

Report to: Cabinet



Date of Meeting 7 September 2022

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Review of Staffing Requirements of the Housing Options Team (Homelessness Service)

Report summary:

To review and address staffing requirements within the Housing Options team one year on from the Cabinet report of 8th September 2021

Is the proposed decision in accordance with:

Budget Yes No

Policy Framework Yes No

Recommendations:

1. That Cabinet recommend to Council to make the two fixed term Housing Officer positions agreed by Cabinet on 8th September 2021 permanent due to ongoing demand and a need for service stability through staff retention. Annual budget in the region of £70,135 for the two Housing Officer posts to continue is recommended to Council for approval, funding to be provided by the Homelessness Prevention Grant.
2. That Cabinet recommend to Council to approve the additional budget in respect of an additional, permanent, full time Temporary Accommodation Officer post in order to cope with additional demand created through higher temporary accommodation numbers. Annual budget in the region of £34,380 is recommended to Council for approval, funding to be provided by the Homelessness Prevention Grant.
3. That Cabinet note the report from Jamie Buckley, Engagement & Funding Officer addressing the proposed utilisation of funding in respect of the Ukrainian refugee scheme, referencing an additional Housing Officer post to be created and funded to specifically manage homeless applications from Ukrainian refugees facing homelessness at the end of the Homes for Ukraine scheme, funding to be provided by the Homes for Ukraine budget.

Reason for recommendation:

To ensure the Housing Options service is sufficiently set up and equipped to tackle the level of pressure and homelessness demand

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Portfolio(s) (check which apply):

Climate Action and Emergency Response

- Coast, Country and Environment
- Council and Corporate Co-ordination
- Democracy, Transparency and Communications
- Economy and Assets
- Finance
- Strategic Planning
- Sustainable Homes and Communities
- Tourism, Sports, Leisure and Culture

Equalities impact Low Impact

Climate change Low Impact

Risk: Low Risk; Not having sufficient resources in place heightens the risk of homeless households being unable to access support, therefore potentially further increasing homelessness levels within the district. The risk of not making the recommended improvements to the staffing arrangements include higher numbers of homeless cases and a resulting increase in the temporary accommodation budget.

Links to background information [Cabinet report 8 September 2021- item 74](#)

Link to [Council Plan](#)

Priorities (check which apply)

- Better homes and communities for all
- A greener East Devon
- A resilient economy

Report in full

1. Current set up of the Housing Options team and Funding

1.1 At the present time there are twenty posts overall within the Housing Options team with the following relevant factors:

- All posts are full time bar two which are 30 hours a week (4 days a week)
- Sixteen posts are financed via the general fund
- Four posts are financed through an external funding stream, the Rough Sleeper Initiative, with funding secured via a successful bid for a fixed period. This funding stream reduces pressure on the general fund with all four posts focusing specifically on tackling rough sleeping. The four additional posts are made up of two Rough Sleeper Navigators, one Private Sector Liaison Officer and one Housing Officer focusing on Housing First support, all operating on a fixed term basis in line with funding timescales. Of the four posts, one is an external fixed term arrangement and the other three are secondments from within the Housing service, one from within the Options team itself. This position (a Housing Officer post) has been backfilled through an external fixed term arrangement also for a fixed period
- There are two other fixed term positions within the team, both Housing Officer posts with 12 month contracts, agreed by Cabinet in September 2021. This report will make a case to extend these positions on a permanent basis in order to meet customer demand, increase staff retention levels, prevent the need for an annual review specifically for the two posts, with the aim of ultimately strengthening and improving the service.

