

Report to: Cabinet



Date of Meeting 28 October 2020

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Exemption applied: None

Review date for release N/A

Homelessness Strategy

Report summary:

To provide an update on the Council's Homelessness Strategy and provide a review of levels of homelessness in the district. Also, to address staffing requirements within the Housing Options team.

Recommendation:

That Cabinet;

- (i) note the updates provided in relation to the Council's Homelessness Strategy and the current levels of homelessness in the district, and
- (ii) agree the requested amendments to the current staffing arrangements comprising an upgrade of a part time post to a full time post and to convert a fixed term post to a permanent post as detailed in the report.

That Cabinet recommend to Council to approve the additional budget in respect of the above posts.

Reason for recommendation:

To ensure the Housing Options team are better equipped to tackle the level of pressure on the homelessness service

Officer: Andrew Mitchell, Housing Solutions Manager

Portfolio(s) (check which apply):

- Climate Action
- Corporate Services and COVID-19 Response and Recovery
- Democracy and Transparency
- Economy and Assets
- Coast, Country and Environment
- Finance
- Strategic Planning
- Sustainable Homes and Communities

Financial implications:

- Housing Officer 1FTE permanent Grade 6, additional staff costs including On-Costs £33,788.

- Increase in permanent hours existing Housing Officer Post Grade 6 from 21 to 37 Hours, additional cost £14,611 Inc. On-Costs.

Legal implications:

There are no specific legal implications arising which require comment

Equalities impact Low Impact

Climate change Low Impact

Risk: Medium Risk; The risk of not making the recommended changes to the current staffing arrangements include higher numbers of homeless cases and a resulting increase in the temporary accommodation budget. In addition, there is potential to lose a capable and valued member of the team in an environment where it is extremely challenging to recruit successfully.

Links to background information [Cabinet Report 6 March 2019 \(Minute 174\), Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2019 – 2023](#)

[Homelessness Action Plan Review 2019-20](#)

Link to [Council Plan](#):

Priorities (check which apply)

- Outstanding Place and Environment
- Outstanding Homes and Communities
- Outstanding Economic Growth, Productivity, and Prosperity
- Outstanding Council and Council Services

Report in full

1. Update on Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy 2019-2023

- 1.1 The Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy was approved by Cabinet on 6th March 2019 and became effective from 1st April 2019. The strategy sets out how the Council and our partners will work to reduce homelessness, minimise rough sleeping, and contribute towards the over-riding vision of the Housing Service to ‘provide a decent home for all residents of East Devon’.
- 1.2 The strategy names four key priorities to tackle homelessness and outlines how we intend to achieve them. The priorities are as follows:
 - Priority 1 – Maximise prevention activities and outcomes
 - Priority 2 – Increasing Accommodation Options
 - Priority 3 – Minimise Rough Sleeping
 - Priority 4 – Improving Health and Wellbeing
- 1.3 A more in depth and specific ‘action plan’ is produced each year and is regularly reviewed by a panel made up of the Portfolio Holder for Sustainable Homes & Communities, staff members, two former service users and one representative from a partner organisation, Young Devon. Having two former service users on the panel is considered as good practice and their views and opinions are valued and respected.
- 1.4 The strategy originally planned for the panel to meet twice a year although in practice meetings have been held on a more regular basis. Throughout the pandemic meetings have been conducted via skype, with the most recent meetings being held on 30th July and 20th October.
- 1.5 The panel have worked together to review the action plan for 2019-20 and also compose a new action plan for 2020-21, which is now operational. A link to the review is included under

'background information'. The new plan has been produced later than would otherwise have been expected due to the resources needed to tackle homelessness at the height of the pandemic. Recovery from the pandemic is a key objective for the homelessness service this year and is included in the 2020-21 action plan.

2. Homelessness levels in the district – background

- 2.1 Since the Homelessness Reduction Act was introduced in April 2018 there have been significant additional responsibilities placed on homelessness services and huge rises in instances of homelessness. It is fair to say the entire landscape has changed for homelessness services. The tables below show the difference in levels before and after the Act was introduced and demonstrate the rise in numbers of approaches for EDDC:

2.1a: Pre HRA

Year	Total
2017-18	261

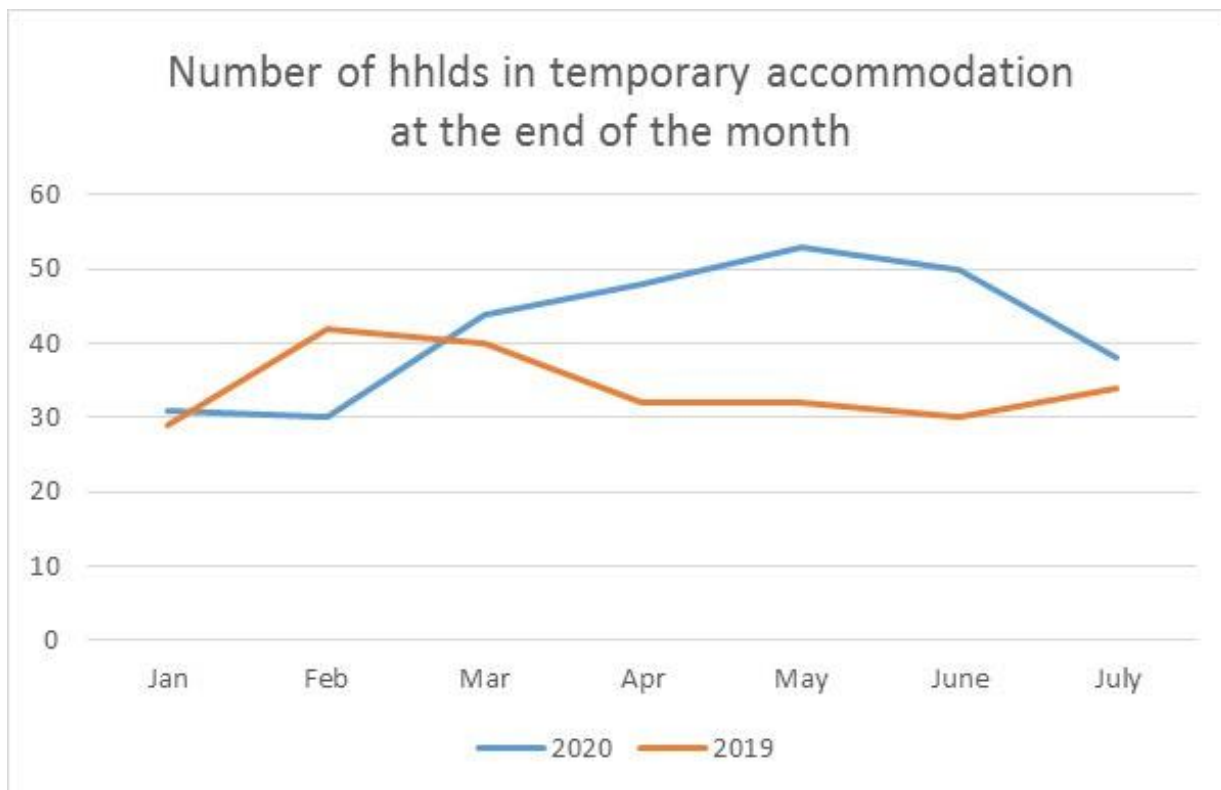
2.1b: Post HRA

Year	Total
2018-2019	871
2019-2020	1126

3. Current levels of homelessness in the district

- 3.1 The covid-19 pandemic has created large numbers of homelessness situations in our community and this has been compounded by job and income losses, in turn affecting affordability of rent and mortgages. The effects will inevitably continue in the short and medium term and lead towards rises in homeless levels in the future, as we feel the wider effects of the economic impact of covid restrictions on business and employers.
- 3.2 For the first six months of 2020-21, between April and September, there have been 432 homeless approaches recorded, a lower figure than the number for the same period last year (555). However it should be noted that this figure has been reached without the usual high number of homeless approaches from people losing accommodation in the private sector. This is as a direct result of the government's current restrictions on evictions from tenancies in the social and private sectors. Year on year the loss of accommodation in the private sector is a major contributor to homeless approaches to EDDC. We are acutely aware that this is only a temporary measure and there will be a high number of approaches from people losing accommodation in the private sector when the government restrictions on evictions are lifted.
- 3.3 Despite the lower number of overall approaches during the last six months, it is noted that many cases have been of a much higher complexity than usual and the issues we have experienced in dealing with these complex cases has been compounded by the reduction in the potential solutions available to us as a direct result of the pandemic. Some of the issues we have come up against include the period of reduced free movement during full lockdown, a reduced supply of available accommodation within the private and social sectors, and lack of access to supported accommodation projects.
- 3.4 The pandemic has seen a huge increase in demand for people requiring temporary accommodation due to factors including people who had previously freely moved between properties, known as 'sofa-surfers', no longer being free to do so. High numbers of approaches have been received from people fleeing domestic violence, those needing accommodation for health reasons, hospital discharges and those with a need to shield. The government's 'everybody in' campaign contributed to a rise in the need for temporary accommodation, whereby councils were tasked with accommodating all rough sleepers. In East Devon, all but two rough sleepers were accommodated, both people concerned

refused all offers of assistance. The graph below shows the comparison of temporary accommodation numbers between 2019 and 2020.



