

15 February 2024		ITEM: 5
Housing Overview and Scrutiny		
Homelessness Update 2023		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: None	
Report of: Christopher Wade, Head of Housing Solutions		
Accountable Assistant Director: Ewelina Sorbjan, Assistant Director Housing and Development		
Accountable Director: Ian Wake, Executive Director Adults, Housing and Health		
This report is Public		
Version: Final		

Executive Summary

This report provides an update on the homelessness picture for 2023 with regards to the Housing Solutions service. Huge pressures on the service continue to be mitigated to some extent by the expansion of the Temporary Accommodation (TA) portfolio.

Recognising Housing as one of the key elements of the Council's 'Human Learning Systems' (HLS) strengths-based approach and digital localities approach to residents has and will continue to require funding.

Commissioner Comment:

This report is to be noted only, with no implications which require comments from Commissioners.

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee are asked to note, challenge and comment on the contents of this update report.

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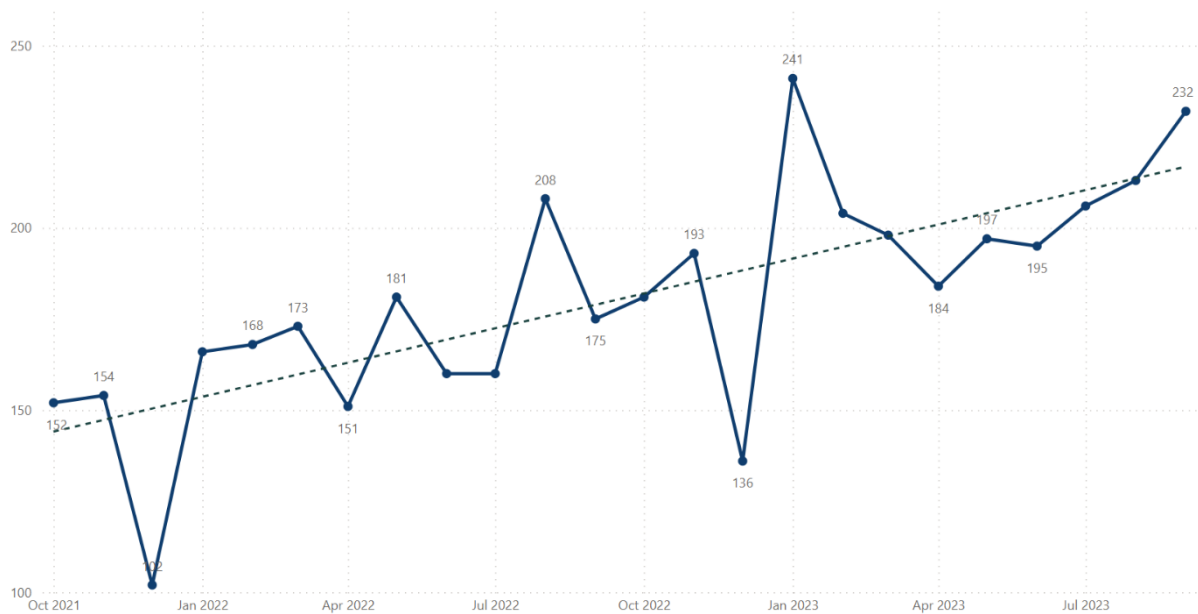
2. Housing Solutions – Homelessness Presentations

- 2.1 The service continues to see a large increase in demand, with presentations year on year having increased, at the point of writing, by 22% from the same point last year. Given the current cost of living crisis, which shows no signs of easing off significantly, as well as previous changes in legislation, we have also seen a comparable year on year increase in temporary accommodation placements. Some of this is likely due to an increase in the rough sleeper cohort, which is well maintained and managed, but mostly reflects higher rental costs with no concurrent Local Housing Allowance (LHA) increases, reduced landlord availability in the private rental sector, and inflationary pressures on household budgets.
- 2.2 One of the largest pressures on the system, both in terms of increasing approaches and reducing supply with which to discharge our statutory duties, is the impact of increased mortgage costs and higher inflation on residents' ability to pay their rent, and landlords' ability to maintain their mortgage obligations. According to research undertaken by *Landlord Today.co.uk*, and *Property118.com*, over 330,000 small to medium landlords are expected to leave the market this year, with 51% of those currently providing homes in London and the South-East.
- 2.3 Given these pressures, alongside ever-increasing encroachment on Thurrock and the broader Essex region by London authorities procuring temporary and private rented housing in our area, the council has had to look to strengthen its processes around qualification for TA under s188 of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended) with more thorough consideration of priority need potential in homeless clients, and also to be more flexible in our approach to procuring temporary housing outside of the immediate Thurrock borough area. This both mitigates against increases in rental expenditure by the authority but also maintains the numbers of properties available for such use by the council. It may, however, increase complaint and member enquiry caseload.