2. Homelessness Demand

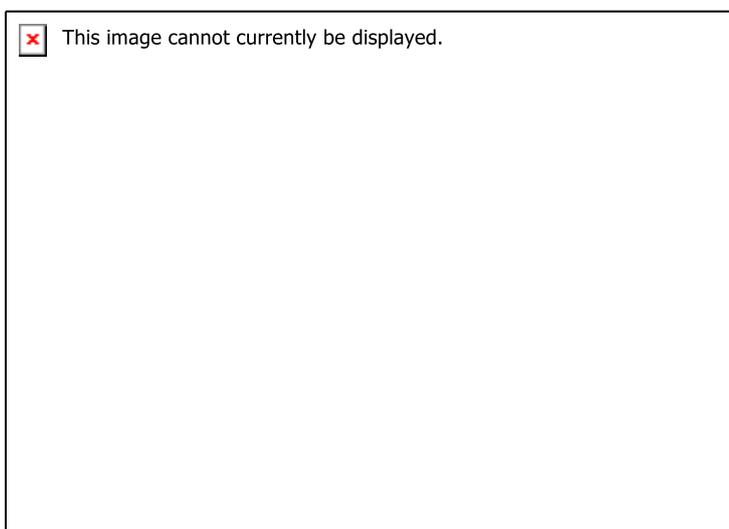
2.1 There has been a significant rise in homelessness demand over the past few years owing to factors including:

- The overall housing environment within the region with a shortage of available accommodation required to meet increasing demand that has been created by a number of factors including the cost of living crisis, increases in numbers of poverty cases, lasting effects of the pandemic and more recently the war in Ukraine
- This increase in demand affects all forms of housing, in particular social housing. This is demonstrated through an increase in the number of households registering for social housing through Devon Home Choice. As of 1st July 2022 East Devon had the second highest number of applicants on the Housing Register in Devon. There has been a 3.5% increase in applications registered since 1st April 2022, a trend which we can only expect to continue bearing in mind the cost of living crisis. To give some further idea of demand, any council 3 bed properties that are advertised at the present time attract well over 150 bids each
- There is also huge competition for all forms of private sector housing. Scarcity and lack of availability, a lack of affordability and rising rent levels contribute towards this situation creating a scenario whereby the private sector is realistically out of reach for many of our customers
- Also to be factored in is the extremely limited availability of supported accommodation projects which would ordinarily provide a suitable accommodation option for many of our customers, especially those with higher levels of support needs. Only one such project currently exists within East Devon
- Within this environment, levels of homelessness are increasing. We are seeing increasingly high numbers of homeless approaches, and it is important to note that within these numbers demonstrated through the tables and figures below is the situation whereby it is increasingly difficult to resolve these cases due to the situations our customers are in and the stark reality of extremely limited accessible options with which to prevent or relieve homeless situations
- This situation is in turn reflected through a significant rise in numbers of homeless households requiring temporary accommodation, when faced with no other available accommodation options

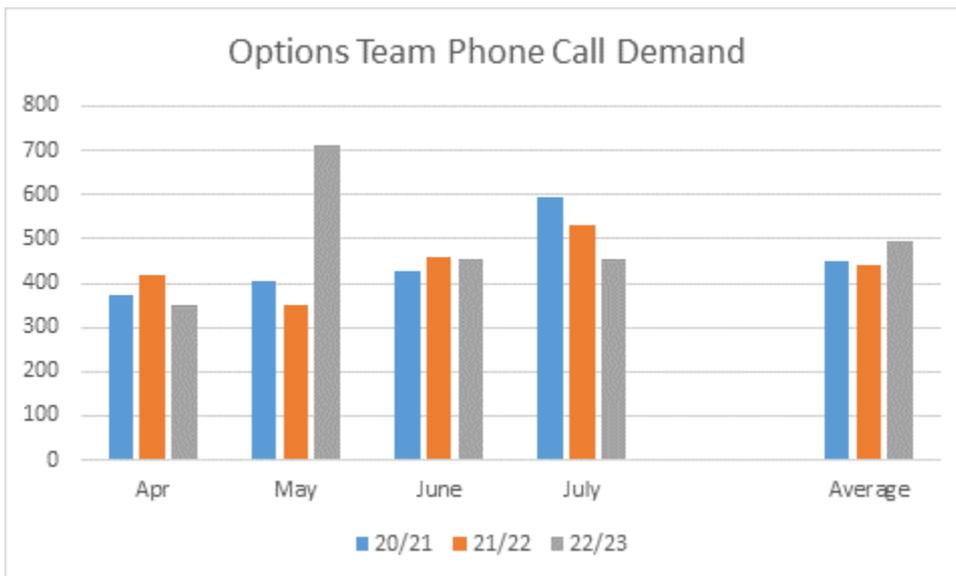
2.2 Supporting figures to show levels of homelessness demand, via number of approaches

