

# People and Health Scrutiny Committee

## 28 January 2021

### Responses to homelessness during winter

#### For Decision

**Portfolio Holder:** Cllr G Carr-Jones, Housing and Community Safety

**Local Councillor(s):**

**Executive Director:** V Broadhurst, Interim Executive Director of People - Adults

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**Report Status:** Public

**Recommendation:** For the Scrutiny Committee to comment and respond to the requested update.

**Reason for Recommendation:** The report and recommendation focus on the current approach of the housing service in dealing with homelessness during the additional pressures brought on by the winter. The update is offered as part of an ongoing wish to scrutinise housing and homelessness, as part of this Committee's programme of activity. Further discussion and scrutiny of housing and homelessness is proposed as part of the ongoing programme for this Committee – including the role of Registered Housing Providers and Housing Associations.

#### 1. Executive Summary

This paper is to respond to the request for an update on winter pressures which impact on homelessness and the way that Dorset Council is responding. The context of this request is being set, in this paper, as part of the changes to the service brought about by wider pressures relating to the Covid-19 pandemic. As is currently clear, the ongoing lockdown conditions are continuing those particular pressures. For example, on 8 January 2021, new requirements were placed upon Local Authorities by the Secretary of State to prevent people sleeping rough and to make sure that associated health, Covid vaccination and infection control needs are met.

## **2. Financial Implications**

There are budget pressures relating to any additional demand on our homelessness services. The current budget position is being reported to Cabinet as part of the usual reporting cycle. We have been successful in gaining funding through bids to MHCLG, the relevant Government Department. This supports capital projects to provide suitable and more cost-effective temporary accommodation and is supplemented by additional internal capital funding agreed at Cabinet in September 2020. The MHCLG Next Steps Accommodation Programme also provides £600,000 in revenue to fund support for the temporary housing projects where this is necessary.

## **3. Well-being and Health Implications**

There are strong themes in this report relating to the well-being and health of homeless people, with the specific focus on people sleeping rough and some acute needs. This cohort of people often, though not exclusively, have high support needs relating to mental and physical health ill-health, drug and alcohol dependency. Strong work across Health, Housing, Social Care and the voluntary sector is under way to make sure there are effective plans to coordinate necessary support or action to bring about better health outcomes.

## **4. Climate implications**

There are no specific implications, other than the wider climate relevance of providing homelessness support during the winter, with the threats posed by cold weather.

## **5. Other Implications**

This is part of ongoing work to provide a service to prevent and mitigate homelessness, as part of our statutory duties. Further scrutiny of our developing homelessness strategy and future responses to demand is invited at a future meeting.

## **6. Risk Assessment**

This is an update paper, not a matter for decision.

## **7. Equalities Impact Assessment**

This is an update paper, not a matter for decision.

## **8. Appendices**

There are none.

## **9. Homelessness since March 2020 – since the impact of Covid-19**

- 9.1 Since the beginning of the pandemic, in March 2020, there has needed to be a major shift in how we have responded to homelessness demand. This is to maintain our statutory duties, but also to adapt our service delivery to deal with new pressures, new ways of working and implementing changes in Government policy. The work to advise and support people and families to prevent homelessness has continued, with good adaptation of our service to make sure this is done effectively under lockdown and remote working conditions.
- 9.2 In April 2020 the Government announced their 'Everyone In' directive, instructing local authorities to take in all people either at risk of rough sleeping, or actually sleeping on the streets. 63 people were brought in, due to the pandemic. 9 of these were people discharged from hospital discharges, 32 with an imminent risk of sleeping rough, 12 actually sleeping rough and 10 moving from shared housing.
- 9.3 Most of the demand was in and around Weymouth and Portland. There has been a rise in wider homelessness demand – with an increased reliance on B&Bs. This has included a wider cross-section of homeless families and not only for those sleeping rough. We had 139 households in B&B (for longer than six weeks) in August and have been reducing this over the autumn and early Winter. The number was down to 90 at the end of November, and 82 at the end of December. This is predominantly made up of single people, with the number of families in B&B accommodation for longer than six weeks reduced to 3 at the end of December.
- 9.4 We provide the service in alliance with strong work across the voluntary sector. Notably, The Lantern Trust, Julian House, Bus Shelter Project and Shelter. There is a tight partnership in place across sectors. There has been a rise in the need for advice and guidance across housing and community safety. Domestic tensions and abuse, tenancy security, rent arrears are continuing concerns and are closely monitored. There are cost pressures which come with the additional demands, with B&B charges exceeding what is claimable through Housing Benefit.
- 9.5 We have made a strong start in planning to move people on from B&Bs into settled housing. There was a successful bid to MHCLG to gain capital