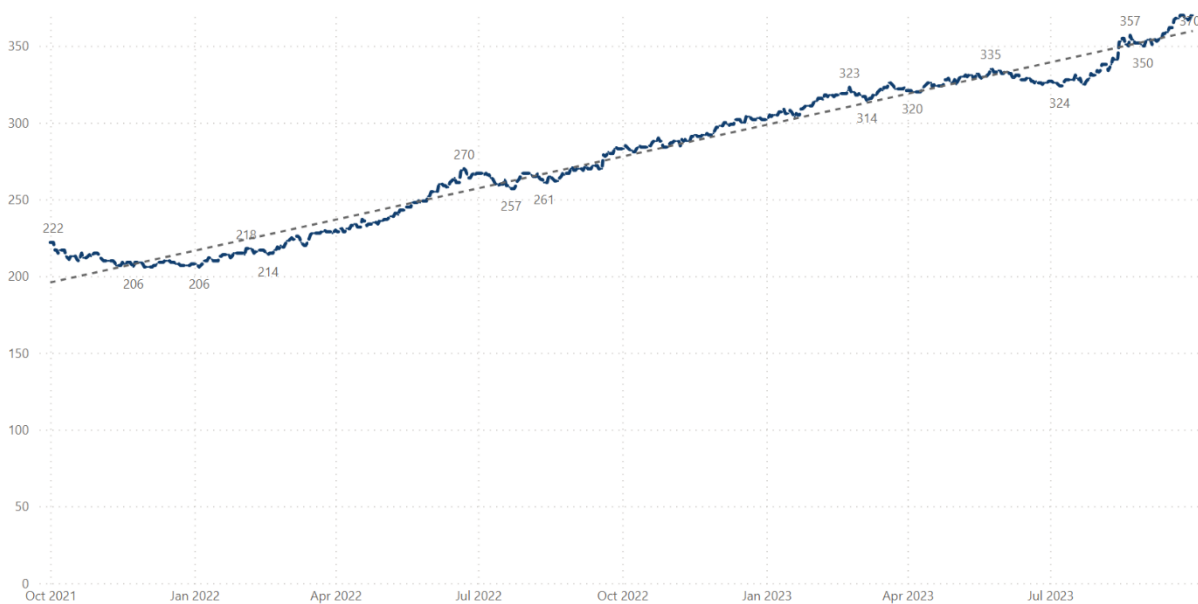
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2.4 Approaches by month (1/10/21 – 1/9/23)



2.5 Active TA placements by date (1/10/21 – 1/9/23)



3. Impact on Temporary Accommodation

3.1 We began the year in a reasonable place, maintaining access to temporary accommodation obtained through the purchase of new homes utilising ‘Right to Buy’ receipts, combined with Housing Revenue Account (HRA) prudential borrowing, to purchase properties on the open market. Since 2022 we have utilised purchased properties to increase our Temporary Accommodation portfolio. This decision was