Financial Year	Number of homeless approaches
2020-21	313
2021-22	429
2022-23 (to date)	210

2.3 Supporting graph to show levels of homelessness demand, via temporary accommodation numbers



2.5 Supporting graph to show levels of homelessness demand, via phone calls received



3. Impact on the staff and the service

3.1 With a relatively high proportion of the team on fixed term, temporary contracts there is a business need to ensure that increased stability is achieved. With the current set up we run the risk of losing valuable staff members who have been fully trained and are performing to a high standard within the role, as the council cannot assure them of long term, stable employment whilst on fixed term contracts. Staff retention is an issue throughout the Council and the recommendations contained within this report aim to reduce the risk and provide a more settled, balanced and experienced team, particularly as the cost of living crisis only looks to worsen and therefore place additional pressure on this team

3.2 Recruitment to positions within the homelessness area is notoriously difficult due to the complexity of the positions and the responsibilities and personal requirements attached to them. For staff members to be successful within these roles there is a personal requirement for a rare combination of high levels of empathy combined with high levels of resilience. In reality, this is a difficult combination to achieve and there are high numbers of cases of 'burnout' within the homelessness employment area

3.3 Repeated staff changes and the need to utilise scarce resources for repeated recruitment processes has had a disruptive, negative impact on staff and the overall service. There is a significant cost to the service of repeated recruitment, through management and staff time, new staff training time, advertising costs etc. Again, a more settled, balanced and experienced team facing less upheaval and containing more possibilities of retaining and developing staff for the longer term, will in turn achieve a more stable and proactive service

3.4 Furthermore, the current cost of living crisis means that we need to offer our own staff the stability of permanent contracts to reduce the risk of them finding permanent positions elsewhere

4. Case for two fixed term Housing Officer positions to become permanent

4.1 The homelessness service is financed through the general fund, with the main contributing factor being the annual Homelessness Prevention Grant. For 2022-23 this figure is £261,374, matching the Homelessness Prevention Grant funding level for 2021-22. These funding levels demonstrate a significant increase from 2020-21 where the combined Flexible Homelessness Support Grant (£111,394) and Homelessness Reduction Grant (£70,206) amounted to £181,600.

This significant increase was central to the case being made for the additional two Housing Officer positions, agreed by Cabinet on 8th September 2021, being added to the team on a 12 month fixed term basis. The increased levels of the Homelessness Prevention Grant are central to the recommendation to extend the positions on a permanent basis.

4.2 The two posts are approaching the end of their contracts. The situation in reality is that these posts are needed more than ever as we now consider ourselves well within a housing/homelessness crisis. We are facing a scenario whereby the situation of higher numbers of homeless approaches, and within those numbers a higher number of applicants with complex needs, exasperated by the situation whereby achievable and available accommodation options are reducing. Overall, it is fully expected that the ongoing situation with high levels of homelessness demand will continue for the long term.

