

# SCRUTINY REPORT



**MEETING:** Overview and Scrutiny Committee

**DATE:** 12<sup>TH</sup> January 2023

**SUBJECT:** Homelessness strategy update

**REPORT FROM:** Councillor Cummins, Cabinet Member for Housing Services

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## 1.0 Background / update

The Council has a statutory duty to support people that are homeless in the Borough and the Council must have an updated and robust Homelessness Strategy to clearly demonstrate how we will meet the required statutory duties and obligations for homelessness in the Borough.

Over the past decade Bury has seen a gradual increase in homeless cases within the Borough with greater increases over the past 5 years.

In 2020 a new Housing Strategy was agreed for the Borough of Bury which included a commitment to end rough sleeping by 2024. The new Homelessness Strategy has been co-produced with the Bury Homelessness Partnership to deliver this, by applying the Borough-Wide 'Lets Do it' ethos of prevention, early intervention and the targeting of public service resources.

The strategy continues to build and expands on the wonderful work that has been done to date. Homelessness is an issue and continues to be high on the national agenda since the new homelessness strategy was approved in April 2022.

The 'Everyone In' response to the COVID-19 pandemic has shown what can be achieved in addressing rough sleeping with a joined-up response, whilst helping people in transformative ways with sufficient funding. We need to continue to build on this progress and the commitments in this strategy reflect this.

The strategy continues to be a wide-ranging and proactive response with the community and all stakeholders playing a vital part in helping to deliver. Integral to our response is involving those individuals who have lived experience or who have been disproportionately affected by homelessness in shaping our services and delivery so that they best meet the needs of those people that need them most with the focus of delivery through the Homelessness partnership, lived experience and all stakeholders and partners in the Borough.

Therefore the same priorities and principles remain :-

- The Homelessness strategy from 2022 to 2025 continues to set out how we will strategically deliver services and meet homeless and rough sleeping demands over the next 3 years to provide the best support and accommodation within the Borough from both a statutory and non-statutory perspective.
- At the heart of this strategy continues to be the commitment to prevention, early intervention, sustainment both support and accommodation and the co-design of solutions with communities aligned with the Councils corporate 'Let's Do It !' and Housing Strategies.
- The strategy continues to be co-delivered by the Homeless partnership and key stakeholders and continues to deliver the vision for how the strategic objective to eliminate rough sleeping and prevent homelessness will be achieved and how outcomes for these vulnerable people will be secured through a proactive, multi-agency approach.
- The focus continues to be prevention and sustainment of accommodation but importantly support despite the challenges and increasing demands over the past 12 months.
- The strategy is continually being refreshed and reviewed due to the changing landscape of homelessness and new challenges such as the cost-of-living crisis and the ever increasing refugee and asylum seeker demands within the Borough that impact on Statutory and non-statutory services.

## **2.0 Context**

Demand on Council housing services including statutory homelessness and rough sleeping has continue to increase since the strategy approval and since the Homeless Reduction Act 2017. Over the last 24 months demand for statutory services in Bury has increased by over 46% and expected to increase further and the number of rough sleepers and non-statutory customers has more than doubled and continues to increase and is becoming more challenging to accommodate and support due to the increasing complexities and with the resources and suitable accommodation available.

The increase in demand in Bury continues to align with GM, regional and national trends and the proportion of pressure experienced locally remains consistent with other boroughs. The reason for this increase includes:

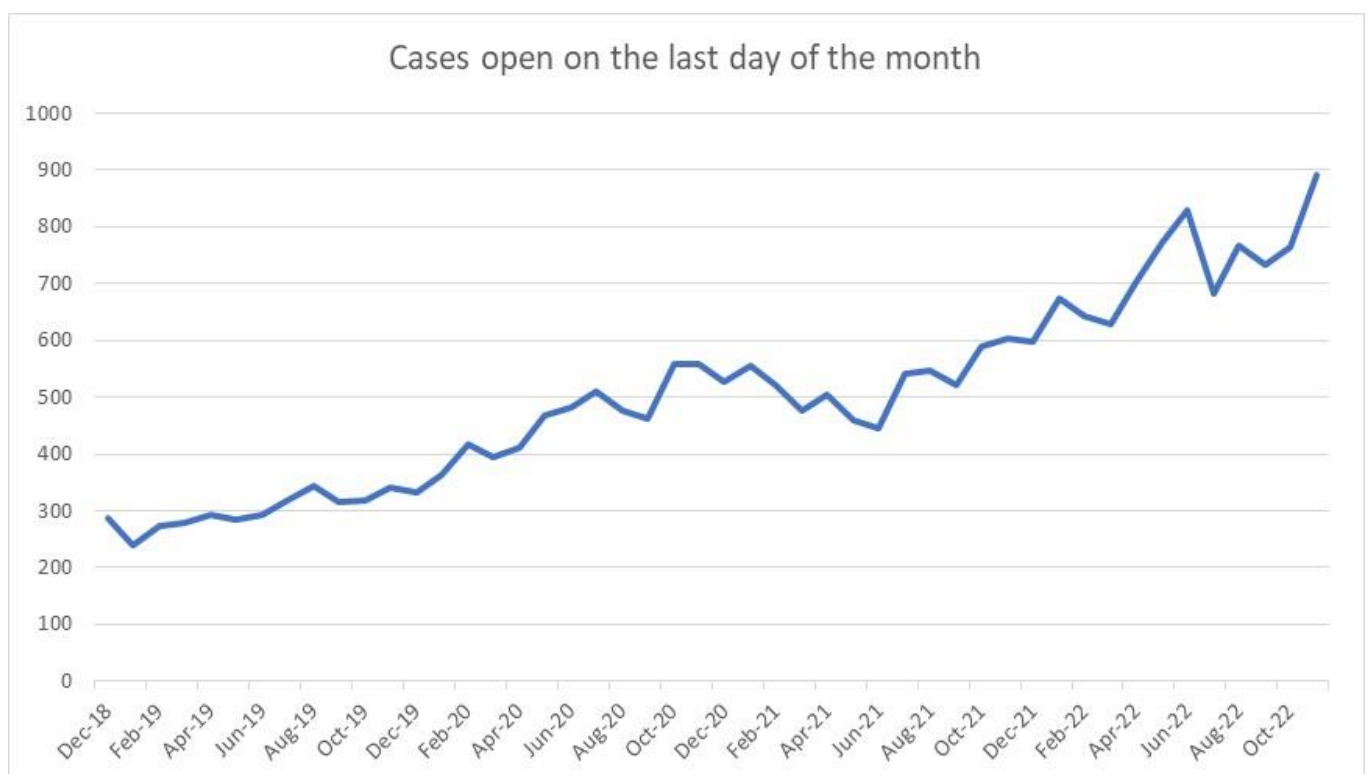
- The impact of complex lives which can result in an inability to sustain mortgage payments or a rented tenancy and subsequent evictions. The majority of homeless people have experienced some combination of financial, emotional, health or substance abuse.
- Mortgage repossessions and the cost of living crisis – even though we haven't seen the full impact of the crisis, the expectation over the next 12 months will see numbers increasing further, particularly working families and people due to their ability to pay their mortgages and rent with the associated housing and general costs. This would be a new co-hort accessing the service as most people at present are reliant on the benefit system.
- PRS – Evictions and Section 21 notices – mainly affordability issues but also landlords looking at other options due to the Government initiatives / intervention that now make it more difficult for landlords in the PRS to operate and is now less attractive to rent properties.
- Asylum seekers and refugee crisis that have had an impact on both statutory and non-statutory services and the impact of the new Home Office dispersal and resettlement scheme introduced this year.

