

16 March 2021		ITEM: 8
Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee		
Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy – Action Plan		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: No	
Report of: Ryan Farmer – Housing Strategy and Quality Manager		
Accountable Assistant Director: Carol Hinvest – Assistant Director of Housing		
Accountable Director: Roger Harris – Corporate Director, Adults, Housing and Health		
This report is Public		

Executive Summary

There is a statutory duty on every Local Authority to have a Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy which sets out the local authority's plans for the prevention of homelessness and for securing that sufficient accommodation and support are, or will be, available for people who are homeless or who are at risk of becoming so.

The local authority must ensure that all organisations whose work can help to prevent homelessness and/or meet the needs of homeless people are involved in the strategy.

The Council's current Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy was adopted in 2020 and its development considered levels of homelessness in the borough, the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, the impact of recent welfare reforms, and newly identified opportunities for preventing homelessness.

The purpose of this report is to present an update on the Homelessness Reduction and Rough Sleeping Strategy Action Plan, which underpins the delivery of the strategic aims of the wider strategy document, to the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee for its oversight and review.

- 1. Recommendation(s)**
 - 1.1 Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee are asked to note and comment on the content of this report.**
- 2. Introduction and Background**

- 2.1. The Homelessness Act 2002 placed a duty on every local authority to carry out a review of homelessness within their area. Following this review, local authorities were required to formulate and publish a Homelessness Strategy based on its findings.
- 2.2. Each strategy must set out plans for the prevention of homelessness, including securing that sufficient accommodation and support are, or will be, available for people who are homeless or who are at risk of becoming so.
- 2.3. The 2002 Act also includes requirements for local authorities to publish refreshed strategies, based on the result of further analysis, within five years of the publication of their last document. Local authorities are able to undertake such reviews and publish refreshed strategies more frequently if circumstances change.
- 2.4. In August 2018 the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) published its Rough Sleeping Strategy where the government stated a commitment to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and end it by 2027. Within this document it was also outlined that local authorities would be required to update their existing homelessness strategies.
- 2.5. Thurrock Council refreshed its Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy in January 2020. The document represented an ambitious approach rooted by the fundamental principle that homelessness is not simply a housing issue, but is instead a complex social challenge requiring true collaboration to tackle effectively.
- 2.6. The Council's strategy presented comprehensive details of the local and national issues which affect homelessness in Thurrock and reflected a number of developments in case law and legislation, most notably relating to the enactment of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 which significantly reformed England's homelessness legislation.
- 2.7. Four strategic themes were set within the strategy, namely:
 - Partnership and collaboration
 - Health and wellbeing
 - Provision and accessibility
 - Customer excellence
- 2.8. Within each of these strategic themes, a number of high-level actions were identified through stakeholder engagement. This report and its appendix sets out the granular actions which have now been compiled and form the initial action plan for the strategy.

3. Development of the Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy Action Plan

- 3.1. One of the most significant high-level actions set out in the strategy was to establish a Homelessness Partnership Board for Thurrock. The board is

comprised of key stakeholders from services across Thurrock Council, from other public bodies and public sector organisations such as the NHS, and from organisations within the community, voluntary and faith sector. The board also seeks to learn from those with lived experience of homelessness.

- 3.2. Whilst the board is strategic in nature, the aim is that members of the board are able to make commitments for practical action towards delivering outcomes in their respective organisations. The success of the board rests in its endorsement by its members and their belief in its ability to deliver positive change to those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.
- 3.3. The board, which first met in March 2020, collaborated on the development of the action plan for this strategy, resulting in a jointly owned document. This approach will ensure that successful outcomes can be delivered over the lifetime of the strategy by leveraging the collective knowledge, experience, influence and expertise of the range of board members and their respective organisations.

4. Progress to date

- 4.1. Shortly after this strategy was adopted and the first Homelessness Partnership Board meeting was held, work to deliver against the action plan for this strategy, and indeed deliver the action plan itself, was significantly affected by COVID-19.

This pandemic changed the legislative, operational and societal context for not only the Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy, but also for those responsible for its delivery and those who the strategy intends to help.

- 4.2. On 18 March 2020, the government announced a “complete ban on evictions” for those living in rented accommodation in England and Wales for at least three months. Following this, on 20 March 2020 the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (commonly referred to as the ‘furlough’ scheme) was presented, backdated to 1 March 2020 and set to run until the end of May 2020.
- 4.3. On 23 March 2020, the government issued its national ‘stay at home’ instruction to mitigate and manage the growing COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of the pandemic on all partners and their respective organisations led to the necessary prioritisation of operational activity which directly responded to COVID-19 pressures.
- 4.4. Soon after, on 26 March 2020, the government announced its response to COVID-19 in the context of rough sleeping by introducing the ‘everyone in’ directive. This asked local authorities to secure emergency temporary accommodation for those who were experiencing or at risk of experiencing rough sleeping, and therefore were more vulnerable to the risks posed by COVID-19, to enable this cohort to follow government and public health

guidance. To date, the Council have assisted approximately 60 individuals through this initiative.

- 4.5. Since these initial announcements, all elements have experienced extensions or reintroductions, often at short notice. The ban on evictions is now in place until the end of March 2021, with notice periods having been extended from two months to three months, and subsequently increased again to six months at present.

The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme is currently due to operate until the end of September 2021 following an extension announced in the Budget in March 2021, a 'Protect Programme' was introduced in Winter 2020 to run alongside 'Everyone In', and at the time of writing England was in its third nationwide lockdown following extremely high COVID-19 case rates throughout November and December 2020.