5. Case for additional Temporary Accommodation Officer position

5.1 Within the Housing Options team we have a full time, permanent Temporary Accommodation Officer (TAO) post with the following main responsibilities:

- Sourcing and locating suitable temporary accommodation for homeless households with no accommodation options available to them
- Supporting homeless households with their everyday needs whilst they are in temporary accommodation. Some individuals and households require more support than others and we are seeing increasing numbers of customers with complex needs who require substantial levels of support, many as a result of a reduction or a lack of available accommodation resources elsewhere within the community
- Managing the specialised 8 bed HMO specifically used as temporary accommodation and in operation since March 2020, ensuring all occupants are supported and adhering to the regulations
- Arranging to move the homeless households on to alternative temporary accommodation as and when necessary, signing them up and ensuring the properties are fit and ready to be occupied
- Ultimately, looking to assist the homeless households to prepare for and to move on to longer term, settled accommodation placements with increased chances of long term sustainment following a period of meaningful support

5.2 There has been a significant rise in not only the demand for temporary accommodation over the last few years but also in the difficulty in moving people on due to the lack of available accommodation, due to the housing crisis and the overall environment. The following table demonstrates the increase in temporary accommodation numbers through a snapshot of two periods in time:

Snapshot timeframe	Overall number in temporary accommodation:	Of which were spot purchase arrangements:
As of 30.06.19	30	15
As of 30.06.22	58	30

5.3 These numbers demonstrate the significant increase in temporary accommodation numbers over the past few years, and in particular since the TAO post was first introduced in 2019. Caseloads and therefore responsibilities have almost doubled within that period, creating an unsustainable situation

5.4 The main factors in this increase are (a) the rise in homelessness demand and (b) the significant reduction in suitable and available move-on options for homeless households, ie social housing, accommodation in the private sector and supported housing projects. This situation results in customers remaining in temporary accommodation for longer periods which is a negative

outcome all round. Factors adding to this increase in demand upon the TAO role also include the expansion of the range of temporary accommodation provision throughout the district, which has been necessary to meet demand and the council's statutory responsibilities. Our current temporary accommodation portfolio is made up of an 8 bed supported project in Honiton owned by a third party, an 8 bed HMO in Exmouth owned and managed by EDDC, a further ten EDDC properties throughout the district designated as temporary accommodation and one private sector leased property. Any other temporary accommodation placements are made through spot purchase arrangements, ie holiday lets or B&B's. All accommodation options are contained within a very wide geographical area making management increasingly challenging.

5.5 Through a team workshop held on 20th June 2022 aimed at identifying and discuss current and future challenges for the service, the need for additional resources to assist the TAO post and maintain our responsibilities towards our customers was recognised and deemed to be the top priority. Also acknowledged in the meeting was the view amongst all team members that the complex needs of customers is constantly increasing, requiring greater levels of support all round and providing greater challenges in meeting their long term housing need

5.6 The current situation, where it is unrealistic and unreasonable to expect the TAO to provide meaningful support to all homeless households in temporary accommodation, is that Housing Officers are being drafted in to assist in providing the levels of support required. This is unsuitable and unsustainable in the long term for a number of reasons, the main reason being distracting the Housing Officers from their caseloads and prime responsibility of preventing homelessness (and thereby reducing the need for temporary accommodation)

6. The Ukrainian situation

6.1 Added to this scenario is the need to acknowledge the high numbers of expected Ukrainian refugees becoming homeless currently and over the next year, a scenario that threatens to overwhelm the service by adding unprecedented numbers of new homeless households on top the already high levels of homelessness being experienced, adding to pressure on temporary accommodation provision and available housing accommodation resources within the community. Reference is made to the Cabinet report composed by Jamie Buckley, Engagement & Funding Officer, addressing the proposed utilisation of funding in respect of the Ukrainian refugee scheme, referencing an additional Housing Officer post to be created and funded to specifically manage homeless applications from Ukrainian refugees facing homelessness at the end of the Homes for Ukraine scheme. Expanded details of the impact of the Ukrainian refugee crisis upon the homelessness service and in turn temporary accommodation resources and budget, are contained within that report.