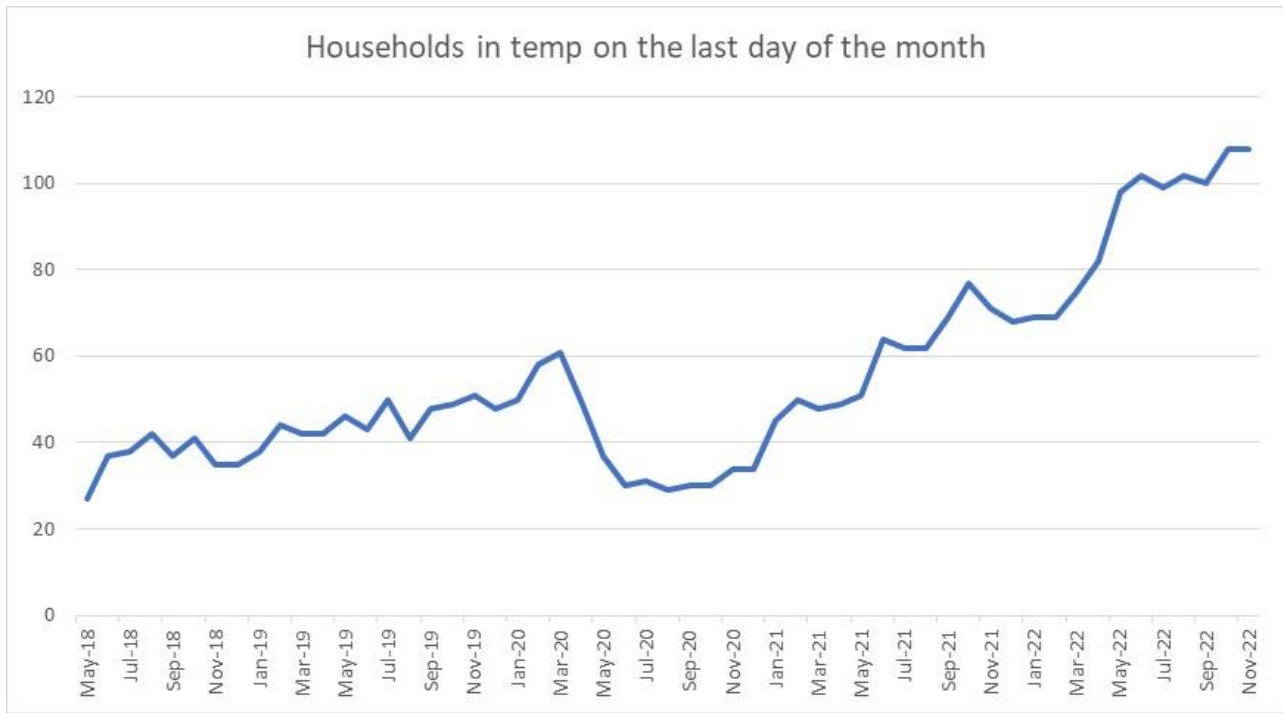
- The lack of available and affordable move-on property because of the short housing supply in Bury means people are staying longer in emergency accommodation, which limits availability for others. The average length of stay in emergency accommodation is currently 169 days.

The Council continues to deliver the significant work across all housing and homeless partners to respond to this context, which is described within this report.

### 3.0 Headline Data / statistics

Open Homeless statutory cases each month					
	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
April	not collected	293	412	505	701
May		285	467	460	772
June		293	481	446	829
July		318	511	540	682
August		344	476	547	766
September		316	462	523	732
October		319	559	588	765
November		340	557	603	892
December	287	333	527	597	
January	239	363	556	674	
February	274	417	521	642	
March	278	394	476	630	





		2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021 -22
ROUGH SLEEPERS	Single Male	7	16	75	77
	Single Female		4	17	21
	Single Transgender				1
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>99</b>

#### 4.0 The Homeless Strategy – Themes and 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, commissioned providers and partners, Housing Associations, charities, voluntary sector and Six Town Housing to name a few.

Preventing Homelessness is the key objective. Homeless prevention and meaningful response can only be achieved on a system-wide, multi-agency basis.

The Homeless partnership has therefore continued to work as a collective and continues to comprise and be delivered on the seven key priorities and themes:

- Prevention
- Person
- Property

- Promote
- Purpose
- Place
- Partnership

The underpinning action plan, key activities within include:

- Specific awareness raising for young people around homelessness
- Promoting life skills and managing debt in all situations.
- Early interventions in all aspects and not just housing but Health, Childrens & Adults services including external agencies and partners.
- Early tenancy sustainment support for tenants and people at risk of homelessness.
- Performance and data measured correctly for local needs, as well as national and regional insight to align resources and react positively to increasing trends and demands. Proactive approach rather than reactive which provides better outcomes.
- 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 with operational pathways
- 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 Council and Six Town Housing (STH) are still working together to ensure they have a robust and deliverable tenancy sustainment strategy for all our social tenants and tenancies that form the majority of our homelessness move on accommodation. The strategy will provide clear strategic direction, outcomes and expectations in how STH and their partners seek to sustain tenancies and accommodation to better prevent homelessness, and which is becoming ever more important due to the increasing demands and trends of 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 to help reduce the demands on our 'front door' and Council duty.

The sustainment strategy once approved 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 service needs greater capacity to align with better prevention work but also the sustainment of accommodation linked with the Councils Neighbourhood model and the Lets Do It! Strategy. This approach is also vital to supporting and linking in with other community resources such as Six Town Housing and their housing officer capacity across our most deprived neighbourhoods to prevent homelessness.

