

7.1 When a household approaches the Council for help with imminent homelessness or homelessness, it is the Advice Team who carry out the initial enquiries, try to prevent homelessness at this stage and book an appointment with the Assessment Team for an in-depth interview to look at both housing and support needs of the household. Many households are prevented from becoming homeless by working with their case officer who will endeavour to find the most suitable home for them. This could be a room in a shared house, supported accommodation for a young person, a new home in a sheltered scheme for someone aged 55+, a suitable home for a family with children (often with additional needs) finding homes in the private rented sector as well as council or housing association homes. Prevention can also occur when negotiations with a landlord or family member are successful so that the person facing homelessness is able to remain in their home.

7.2 If homelessness cannot be prevented, households are initially moved into either emergency Bed and Breakfast (B&B) accommodation or a form of temporary accommodation.

7.3 **Bed and Breakfast (B&B)** - It is universally accepted that B&B (particularly where there is no access to cooking facilities or fridges) is not suitable for families with children. However, many local authorities have no choice but to use B&B as a last resort. The team try to keep families with children in school in Woking as far as possible. Where a family must be placed out of borough, the team bring them back into Woking as soon as there are suitable vacancies.

7.4 The Council uses many B&B's, including several out of the area, such as, Travelodge (Aldershot, Camberley, Farnborough, Guildford, Epsom and Clapham Junction) as well as smaller guest houses in Aldershot, Guildford and Slough. One reason for using out of borough placements is where it is not safe for someone or a family to be in Woking (for example, where fleeing domestic abuse). Another reason is because there is not enough provision in the borough.

7.5 The main B&B in Woking is The Maybury Lodge, which is owned by ThamesWey Guest Houses Limited. The manager and his staff are expert at dealing with the Council's customers who can often be challenging with mental health, physical health and substance misuse playing a large part.

7.6 There are also other B&B's which are used in Woking, but one of the challenges is the size of the rooms and the number of residents allowed to occupy. The service is seeing a rise in the number of larger families approaching which means we have to book two rooms instead of one, which is clearly twice as expensive.

7.7 It is much more cost-effective and timely to place people in more settled homes in the private rented sector, but many clients are very reluctant to move into private rentals as they feel they are not affordable. The Council pays for rent in advance and offers a Bond to landlords of £2,500. It also "Tops-up" rent payments where the rent is

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higher than the Local Housing Allowance (LHA), for example when a household is benefit capped.

- 7.8 Legislation requires that families are not placed in B&B except in an emergency and then only for a maximum of six weeks.
- 7.9 There are currently 40 households in B&B of which, 23 are families with children. We have 11 families who have been in B&B for longer than six weeks, but the team has identified properties as temporary accommodation for two of these families and several families have been nominated to the new Sheerwater flats and to another new development on Egley Road. Once these properties are ready, the families will move into their new, settled homes.
- 7.10 As we have more than five families in B&B for longer than six weeks, Woking Borough Council is subject to increased monitoring by MHCLG and have had to produce an Elimination Plan for the use of B&B.
- 7.11 **Temporary Accommodation** - There are 204 households currently in temporary accommodation. The Council has a range of temporary accommodation spread throughout the borough, including two new(ish) flagship blocks of flats at 121 Chertsey Road and Waterman House. These studio and one-bedroom flats are self-contained and have white goods and high-end flooring as they were originally intended for the private market. There are 25 studio flats (one is used as an office) and 22 studio, one- and two-bed flats respectively.
- 7.12 121 Chertsey Road is temporary home to former rough sleepers and has not been without issues. However, several residents have moved into settled homes following support from the Rough Sleeping Team. There are also 8 flats in the borough, known as RSAP properties, which were funded by Government as move-on homes with some support, for up to three years, for former rough sleepers.
- 7.13 Waterman House is temporary home to 22 households, mostly families. It is often used where there is disability within the family as the flats are on one level with no internal stairs. There is a lift to the first and second floors.
- 7.14 There are also 9 self-contained properties at 40 Birchwood Road; 4 at Ash Road and the team is currently using a further 49 self-contained Council homes as temporary homes.
- 7.15 The least-preferred Council TA properties are those with shared kitchens and bathrooms, which are at 5 & 7 Claremont Avenue, 131 – 135 Chertsey Road and 125 York Road. These are fairly old properties, which take a lot of wear and tear, mainly because of the shared facilities and communal areas.
- 7.16 There are 67 PSL properties leased by the Council from private landlords, which are maintained and managed by the Council as TA.
- 7.17 These homes are procured by the Council's Let's Rent Team and lease payments are made to the landlords on an annual basis. Leases are usually for two to five years and the rents are kept below or at Local Housing Allowance rates.