- 4.6. These factors, amongst others directly and indirectly related to COVID-19, have significantly disrupted the progress which may otherwise have been made within the Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy Action Plan, including the meaningful membership of 'experts by experience' as part of the Homelessness Partnership Board which is a priority.
- 4.7. Despite the volatility of the past 12 months, some successful outcomes have been achieved in line with the action plan.
- 4.8. In the Partnership and Collaboration theme, in addition to the founding of the Homelessness Partnership Board, work towards a communications campaign to raise awareness of the StreetLink app and website began. StreetLink is used to collect referrals from members of the public if a person is seen sleeping rough, which is then passed on to outreach workers who will attempt to connect with that person and coordinate support from others in the community, voluntary and faith sector. A video has been produced, and is available to view on the Council's YouTube channel.
- 4.9. Under the Health and Wellbeing theme, the Mental Health and Homelessness Forum has been re-established, bringing together a network of professionals and practitioners to share information, best practice and training resources. Through the forum, members are also able to access a range of subject matter experts to help achieve positive outcomes for individuals or families who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Through the Homelessness Partnership Board, the current joint protocol between Housing and Children's Services relating to homeless children and families has been highlighted as an area for action and review, ensuring close working relationships are maintained for the future.

Also within this theme of Health and Wellbeing, a briefing was arranged for officers from across the Housing service through Stoll's No Homeless Veterans campaign, encouraging all Housing staff to 'Think Veteran'.

- 4.10. Within the Provision and Accessibility theme, although it was not possible for the Winter Night Shelter provision to be made available for Winter 2020, emergency accommodation options were identified and implemented when the severe weather emergency protocol (SWEP) was called into action.

In addition to this, the Council took ownership of 82 new homes which were built as part of the HRA development programme. These included 23 flats and six maisonettes at the Alma Court development in South Grays, and 22 flats, 19 bungalows and 12 houses at the Claudian Way/Healthlyn Close development.

An annual review of social and affordable housing demand was also undertaken to identify the sizes of properties which were required and to inform the future development pipeline.

- 4.11. Finally, through the Customer Excellence theme, work to develop a proposal for supported accommodation in partnership between Housing, Adult Social Care and Children's Services began.

A new Hostel and Floating Support Contract commenced in Autumn 2020, and this will allow for a refreshed engagement and feedback approach with people with lived experience of homelessness alongside the delivery partner.

5. Next Steps

- 5.1. It is the aspiration that significant progress will be made towards a number of existing actions throughout the 2021/22 financial year, however it is expected that the action plan will continue to develop across the life of the strategy. This will ensure that the Council and its partners have a plan which will respond and react to future opportunities, demands and challenges, particularly when the current COVID-19 protections and schemes are withdrawn.

For example, it is probably that there will be an influx of evictions when extended notice periods expire or when bailiff enforced evictions can be undertaken again, or that unemployment levels and households experiencing financial hardship may increase when the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme finally ceases, which could result in instability and uncertainty for households in the borough.

6. Reasons for Recommendation

- 6.1. Within the adopted strategy, it was outlined that in order to ensure appropriate oversight of the action plan, an annual update will be provided to Housing Overview on Scrutiny Committee – this report is the first such update.

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

7.1. Consultation activity for the development of the initial strategy document included face-to-face sessions with Council staff, with individuals which have used the Council's homelessness services, and with partner agencies. Statistical analysis was undertaken, and presentations to other key Council services, committees and boards were made to share findings and gather feedback. The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee had opportunities to provide feedback in both the development phase and on the draft strategy document itself, and have the opportunity for annual reviews of progress against the action plan.

7.2. Close work has and will continue to take place with a range of partners and service providers, such as the membership of the Homelessness Partnership Board and the Council's Mental Health and Homelessness Forum, which includes representation from organisations such as Thurrock CVS, NELFT, Sanctuary Housing, Open Door, SERICC, Thurrock Mind, and Changing Pathways.

8. 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):

- Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2020-2025, Thurrock Council

9. Implications

9.1. Financial

Implications verified by: **Hannah Katakwe**
Housing Accountant, Finance & IT

By analysing homelessness in the borough, developing a new strategy in line with the preventative aims of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, and delivering its action plan in partnership with others with key responsibilities towards those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, it is hoped that the costs associated with the provision of services can be contained within the budget allocation.

9.2. Legal

Implications verified by: **Tim Hallam**
Deputy Head of Legal and Deputy Monitoring Officer

Given the nature of this report there are no legal implications directly arising from it.

By way of background information and context, Section 1(1) of the Homelessness Act 2002, requires a Local Authority to review homelessness in its area and to produce a strategy under s1(3). Section 1(4) requires that the strategy is reviewed and updated every 5 years, although Local Authorities may do this earlier/more frequently than that. The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 changes should be reflected in such a strategy. Thurrock Council must comply with the legal requirement of having an updated strategy within five years of publication of its last strategy.

This report sets out the progress towards achieving the aims of the strategy, published in Spring 2020.

9.3. **Diversity and Equality**

Implications verified by: **Roxanne Scanlon**
**Community Engagement and Project
Monitoring Officer**

As set out in the Homelessness Code of Guidance, consultation was carried out with other public bodies, voluntary organisations, service users and other identified stakeholders in the work to implement this new strategy. By undertaking a homelessness review, a broad range of stakeholders throughout the community were identified and involved in the activity to develop a holistic strategy.

The ongoing partnership approach to delivering this strategy will ensure that the range of diverse support needs of those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness will be appropriately considered and addressed.

9.4. **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder)

Not applicable

10. **Appendices to the report**

- Appendix A - Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy Action Plan

Report Author:

Ryan Farmer

Housing Strategy & Quality Manager

Business Improvement - Housing