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. This strategy will be led by STH involving key partners including the Council's Adult and children Services, GMCA, DWP, Health services, Housing Associations and GMP. The final strategy is nearing completion and approval.

#### **4.1 Statutory homeless response**

The most recent restructure of services 18 months ago, we designed services to be more focussed and efficient on statutory and non-statutory services based and evidenced on demands at that time but also to make the required savings of circa £250k. Since the restructure numbers have continued to increase as shown in this report and the service is now becoming increasingly under resourced to meet current and future demand.

The service is currently supporting and assisting 964 homeless cases and on average the Council receives around 250 homeless self-referrals / new cases per month (a 300% increase from before Covid 19) and 60+ "duty to refer" cases each month.

In response, the Council Homelessness and Housing Options team:

- manages 115 properties to meet the statutory duty which is a mix of dispersed houses, maisonettes and flats. This portfolio provides a total of 364 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.
- Proactive work with PRS Landlords to avoid Evictions.
- Robust partnership and multi-agency working across all sectors and stakeholders.

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 has now been implemented through a commissioned service with Safenet within the Borough with floating support when appropriate.
- 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 to ensure all services support and meet the Councils corporate parenting responsibilities.
- Asylum and Immigration support services to refugees and asylum seekers through pathways with new commissioned services, Serco and the Home Office.

## **4.2 Support to rough sleepers**

The Council continues to see increases in rough sleeper numbers over the past 12 months with a 1300% increase since 2018/19. The current number of recorded rough sleepers is 34 in our supported accommodation via A Bed for Every Night (ABEN) and other commissioned emergency accommodation with a further 47 rough sleepers supported into longer term move on accommodation. We have recently implemented our additional cold weather provision when temperatures go below zero degrees to ensure all rough sleepers are supported and accommodated during the cold weather. Due to the success of the above provision and funding we currently have 1 known rough sleeper actually on the streets, with whom the outreach service is working closely with to engage and move into appropriate supported accommodation. This number would have been significantly more if this non-statutory provision wasn't developed and available due to best practice operational procedures.

The Council continues to receive additional external funding from GMCA for ABEN and DLUHC via RSi (Rough sleeper initiative) and RSAP (Rough sleeper accommodation programme) and over the past 12 month this has amounted to circa £1m of additional ring fenced funding which is in addition to the Homeless Prevention Grant that all Councils receive to meet their statutory duties.

This funding continues to be invested in commissioned provision through independent partners.

The team with our partners continues to have success in moving rough sleepers into more secure, longer-term accommodation, despite the increase in caseloads.

## **4.3 Asylum dispersal, including refugee crisis (Afghan & Ukrainian).**

Over the past 12 to 18 months demand and funding for asylum and immigration support has significantly increased. Historically the Council typically supported the dispersal of around 40 families each year, through the Home Office and 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.

The current provision and capacity in supporting refugees and asylum seekers in the Borough has increased aligned to the funding and good practice with a more joined up and robust response to meet current and future demands and comprises of:-

- ARAP supported accommodation for the Afghan refugee crisis – 10 family properties dispersed across the Borough and supported via a commissioned partner to approximately 40 people.
- Ukrainian refugee crisis – Supported through two home office schemes – Homes for Ukraine and the Family visa scheme. We currently have 62 hosts and 107 refugees and 4 families via the family visa route with two already placed into permanent housing.
- Statutory homeless services – Pathways into Council accommodation once the Home office determine the immigration status of asylum seekers in their dispersed accommodation in Bury and then duty passes to the Council.
- Multi agency approach with all stakeholders across all sectors, voluntary, faith and public. Recent Strategic Migration partnership group has been set up.

The Home office introduced a new dispersal and resettlement scheme during 2022 and is currently consulting with the NW Local Authorities. Bury is specifically working

collectively with GMCA and the NW RSMP (Regional Strategic Migration Partnership) to provide robust feedback during the consultation phase with the Home office. There is a clear desire to continue to support asylum seekers across Greater Manchester but the lack of affordable and suitable accommodation is now becoming saturated within all 10 LA's and the current number of placements across GM and the NW is disproportionately high when compared to the rest of the UK and other regions.

The new compulsory dispersal and resettlement programme should balance out asylum numbers fairly and equitably across all regions of the UK to ensure the right support and outcomes are achieved. Despite the new dispersal scheme and remit, the expectation and impact over the next 12 months of increased numbers of asylum seekers will still be significant and the projected numbers, therefore demand and numbers will continue to increase in Bury.

