

SCRUTINY REPORT



MEETING: Overview and Scrutiny Committee

DATE: 18 November 2021

SUBJECT: Housing Update

REPORT FROM: Councillor Cummins, Cabinet Member for Housing Services

1.0 Background

In May 2021 the Council adopted a new Housing Strategy for the next ten years, which sets out clear objectives to deliver:

- More, high-quality and low-carbon homes in the Borough.
- More affordable homes, to help get people on the housing ladder.
- A more dynamic housing market, with a broader range of housing tenures and more tailored support for people.
- A housing strategy for every township, shaped by development and regeneration plans to support the future of each town centre and neighbourhood.
- Additional support that enables people to live healthily and well in their own community long into later life.
- An approach to eliminate rough sleeping by 2025, by helping homeless people achieve financial independence.

This report provides an update on the work related to homelessness and eliminating rough sleeping, including:

- Homeless prevention and tenancy sustainment.
- Homeless response.
- Non statutory support for rough sleepers.
- Asylum dispersal including current work to support Afghan refugees.

Delivering these priorities is achieved through:

- The Council's Homelessness and Housing Options service
- A Performance and Policy Officer.
- The Council's Arm's Length Management Organisation (ALMO), Six Town Housing (STH).
- A network of approximately 17 Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) operating in the Borough.
- Serco, who hold the national contract for asylum dispersal.
- Urban Renewal who manage relationships with the private sector.

Substantively this portfolio is within the Business Growth and Infrastructure department under the leadership of the Assistant Director Housing. This post has, however, been long term vacant. The service has therefore been managed by the Deputy Chief Executive (Corporate Core) since 2019.

2.0 Context

Demand on Council housing services including statutory homelessness and rough sleeping has been increasing since the Homeless Reduction Act 2017 and more recently due to the impact of Covid-19 and the "Everyone in" initiative. Over the last 12 months demand for statutory services in Bury has increased by around 30% and the number of rough sleepers has more than doubled.

The increase in demand in Bury is a national issue and the proportion of pressure experienced locally is consistent with other boroughs. The reason for this increase includes:

- The impact of complex lives which can result in an inability to sustain mortgage payments or a rented tenancy. The majority of homeless people have experienced some combination of financial, emotional, health or substance abuse.
- The lifting of the Covid eviction ban which was imposed as part of the "everyone in" initiative and relaxation of wider restrictions.
- The lack of available move-on property because of the short housing supply in Bury means people are staying longer in emergency accommodation, which limits availability for others. The average length of stay in emergency accommodation is currently 82 days.

The Council has led significant work across housing partners to respond to this context, which is described within this report.

3.0 The Homeless Strategy - Prevention

The Homeless Reduction Act 2017 requires local authorities to take a preventative approach to homelessness through a multi-agency approach; this is delivered in Bury through an independent Homelessness partnership comprised of community leaders; service users; the Council and Six Town Housing.

The Council supports the work of the Partnership by co-producing a Homeless Strategy to guide its work. The strategy currently comprises seven key priorities and themes:

- Prevention
- Person
- Property
- Promote
- Purpose
- Place
- Partnership

The strategy is delivered through an underpinning action plan, key activities within which include:

- Specific awareness raising for young people around homelessness
- Promoting life skills and managing debt in schools and colleges
- Early tenancy sustainment support for people at risk of homelessness

- Performance and data measured correctly for local needs, as well as national and regional insight to align resources.
- Prevent people being discharged from hospital before housing options in place.
- Resolutions to the challenges created by welfare reform.
- Strengthening Private Rented Sector (PRS) landlord support, advice and assistance to avoid S21 notices and evictions
- A clear plan to be ready for people - 'in-reach' prevention work (how to manage a tenancy) with prisons / prison liaison
- Training offers for all frontline staff to address barriers to housing, including debt management.
- Ensuring that the Asylum and Refugee community are given early housing options and support.
- Partnership approach with all stakeholders to help prevent homelessness and improve resources and capacity.

The strategy is currently under review and a refreshed strategy for the next three years will be proposed by the end of the 2021 calendar year. The updated strategy will, in particular, be strengthened to reflect the *Let's do it!* ethos, including though:

- Supporting people to take an asset-based approach to access the resources that will allow them to stay in housing.
- Establishing housing professionals within local public service neighbourhood teams, to ensure joined up multi-disciplinary support through a key worker approach. It is well understood that the principal causes of homelessness are social and economic and, through these teams, support to professionals in the areas of substance misuse, domestic abuse and work and skills will be expedited.
- A new focus on engagement with landlords within the private rented sector to help them better understand the causes of homelessness.

3.1 Tenancy Sustainment

The Council and Six Town Housing (STH) are working together on the refresh of the tenancy sustainment strategy. The strategy will provide clear strategic direction, outcomes and expectations in how partners seek to sustain tenancies and accommodation to better to prevent homelessness. The Strategy will be designed for application within Council housing stock in the first instance, but with engagement from landlords in the private rented sector to broaden its potential application.

The sustainment strategy will define partnership arrangements for identifying and supporting people at risk of eviction and the eviction process itself, should that ultimately occur. More fundamentally, however, it will seek to define how public services identify and proactively support people with complex lives who, as a result, may be at risk of tenancy failure. This includes residents experiencing domestic abuse, for example, or affected by anti-social behaviour; financial deprivation or substance misuse

The strategy will focus on supporting the 'person' not the 'property' to break the cycle of homelessness for many complex and high need residents. The intention is to use the neighbourhood model to bring together all public services in a place to share insight; stratify risk and proactively intervene in high-risk situations. A task and finish group has been established to progress this work, led by STH and involving key partners including the Council's Adult and children Services, DWP, Health services, Housing Associations and GMP.