- 7.18 Many of these temporary homes tend to be self-contained, one- or two-bedroom flats in Woking until a more settled home can be found - either through the Council's Choice Based Lettings Scheme or in the private rented sector. The average time spent in TA is about two years, but is often longer as people with additional needs may need specialist housing or adaptations. People often wait much longer for a house, rather than placing bids on studios, flats and maisonettes. There are also some families with three or more children who must wait longer for larger family homes, as fewer become available.
- 7.19 The main reason for moving families into temporary accommodation is a lack of suitable, long-term, social-rented homes in Woking.

8.0 Current Data

- 8.1 During Quarter 3 (01/10/24 – 31/12/24), 42 households were placed in B&B. At the end of December 2024, there were 40 households in B&B and 204 in TA. Of these, there were 23 families in B&B (with 42 children), with the majority needing 2- or 3-bedroom accommodation waiting for homes of the following sizes:

No. of Bedrooms Needed	No. of Households in B&B
2 bedrooms	14
3 bedrooms	8
4 bedrooms	1

- 8.2 The average time spent in B&B in Quarter 3 was 9 weeks.
- 8.3 There are 13 families in Temporary Accommodation (TA) with shared facilities waiting for:

No. of Bedrooms Needed	No. of Households in B&B
2 bedrooms	9
3 bedrooms	4
4 bedrooms	0

- 8.4 There are 56 families in Private Sector Leased (PSL) homes. These are self-contained homes around the Borough, which are owned by private landlords but managed by the Council. These families are waiting for settled homes of the following sizes:

No. of Bedrooms Needed	No. of Households in B&B
2 bedrooms	24
3 bedrooms	23
4 bedrooms	9

- 8.5 There are 68 families on non-secure tenancies within the Council's own stock, waiting for:

No. of Bedrooms Needed	No. of Households in B&B
2 bedrooms	37
3 bedrooms	23
4 bedrooms	7
5 bedrooms	1

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- 8.6 There is 1 family on an Assured Shorthold Tenancy (AST) with ThamesWey, waiting for a settled home with 4 Bedrooms.
- 8.7 There is a total of 138 families in some form of temporary accommodation with 273 children.
- 8.8 The average time spent in all types of Temporary Accommodation during Quarter 3 was 95 weeks, down from 114 weeks in the previous quarter.

9.0 Possible Solutions

- 9.1 The Council's homelessness costs are partially funded by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) through grants. The Council's homelessness position is currently subject to increased monitoring as we have families in B&B for more than six weeks. This puts the Council at risk of a challenge from the Courts. Officers produced a B&B Elimination Plan with the help of MHCLG and one of the actions was to look at what is preventing early move-on into suitable temporary accommodation from B&B and then into settled homes.
- 9.2 The new Temporary Accommodation Officer is already helping with this, as she encourages people to clear rent arrears or come to an arrangement to clear, and to place bids on settled homes through the Council's Choice Based Lettings Scheme in an attempt to help people move into a settled home more quickly.
- 9.3 Many of the homeless households the team works with have other issues too. These often include medical conditions, both physical and mental health. Some have a family member with substance and/or alcohol misuse; other addictions such as gambling and/or the inability to budget their household income to pay rent, utility bills and other costs. This often leads to people burying their head in the sand and sitting in B&B/TA without placing bids to enable their move-on into settled homes.
- 9.4 There are a number of new affordable housing developments in the pipeline, which should help the Council's position by releasing some temporary accommodation for people in B&B to move into. This should reduce costs as well as time spent in B&B, which is difficult for most households, particularly those with children and also those people with medical conditions and mental health issues.
- 9.5 One of the issues we are dealing with is the length of time from when someone who is homeless or threatened with homelessness, first approaches the Council, to the date of their homelessness assessment. When the team is fully staffed, this period is usually 5-7 days. However, following four resignations in the summer and school summer holidays, it increased to six weeks. It is currently back down to two weeks. This is a critical time in the homelessness process when the Assessment Team could be intervening to prevent homelessness, but with caseloads of 60+ per officer, the workload is high. Recruitment is taking place, but it is very difficult to attract suitable candidates.
- 9.6 Our aim is to reduce the cost of homelessness and reduce the number of households in B&B/TA as well as the number of nights households spend in B&B.