and revenue support, totalling £1.6 million. We are funded to buy 25 homes for temporary accommodation by 31 March 2021. This included a £600k grant to provide 'tenancy sustainment' support for people previously sleeping rough. This has developed the key role for voluntary sector in delivering the commissioned support. Additional capital funding was secured at Cabinet in September 2020 to secure further temporary accommodation, to supplement the MHCLG grant funded housing.

- 9.6 We also work closely with partner Registered Providers of Social Housing (Housing Associations) to make best use of their stock. They have been proactive in offering properties for the immediate needs for temporary housing, as well as the permanent lettings which are made available to us. The opening up of the house building sector following the first lockdown has brought an increase in lettings being available to us, which has reduced some of the pressure on our temporary accommodation and housing register needs – although the need is still high.
- 9.7 We look for solutions across Dorset Council area, recognising the greatest pressures focusing on the Weymouth and Portland area. We are moving rapidly to acquire suitable properties and are on track to meet grant conditions. We are speaking with MHCLG and Homes England to plan further bids to acquire or develop homes. We are reducing reliance on B&B by moving people into other temporary accommodation and permanent lettings. We are working to spread locations, to mitigate pressure on areas and help effective management. It is recognised that the concentration of available B&Bs in central and seaside locations in Weymouth means that we need to carefully assess and manage who we place there, to achieve a balance and minimise any negative impact on neighbours.
- 9.8 We maintain a focus on strong 'prevention' advice to help people avoid housing crisis, explore options to remain in current homes, or find suitable alternatives. We are developing options to provide consistently effective 'wrap-around' support for emergency housing, in the right locations. (Supported by the MHCLG funding, with the prospect of further funding in 2021/22). Reliance on B&Bs is reducing. We want to maintain that at a manageable level, if demand rises. We are preparing options relating to managed hostel type accommodation, as well as tightly managed B&B.

## **10. December/January update:**

- 10.1 Safe Sleep 2021 is being run by the Lantern Trust, as a 'Covid-safe' shelter to keep rough sleepers safe from the threat of cold weather. This started on 4 January 2021 and will run until March. It has been funded via £50,000 MHCLG (NSAP – Next Steps Accommodation Programme) funds allocated to Dorset Council alongside £41,000 funding awarded to the Lantern Trust from the Homelessness Winter Transformation Fund. Overnight accommodation will be provided for up to 10 verified rough sleepers, in hotel accommodation – enabling people to stay within the Covid-19 lockdown rules, as opposed to the traditional model of church halls. Support workers are on site and all clients will be required to sign a contract with the Lantern Trust and comply with terms relating to conduct and behaviour.
- 10.2 On 8 January 2021, we received a letter from the Secretary of State, outlining the intentions to reintroduce a version of the 'Everyone In' initiative, meaning that we need to accommodate all rough sleepers across the Dorset Council area. This is focused on people actually sleeping out (or 'rough'), so is a narrower and smaller cohort than the requirement in April 2020. We are in a good position with this already as the housing teams have been carefully managing the cold weather spell and its impact on people with nowhere to live.
- 10.3 As part of the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol that was triggered on 29 December, we had already found safe, temporary accommodation for 24 people who were sleeping rough. As of 11 January, we had eight people sleeping rough across the county, some of whom do not want accommodation found for them. Work is under way to engage with them and to ensure safety and welfare. The Secretary of State has also urged Local Authorities to support our rough sleepers to register with a GP, so that they are able to receive the COVID-19 vaccine at the earliest opportunity. At the point of writing this report, work is under way to plan the vaccination exercise.

## **11. Conclusion**

Members are invited to comment on and scrutinise progress, so far, and highlight points of further interest for future scrutiny.

### **Footnote:**

Issues relating to financial, legal, environmental, economic and equalities implications have been considered and any information relevant to the decision is included within the report.