- 3.5 Net spend on temporary accommodation over the past six months has been £13,120 over budget. At this stage of the year the forecast was for a net spend of £84,960 and in reality it has been £98,080 (calculated by a gross spend of £170,035 less a net Housing Benefit contribution of £70,305 and also less a MHCLG contribution towards 'everybody in' expenses of £1,650).
- 3.6 In recent months there has been a noticeable shift within the district towards families requiring temporary accommodation, whereas previously demand was much higher for single people. Factors contributing towards this shift include a significant rise in approaches from households fleeing violence and domestic abuse, many of which have fled from other areas, and measures taken to assist single homeless applicants in need of temporary accommodation. Measures include the purchase of a HMO to accommodate single homeless applicants as an alternative to bed and breakfast establishments, which has been available for use from February 2020.
- 3.7 There is an inevitable second wave of homelessness expected in the coming months when landlords are no longer restricted from evicting tenants in the private sector, consistently the major reason for homeless approaches year on year to EDDC. Also to be factored in are the economic situations created by the pandemic including people losing jobs and income being reduced creating barriers to the affordability of rent and mortgage payments, ultimately contributing towards evictions and loss of homes.

4. Measures taken

- 4.1 The Housing Options team have been highly focused on tackling the issues caused by the pandemic, dealing with the resulting high levels of homelessness and aforementioned complexity. Opportunities to prevent and relieve homelessness have been severely restricted owing to factors including lockdown restrictions, health conditions of applicants including a need to shield, the closure of many supported accommodation projects to new applicants, the slowing down of accommodation options in the social and private housing markets and the restrictions placed on free travel.

- 4.2. Throughout this period the Options team have held daily team briefings where cases are discussed and solutions created. Members of the Options team have participated in the Covid-19 Devon Homelessness and Health Coordination cell meetings, consisting of representatives from each Devon Local Authority alongside partners from Children's Services, DCC public health, Clinical Commissioning Group, Police and Probation to discuss and cement joint working approaches. There is a mutual sharing of information, to assist in tackling the issues caused to homeless customers by the pandemic. These meetings were held weekly throughout the height of the pandemic, and are now fortnightly.
- 4.3 With large numbers of individuals and households requiring temporary accommodation throughout this period, the focus of the team has been to source and arrange suitable accommodation for people in homeless situations and to support them when accommodated. 89 households (individuals and families) have been provided with various forms of temporary accommodation between the lockdown at the end of March until the end of September. Also to be noted is the fact that the pandemic has created higher levels of support need within the households seeking assistance.
- 4.4 Opportunities for moving people on successfully from temporary accommodation have been severely restricted throughout the pandemic, with the result that people have been in temporary accommodation for longer periods than they would otherwise have been. Therefore, twelve flats in Exmouth that have been recently purchased, and have become available to occupy since early September, are being used as move on accommodation. This arrangement was authorised through a Senior Officer Urgent Decision on 20th May 2020 providing sustainable move on options for homeless applicants whilst clearing temporary accommodation units for the use of new applicants and relieving pressure on the temporary accommodation budget. The tenancies at the twelve flats are introductory to flexible, in line with those of our general needs properties, with the only difference in the overall process being that nominations are made from applicants within our temporary accommodation units. Nominations are discussed and agreed at allocations panel meetings and additional support is available from the Housing Options team if required.
- 4.5 Measures have been taken to maximise the Council's Rent Deposit and Bond Scheme throughout the pandemic period. Over the past six months the Options team have managed to assist a total of 56 households from homeless, or potentially homeless, situations into the private sector. This has been achieved within a period where it has been particularly difficult to access the private sector accommodation due to the restrictions of the pandemic and the reduction in properties becoming available due to the ban on evictions from the private sector. These numbers have been made possible by utilising our Private Sector Liaison Officer, who focusses on accessing accommodation and then maintaining support to those applicants who have been accommodated through this route. Another Private Sector Liaison Officer post has been secured on a fixed term basis through the Rough Sleeper Initiative funding from MHCLG. Although recruitment was delayed due to the pandemic, the post has been filled from 1st October 2020.
- 4.6 Actions have been taken to address the homelessness situation throughout the pandemic through the Housing service recovery plan with measures taken including prioritising repairs and planned works for EDDC properties under offer to homeless households and those in temporary accommodation. However, delays have been inevitable in making these properties available as quickly as usual over the last six months due to staff shortages and lockdown delays, which have in turn added to the temporary accommodation budget. Significant improvements are expected over the next six months if further restrictions are not put in place by the government.

5. Funding for staffing

- 5.1 Since the Homelessness Reduction Act was introduced only one additional post has been added to the Housing Options team using funding from the general account. A case was made for additional staffing resources in November 2019 following an analysis of the

staffing structure where recommendations for additional staffing were made. This resulted in a fixed term Housing Officer post being agreed and the post became operational from March 2019, on a fixed term basis for 12 months.