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- 9.7 Officers are also in active discussion with ThamesWey Housing Limited (THL) on potential improvements for collaboration that could better assist the Council in meeting the needs of homeless households. If the Council had access to more of THL's housing, this would reduce the impact on families (and single people/couples) who are struggling in B&B, particularly where there are no cooking facilities and may be out of area too. It would also reduce the number of nights spent in B&B and therefore the cost. This has been submitted as an MTFS savings proposal.
- 9.8 Further possible solutions include reviewing and strengthening the current policies and procedures; using Autobidding; reviewing the Council's Voids and Repairs process and increasing the supply of settled homes within the Borough.
- 9.9 **Policies and Procedures** - The Housing Allocations Policy governs Allocations and Nominations to social and affordable rented homes provided by the Council and other social landlords. The policy sets out the process, criteria and prioritisation for social housing letting in Woking. The current policy was adopted by Full Council in 2019 and came into effect on 1 January 2020. It is due to be updated during 2025.
- 9.10 The Council's "Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2020 – 2024" is also due to be refreshed. This is a high-level strategy that sets out our aims and objectives in tackling homelessness in the Borough, including our work with partners.
- 9.11 The operational delivery of the service is largely set out in the Homelessness legislation and "The Homelessness Code of Guidance". However, further work is required to ensure this is pulled together into operational procedures to guide the team.
- 9.12 **Autobidding** - Autobidding is where the Housing system places bids for applicants on all suitable properties, rather than allowing the applicant to make their own choices. This removes any choice of where someone would wish to live or the type of home they would like.
- 9.13 Although this would prevent households in TA waiting for their preferred settled home, it is also likely to cause additional work for the Allocations Team and the Housing Options Team Leader. This is because there are likely to be increased refusals to allocations and requests for reviews of the suitability of accommodation. The Council's new Temporary Accommodation Officer also has a part to play in encouraging residents to move into settled homes as soon as possible.
- 9.14 **Voids And Repairs** - The Housing Options Team relies heavily on Woking Borough Council and Housing Association voids to help provide settled homes.
- 9.15 The longer it takes to turnaround a void property, the longer a household will stay in temporary accommodation or B&B. Work is currently underway to review the voids end-to-end process to improve current performance.
- 9.16 Voids management is also on the Internal Audit Programme for March 2025.
- 9.17 **Supply of settled homes** - Since 1 January 2024, the team has allocated 153 settled council homes and 62 TA homes. In addition, it has nominated 72 households to Housing Associations, many of them for people aged 55+.

9.18 26 homeless families have been accommodated since January 2024, of which:

- 15 families moved into settled homes
- 5 families found their own solution
- 6 families moved into alternative TA

9.19 The Council has a number of new-build affordable homes becoming available at the end of 2024/early 2025. The Yellow phase in Sheerwater will deliver 102 affordable homes from January 2025. The Cala Homes new development (Chestnut Fields) on Egley Road will deliver 30 new affordable properties in batches over 9 months.

9.20 This additional new-build supply is expected to assist with providing settled homes for homeless households and additional turnover of social housing stock, which should have an impact on B&B and TA usage.

10.0 Conclusion

10.1 It is clear that the cost of B&B is too high and that the impact on households, particularly children and their development, is too great. The knock-on effect on education and health also has long-term implications.

10.2 There is no way of predicting how many households will contact the Council for help and support with their housing and the number of households in B&B changes on a daily basis, particularly when SWEP has been called.

10.3 The main solution would be to have access to more homes which are affordable for those on low incomes or benefits. This is already in play with the various new developments becoming available. However, we still need to have discussions with THL about future tenants and its criteria.

10.4 Recruitment has been taking place which means that the gap between approach and assessment has now reduced to two weeks after the summer and Christmas holidays, but the aim is to reduce it to 5-7 days.

11.0 Implications

Legal

11.1 Homelessness is governed by extensive and detailed legislation.

Resources (including finance)

11.2 The Council receives grant funding from MHCLG as well as covering other costs associated with homelessness from its own budgets.

11.3 The Council has been allocated a total of £1,242,584 for 2025/26 across Homelessness and Rough Sleeping grant funding. This is made up of different components set out below.

11.4 The new, single Rough Sleeping Prevention and Recovery Grant has replaced the Rough Sleeping Initiative (RSI) funding and the Accommodation for Ex-Offenders grant with the single grant amount of £167,150.

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11.5 The Homelessness Prevention Grant, which is given to help local authorities manage homelessness pressures and support those who are at risk of homelessness, will be £930,034 for 2025/26.

11.6 An additional £145,400 has been allocated for the Rough Sleeping Accommodation Programme (RSAP).

Risks and Mitigation

11.7 There is always likely to be a risk with external or Government funding that it will be withdrawn and this has been included in the Council's risk registers. However, MHCLG has awarded single-year funding for 2025/26 as a transitional measure whilst it reviews its long-term spending on homelessness during 2025.

Consultation, Equality Impact Assessments

11.8 Not applicable.

Environment and Climate Change

11.9 There are no environmental or climate change issues associated with this report.

12.0 Supporting Documents

Appendices

12.1 None.

Background Documents

12.2 None.

Report Ends