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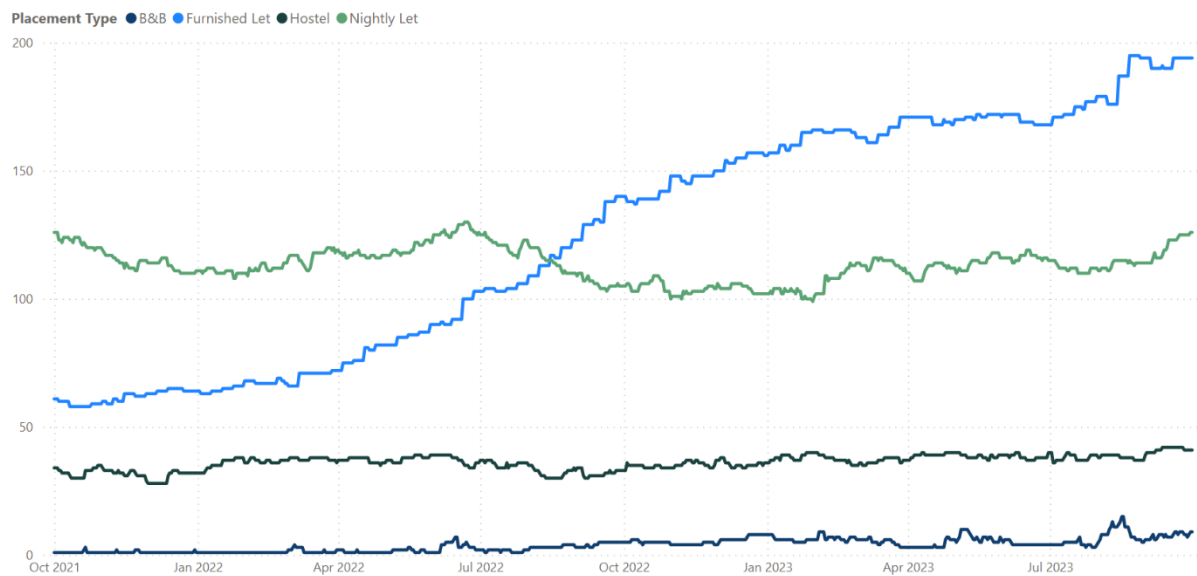
taken to reduce cost and increase control over the quality and location of the TA placements. This has continued this year, but the supply of such accommodation is no longer incoming as a result of financial and legislative constraints. This has led to a levelling off and slow increase in the need to use more expensive nightly let accommodation in the private sector, at a cost to the authority. This can be seen in the visualisations below.

3.2 New homes purchased/leased from open market:

Year	PHI Properties Acquired
20/21	75
21/22	50
22/23	47
Total	172*

**This does not include a further 32 units which have been brought back into use as temporary accommodation from re-commissioned HRA stock.*

3.3 Active TA placements by date and placement type (01/10/2021 – 01/09/2023)



3.4 As stated above, at 2.2, the Council’s ability to mitigate against increases in temporary accommodation, and to discharge appropriately into the private rented sector is significantly impacted by the number of landlords leaving the market.

3.5 Additional pressures appear to be on the horizon, and the service is undertaking risk planning around these, in relation to the Government’s position on the closure of hotels for asylum seekers. Whilst we will continue to play our part in supporting this cohort, where we can, some of them have not yet been granted status in the UK and

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would fall outside of the statutory remit of Housing. As a result, these closures are likely to have an impact not only on Housing, but also Social Care, who may owe duties in the absence of those owed ordinarily by Housing. It should be noted that, at time of writing, none of the planned closures are in Thurrock but that this remains a risk for the future.

- 3.6 Given these pressures, alongside ever-increasing encroachment on Thurrock and the broader Essex region by London Authorities procuring temporary and private rented housing in our area (Enfield have 300 households in hotel accommodation and are looking to the out of London areas for re-location, for example), the Council has had to look to strengthen its processes around qualification for TA under s188 of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended) with more thorough consideration of priority need potential in homeless clients, and also to be more flexible in our approach to procuring temporary housing outside of the immediate Thurrock borough area. This both mitigates against increases in rental expenditure by the authority but also maintains the numbers of properties available for such use by the council. It may, however, increase complaint and member enquiry caseload. At the time of writing, we are already seeing an increase in the need to use out of borough placements, at least in the short term (we do make efforts to move them back into the area as soon as possible) with the figure lying at 35 households at this point; 12 of these being placed outside Thurrock due a need to be safely out of area, to maintain contact with a specific source of support in the placement location, or to be in compliance with movement restrictions placed upon them by outside agencies.
- 3.7 The council is looking at alternative methods of procurement for discharge properties, in particular in the private rental market, in order to diversify our offer to landlords, and recently signed up to Rentsurance, a rent insurance scheme which can cover non-payment of rent up to £2,500 per month for an annual premium of between £350 and £470 per annum. This is being offered to landlords as an incentive in place of the financial one, or else in tandem with a reduced financial offer to maximise impact.
- 3.8 In line with the HLS approach, the spirit of integration, and the new operating model, Housing is also considering, alongside colleagues in both Social Care departments, Public Health and health partners, ways in which joint working and combined efforts could increase procurement capabilities, whilst also increasing support for those living in our temporary accommodation for longer than they might otherwise have had to.
- 3.9 The cumulative impact of the above pressures on temporary and discharge accommodation supply have combined to mean that, at time of writing, the service has a forecast overspend of £468k over the year. Of course, we will do what we can to mitigate against this and, as is mentioned later in this report, budget setting will be undertaken to look at how such overspends can be eliminated in future.