7. Risks

7.1 Without the stabilisation of existing resources we run the risk of failing to meet our statutory requirements to assist homeless applicants. Failure to extend arrangements for the two Housing Officer posts on a stable basis past the date of their contracts expiring will lead a lessened ability to prevent or relieve homeless cases creating higher numbers of unresolved cases of homelessness. Not having these resources in place increases the risk of homeless households being unable to access support, therefore driving up homelessness numbers within the district. This will in turn lead to higher numbers of customers requiring temporary accommodation, leading to further increases in the temporary accommodation budget. We also run the risk of losing capable and valued staff members at the end of the fixed term contracts.

7.2 Without an additional resource required to meet demand attached to temporary accommodation responsibilities, and much needed targeted assistance for the current TAO, we run the risk of a higher number of temporary accommodation placements failing due to a lack of meaningful support. Over the past few years numbers of failed temporary accommodation placements have remained relatively low, but it is now considered that this situation will be

unsustainable in the longer term. A priority for the service is to ensure sustainability for our customers and this requires a great deal of resources through staff time, most notably through the responsibilities of the TAO. The risk of not adding additional resource in this area includes an expectation of higher numbers of temporary accommodation placement breakdowns, leading to repeat cases of homelessness. We are committed to avoiding this 'revolving door' scenario where, each time an accommodation placement fails it becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to source and arrange an alternative accommodation placement. Therefore, higher overall numbers of homelessness would be expected, including higher rough sleeper numbers.

8. Costs

8.1 The annual cost to the general fund for each post, which are all grade 6 posts, would range between £34,380 (salary of £26,446 at the bottom of the scale plus on costs) and £37,926 (salary of £29,174 at the top of the scale plus on costs)

8.2 It is considered that the recent increases in funding from the DLUHC through the annual Homelessness Prevention Grant (referred to under 4.1) would be utilised to fund these posts. Also to be factored in is a current saving to the staff costs from a team member reducing their hours from 37/week to 30/week, resulting in an annual saving of £9,265 (including on costs)

8.3 To clarify, the overall additional cost in comparison to the current staffing expenditure levels would be £34,380, reflecting the additional TAO post. This calculation is based on the assumption that we will be extending the posts ie we will not be making a decision to discontinue with the two Housing Officer posts agreed at Cabinet on 8th September 2021, whilst facing a homelessness crisis

9. Aims

9.1 These recommendations are made with the intention of achieving positive outcomes including:

- A more balanced, stable and experienced team resulting in a more effective and efficient service
 - Resources to focus on the prevention of homelessness and the resolution of homeless cases without the distraction of repetitive recruitment processes (ie annually at the end of fixed term positions)
 - Whilst demand upon homelessness services cannot be controlled due to exterior factors, the expected efficiencies would be expected to result in increased prevention activity leading to less demand and need for temporary accommodation. In addition an extra TAO resource would be expected to increase turnaround times for homeless households moving on from temporary accommodation, all contributing to a more efficient temporary accommodation budget
 - Increased sustainability for homeless households whilst in temporary accommodation, met through the ability to provide greater levels of support, would be expected to result in low numbers of homeless households losing their temporary accommodation placements, providing better outcomes for customers. This would encourage higher numbers of successful placements and fewer cases of repeat homelessness cases which would inevitably include higher instances of rough sleeping
 - To contribute towards setting the service up to be able to cope better with the expected unprecedented demand from homeless Ukrainian refugee households once the Homes for Ukraine schemes ends
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Financial implications:

Financial details are outlined in the report. Government is currently consulting on the Homeless Prevention Grant for 2023/24 onwards and it seems the intention is to continue the grant at the increased 2022/23 level. Members have raised concerns over the growing cost of the homeless service and whether we have the right strategies in place. Work on service efficiencies reviews are detailed in the Financial Plan and this service will be included in that process, in the meantime justification for additional spend and the continuation of existing posts to be made permanent has been presented for member consideration.

Legal implications:

The Council has a statutory duty to house homeless persons under the Housing Act 1996. Without a staff resourced service it will fail this duty.