- 5.2 Two Housing Officer posts currently exist thanks to funding from the MHCLG since the Homelessness Reduction Act was introduced. Formerly known as 'New Burdens Funding' the Homelessness Reduction Act prevention pot 2020-21 allocation is £70,206 and this is used to fund the two Housing Officer posts.
- 5.3 Three posts exist due to further MHCLG funding through Rough Sleeper Initiative (RSI) Funding. This funding has been available annually for the past two years through a bidding system and is specifically aimed at assisting rough sleepers. For 2020-21 a total of £230,000 has been awarded to EDDC through a joint bid with Mid Devon District Council. The funding is allocated as follows:
- £100k for 3 Rough Sleeper Navigator posts (one full time for each LA and one shared, all fixed term)
 - £75k for 2 Private Sector Liaison Officer posts (one for each LA, fixed term)
 - £20k prevention pot (£10k to each LA)
 - £35k Housing First support (contract with BCHA) – providing floating support for 6 former rough sleepers accommodated in our own stock (3 for each LA)
- 5.4 Overall, the most effective action we can take to tackle homelessness and in turn reduce the temporary accommodation budget, is to ensure that sufficient resources are in place to successfully prevent and relieve homelessness, with the expectation that interaction and preventative measures provide positive outcomes for applicants and dispel the need for temporary accommodation. The staff resources available to the Housing Options team are constantly under review in order to meet increasing demand and ensure we are set up to successfully reduce homelessness.

6. Staffing recommendations

- 6.1 The first recommendation is related to a vacancy that has occurred within the Housing Options team for a permanent Housing Officer post. Throughout the employment period the working hours of the former post holder reduced from 30 hours a week to 24, then again to 16, effectively working two days a week. 5 hours a week have been unassigned and unspent since the former post holder reduced their hours, therefore the 5 hours can be included in this case and bring the weekly hours already available to 21 a week.
- 6.2 This vacancy has created an opportunity to review the structure of the team and which posts work effectively. It is considered by the management of the Options team (Housing Solutions Manager and Housing Options Manager) that it is not possible to successfully and proactively manage a homeless caseload only working two days a week. Due to the intense nature of the cases and the homeless situations being managed, there is a much stronger possibility of arriving at a positive outcome with the Housing Officer working on a full-time basis. The benefits of successful prevention of homelessness not only benefit the customer but also benefit the council, as there would be less need for the use of expensive emergency accommodation. The most effective and efficient method of reducing emergency accommodation expenditure levels is by setting the service up to prevent homelessness at an early stage.
- 6.3 Also to be considered in looking at the viability of a part time role is that responsibilities of all Housing Officers include taking part in the duty rota, dealing with new homeless approaches on the day they present. Working part time severely restricts the Housing Officer from effectively managing their caseload and meeting the needs of the service.
- 6.4 Therefore the request is made to bring this part time post up to the status of a full time post. This will ensure the team are better equipped to cope with the rising demands on the

service with Housing Officers enabled to effectively and proactively manage a caseload with the emphasis on preventing homelessness, ultimately saving expenditure on emergency accommodation. The request is to upgrade the post from part time (21 hours a week) to full time (37 hours a week) by adding an additional 16 hours a week to the position. The cost would be approximately £14,610 per annum calculated by using the scale 6 hourly rate, including add-ons, of £17.56 multiplied by 832 hours (16hours x 52weeks).

- 6.5 The second recommendation is for the fixed term Housing Officer post to be made permanent. The post is currently occupied and the employee has become an effective and valued member of the Housing Options team, picking up the role and developing well through a challenging period. Employment commenced around the same time as the pandemic occurred and lockdown restrictions were introduced. The request that this post is made permanent with the expectation that homelessness levels will increase significantly in the near future and the demand will sadly always be there. By making the post permanent we will ensure a valuable resource continues to be available whilst avoiding the risk of losing a capable and valued member of the team in an environment where it has been established that it is very challenging to recruit successfully, owing to the nature of the specialised role and the personal qualities required.
- 6.6 As of 6th October 2020 there are 246 open homeless cases. The current caseload of the Housing Officers within the Options team is averaging 40 cases each, in a period before a significant second wave of homelessness is expected. The general consensus for local authorities with the responsibility for maintaining homelessness services is that 30 cases per Housing Officer is a manageable number. In addition, it is acknowledged that cases are becoming increasingly complex, many of which come with an array of restrictions and considerations due to issues including offending history and complex health/mental health needs.
- 6.7 In summary, these staffing recommendations have been made with the intention of maintaining the focus on preventing homelessness and avoiding a rise in the numbers of individuals and households that become homeless, which would in turn become extremely costly to the service through additional temporary accommodation placements.