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4. Rough Sleeping

- 4.1 Rough Sleeping continues to be a priority for the council, and we maintain access to grant funding which provides for incentive payments to landlords, a tenancy sustainment officer, a Private Rented Sector Officer, a Rough Sleeper Coordinator, and an Outreach Service. Whilst numbers of rough sleepers have fluctuated across the year, we have, overall, maintained numbers below double figures, with a current number of confirmed rough sleepers of 7. Given higher numbers of rough sleepers approaching us having only arrived in our borough from elsewhere recently, we have tightened our confirmation criteria and looked to relocate some individuals back to their home region, which has helped us to keep numbers down whilst also offering assistance to all those who come to our attention. We aim to make a suitable offer of accommodation to anyone who finds themselves roofless regardless of their ability to demonstrate they meet 'Priority Need' status. We've seen what can be achieved with the right amount of support, but we've also seen the scale of the challenge and its impact on our resources. We have also made plans, involving local charities and churches to handle the extra pressure which will result from weather conditions over the winter period. At the time of writing, we have provided 25 Rough Sleepers with private rented accommodation since January 2023 utilising our Rough Sleeper Initiative grant from Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). We are also continuing to accommodate 3 further individuals in our temporary accommodation, whilst looking for a longer term solution to their homelessness.
- 4.2 We've utilised the council's communication channels including social media and continue to use the 'outreach' video our Rough Sleeper Coordinator, assisted by local faith groups, made last year and have seen real engagement from the community in Thurrock in getting support where it is needed.
<https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/homelessness/if-youre-homeless-or-likely-tobecome-homeless> or watch this video about StreetLink and our outreach team:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B3MV0aBnD4c> If you're concerned about someone sleeping rough, you can connect them to local services by sending an alert to StreetLink at: <https://www.streetlink.org.uk/>, via the StreetLink app or by calling: 0300 500 0914.
- 4.3 Given the demand from this cohort, the service has been in discussions with other authorities, as well as DLUHC, about some additional grant funding to provide for a pilot, short-term accommodation-based offer for our entrenched rough sleepers, of whom we have identified 5 individuals. As a result of this, we have been granted an extra £26,084 which will be used to provide four units of housing within a single licensed Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO), where rough sleepers can be provided with support from across the Council, as well as our partners at BEAM, substance misuse, and mental health. They will remain in these placements for a period of 28 days whilst this support is put in place and we will look to secure them a more long-term accommodation solution during that time, so as to ensure continual turnover.

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5. Human Learning Systems and New Operating Model

- 5.1 Increased collaboration between council teams in Adult Social Care, Housing & Health, EPUT and Childrens Social Care have seen us applying a more flexible approach to our remits. Vulnerable adults (including care leavers) who may have a history of failed tenancies or who've moved between increasingly expensive care placements, hospital admissions or the criminal justice system have been offered further housing opportunities, with multidisciplinary teams supporting them. Following on from this successful multi-disciplinary approach has led to the creation of a 'Complex Housing Intervention Team' that sits within the Adults, Housing & Health service. We have recently completed our recruitment to this team and so the one-year pilot for it is due to commence shortly, with referral processes and decision-making now being agreed. We are also expanding our Housing First Service to include a specialist area of provision led by a Community Psychiatric Nurse (CPN) for those with serious and enduring Mental Health challenges. This will provide a further 5 units for this cohort and, again, terms of reference and referral protocols are being agreed at present so that this work can commence as soon as possible.
- 5.2 Housing Solutions has been working very closely with Children's Services in particular, concentrating on duties and provision for Care Leavers and even those who have left Care and have reached an age where no statutory duty beyond advice remains. This includes agreements at service level about provision of discretionary TA for individuals who have previously been in care and have reached the age of 25, where a duty to provide this may not exist in law. This collaboration has also helped to maintain relationships between the Sanctuary hostel employees and Children's, as well as providing for some joint budgeting for PRS placements for older care leavers. It has also led to the adoption and utilisation of Joint Housing/Children's Protocol, and closer working between both the social and private housing wings of Housing Solutions with social workers and personal advisors.
- 5.3 In addition to the above, Housing Solutions is to play a role as a digital member of the localities in Thurrock, with a named or duty officer available to give over-arching and detailed legal and other housing advice to feed into the work of coordinators within localities.