3.2 Statutory homeless response

On average the Council receives around 300 homeless self-referrals / new cases per month (a 300% increase from before Covid 19) and 80+ "duty to refer" cases each month. In response, the Council Homelessness and Housing Options team:

- manages 90 properties to meet the statutory duty which is a mix of dispersed houses, maisonettes and flats. This portfolio provides a total of 320 bed spaces when at full capacity
- provides wider, personal support and facilitates outreach to people who need to access emergency accommodation
- seeks to move people into more sustainable accommodation as quickly as possible.

In addition to fulfilling the Council's statutory duties in relation to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, the team also provide specialist support to particular vulnerable cohorts including:

- Victims of domestic abuse (DA). As part of a recent review of DA arrangements and the development of a new strategy, the provision of specialist housing for singles of both genders and families is being arranged.
- Council Care Leavers through a long-standing arrangement to provide priority support to Looked After Children in order that these children become independent at the point of adult hood. As part of the Childrens and Young Persons improvement plan, arrangements for care leavers are currently under review.
- Asylum and Immigration support and services to refugees and asylum seekers through pathways with Serco and the Home Office.

The Homelessness and Housing Options team has recently been restructured to ensure staffing and property resources are maximised to respond to demand pressures. A saving of £250,000 from this restructure was also contributed to the council's budget.

3.3 Support to rough sleepers

The Council has recorded a 455% increase in rough sleeper numbers over the past 12 months and a 1300% increase since 2018/19. The current number of recorded rough sleepers is 40 in our supported accommodation via A Bed for Every Night (ABEN) and Stepping Stones emergency accommodation with a further 4 rough sleepers supported in longer term move on accommodation. Due to the success of the above new provision and funding we currently have only 1 known rough sleeper actually on the streets, with whom the outreach service are working closely with to engage and move into appropriate supported accommodation.

The Council does not have a statutory role in supporting or accommodating rough sleepers but, over recent years, has received extra funding to respond through:

- The Greater Manchester Combined Authority's 'A Bed Every Night initiative'.
- The government's Rough Sleeper Initiative (RSi) and Rough sleeper accommodation programme (RSAP).

Funding has been invested in a commissioned provision through an independent partner, Stepping Stones, to provide 15 bed spaces plus support to make emergency provision. Greater Manchester Combined Authority funding for A Bed for Every Night also provides a further 25 supported bed spaces for a total of 40 individual accommodation units with support

The team has been very successful in moving rough sleepers into more secure, longer-term accommodation, despite the increase in caseloads. Longer term strategic responses are also being developed through the Bury Homeless Partnership including the establishment of an Ethical Lettings Agency via the Greater Manchester Let Us scheme with 2 properties specifically designated for our rough sleepers with more in the pipeline for the future

3.4 Asylum dispersal, including Afghan resettlement

Demand and funding for asylum and immigration support has generally reduced in recent years. The Council typically supports the dispersal of around 40 families each year, through Serco. In Bury this is a challenge in the context of the scale of statutory demand as described and the shortage of housing supply which means the private rented sector is similarly at full capacity. Serco currently have 139 dispersed properties in the Private rented sector supporting 450+ asylum seekers and refugees.

The Council does, however, receive national direction to assist in priority resettlement. For example the Hong Kong UK Welcome Programme and the current Afghan crisis. In these situations the Council:

- Engages with Serco and the network of Registered Social Landlords.
- Accesses its own supported housing portfolio.
- Engages with other Council departments and agencies to provide wider resettlement support, in particular health care and schools.

Bury Council has managed to facilitate an offer of ten houses (sufficient for 30-40 people) to assist in the current Afghan crisis. This provision will be made through the commissioned sector, which protects council stock for statutory duties. The response and allocation is being co-ordinated at Greater Manchester level. A meeting with community leaders is being arranged to discuss how we welcome Afghan people into Bury and to ensure multi-agency support is in place. The first of the families matched to the accommodation by the Home office should arrive in Bury during the week commencing the 15th November and plans are in place to provide them with a warm welcome with co-ordinated support and assistance by all stakeholders across all sectors and partners.

4.0 Future strategy and innovation

The Housing team are active in continually securing funding to explore new delivery models and maximise support for vulnerable people.

At present, a total in excess of £1.3m extra short-term funding has been secured via successful bids since April 21. This supports 5 short term initiatives which are benefitting vulnerable people. These initiatives and extra funding enable the Council to provide:-

- rough sleeper outreach service
- emergency and longer term supported accommodation for our rough sleepers
- accommodation for prison releases that are homeless on release
- funding private rented sector initiatives and deposits with landlords.

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (formerly MHCLG - Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government) have recently provided further homeless prevention funding to support specifically vulnerable renters in the private rented sector that were impacted as a result of Covid and the consequences of the lifting of the eviction ban earlier this year. The neighbourhood teams described in

this document, including an embedded housing lead, will take responsibility for identifying vulnerable people who would benefit from this short term financial assistance and ensuring they are connected to longer term sustainability advice and support.

5.0 Conclusion

Homeless prevention is one of the central objectives of the borough's housing strategy. However, the wider pressures of the housing market in Bury, which the strategy seeks to address, compound this challenge. Despite this, the team have a strong track record of maximising funding opportunities and engaging with partners to secure resilience.

Feedback from the Overview and Scrutiny committee is welcome including, for example, how:

- homeless prevention is aligned to the principles and priorities within the borough strategy, *Let's do it*.
- asylum seekers, including Afghans, are welcomed to the borough.
- the Council maximises its relationship with partners, including our Arms Length Management Organisation, Six Town Housing, to sustain and prevent homelessness and extend support to the vulnerable.

List of Background Papers:- None.

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