6. Costs

- 6.1 The expansion of the Housing First model to include a cohort of high need individuals who may be at risk of rough sleeping but may also be in a variety of other situations, such as in inappropriate social care placements, at risk of eviction, and/or leaving institutionalised environments is continuing apace, with criteria now looking to be finalised and referral forms completed. This will provide for a further five placements which will use some grant funding as well as pooled resources to reduce financial costs across services within Adults, Public Health, Drug and alcohol services, and Housing.

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- 6.2 In addition to this, the one-year pilot for the Complex Housing Intervention Team (previously referred to as Complex Care Team), which provides wraparound support from a mental health, substance misuse, mental health, and other services now has a team available to begin work and referrals will be taken shortly. This, again, should assist in the pooling of resources and also feed into the HLS and Locality model for service provision to act as a preventative measure against the costliest interventions, at crisis-point, for our most vulnerable and complex individuals.
- 6.3 We have seen a huge increase in rental costs, a national trend exacerbated in Thurrock by London authorities utilising our PRS market to house their residents, as well as frozen LHA rates and cost of living pressures. With this and the increased demand for housing assistance we are continually monitoring budgets in order for them to be set at levels which will ensure that we do not overspend.

7 Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

- 7.1 This report is for noting and comment only. No options are available to be presented

8. Reasons for Recommendation

- 8.1 The sole recommendation is that this report is noted, challenged, and commented upon by the committee.

9. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

- 9.1 None

10. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

- 10.1 None

11. Implications

11.1 Staffing

The Council's current financial situation, combined with high levels of financial competition for good housing solutions officers from neighbouring London Authorities who can offer more generous pay-scales, have led to higher staff turnover over the course of this year, including amongst more senior roles. This has meant that, since January of this year, we have had to maintain statutory service provision with some agency staff, whilst recruiting for permanent and fixed term roles in a difficult hiring environment. Recruitment has included the need to replace two senior officers (in TA and Homelessness), and also our Rehousing Manager, as the previous incumbent took the place of the previous outgoing Strategic Lead for Housing Solutions; Ben Tovey. Most staff, especially seniors, are now in place and the service can look to further stabilise and move forward. Given higher demand, however, as well as the need to move more quickly towards integration across

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services and better joint working, we have added a further officer to our establishment for a one year period to help us to avoid backlogs, and to provide the high quality advice needed for us to form an effective part of the digital localities.

11.2 Financial

Implications verified by: **Andy Michaelides**
Service Accountant, Corporate Finance

The increase in the number of approaches from residents in relation to homelessness represents a significant financial risk to the Council. After careful assessment, growth has been identified within the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy, and draft budget proposals for the following financial year. The acquisition of open market properties in order to find permanent accommodation solutions and increase the level of Council owned housing is not currently available to the Council in the following financial years due to legislative and financial constraints, although a further business case is being considered should financial restrictions be eased to some extent. Expenditure on temporary housing solutions will continue to be closely monitored, and any realisation of increased expenditure risks reported accordingly.

11.3 Legal

Implications verified by: **Jayne Middleton-Albooye**
Interim Head of Legal Services and Deputy Monitoring Officer

All local authorities have a duty under the Housing Act and Homelessness Reduction Act to assist all eligible applicants who present as homeless. As an update report on action taken, there are no legal implications directly arising from this report.

In accordance with the remit of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Members are asked to review and scrutinise the updates outlined in this report.

11.4 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Rebecca Lee**
Team Manager, Corporate Diversity and Equality

As this report is for information there are no direct diversity implications. Further business case for additional purchase options for additional temporary accommodation are subject to a CEIA.

All information regarding Community Equality Impact Assessments can be found here: <https://intranet.thurrock.gov.uk/services/diversity-and-equality/ceia/>

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11.5 Risks

As this report is for information only, there are no risks outside of what is identified in the body of the document.

11.6 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health Inequalities, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, or Impact on Looked After Children

None

12. Background papers used in preparing the report (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

None

9. Appendices to the report

None

Report Author:

Christopher Wade

Head of Housing Solutions

Housing

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