The current number of asylum seekers in temporary Home Office accommodation within the Borough is 435. The proposed number for Bury through the consultation would be an increase of 132 to 567 by December 2023. The Home office is currently working to a cluster limit of 1:200 residents which could mean an actual increase to 970 based on current population levels within the Borough with a 100%+ increase. This worse case scenario would mean an increase of Home office and Serco accommodation of over 100% from circa 150 to 300 properties in the PRS. Even the lowest number stated would be extremely challenging in the short and medium term due to the lack of suitable and affordable accommodation within the Borough. The cost-of-living crisis and the general increases in homelessness make the impact of these numbers more significant.

The Home office when factoring in their dispersal and cluster ratios to determine asylum numbers do not include the additionality of the refugee co-hort and their other existing pathways such as ARAP (Afghan) and Homes for Ukrainian and the family visa schemes, in Bury this adds a further circa 150 refugees within the Borough that we are already accommodating and supporting in either permanent or temporary housing or via hosts.

The wider impact is on the Private rented sector which in Bury is already small and expensive, an objective for the Council is the supplement our social housing stock to meet demands by accessing and incentivising PRS landlords to increase access to properties in the PRS for homelessness and people on our housing register and robustly access the 1000+ long terms voids in the PRS. Its likely that we will be competing with Serco for these properties and market forces are likely to increase rents further, make the properties less affordable which would be counter productive and have a negative impact on expected outcomes.

#### **4.4 – UASC – Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker Children**

A recent letter from the Minister of State for Immigration has highlighted the increasing number of unaccompanied asylum seeker children in holding hotels across the UK and the need to place them into more suitable temporary or permanent accommodation via Local Authorities with a temporary incentivised funding stream, phase one until February 2023 and phase 2 from March 2023 onwards.

These children are likely to be suffering trauma and serious distress due to their unfortunate situation and will need individual and specific tailored support to ensure the right positive outcomes are achieved aligned with appropriate accommodation.

Immigration officials will share more data on future forecasts for unaccompanied children so that local authorities can plan and prepare for these future arrivals.



Therefore, at present the increased numbers of UASC to Bury are unknown but a clear action plan will be needed to ensure all situations can be planned and managed to avoid any unnecessary risks and ensure all UASC placed within Bury are appropriately supported and accommodated. Internal discussions are required to agree a lead.

## **5.0 Future strategy and innovation**

The Homeless and Housing Options service continue to be active in identifying and securing funding to explore new delivery models and maximise support for vulnerable people.

At present, over the past 12 months a total of approximately £1m of extra short-term ring-fenced homeless funding has been secured via successful bids since 2021/22.

The wider Housing department needs to be innovative and flex to meet the increasing demands for social and affordable housing over the next 12 months and beyond.

Building more social and affordable housing in partnership is key in the longer term but short terms objectives and strategies are currently being developed to meet the increasing demands for our people that need it the most.

A key strategy in potentially meeting these demands in the short term to medium term will be the empty homes strategy and accessing the 1000+ long term voids in the private rented sector for our most vulnerable families and people.

The continued development and delivery of a Bury Homeless Hub is becoming increasingly important to support our more complex and high need people and would provide a hub of 30 temporary supported self-contained units. This is an important further opportunity to help meet the increasing demands and the gap in supporting our more complex and high need individuals of all ages that are homeless or at risk of homelessness (Rough sleepers, Statutory single homeless and care leavers). This provision will fundamentally change for the better how we are able to support our single homeless in partnership with stakeholders in a modern, safe and fit for purpose building with 24/7 support.

## **6.0 Conclusion / Summary**

There is no doubt that the next 12 months will be extremely challenging for the Council in ensuring we meet our statutory duties and obligations but despite these challenges and demands our strategy and robust delivery will continue and there is confidence we will meet the challenges head on for the benefit of our most vulnerable families and people. Partners must remain focussed around prevention and sustainment activity, to ensure the whole system is robustly supporting all homeless people from rough sleepers to statutory homeless families and single people.

A key issue within Bury is limited access to affordable housing and the small and high-cost private rented sector. Housing supply issues constrain both move-on options for people in emergency accommodation and the opportunities for people to access and maintain independent affordable housing.

It is Council policy that we do not use B&B provision to accommodate our homeless families and customers which is the correct approach and good practice. If the opportunities highlighted within this report are not maximised or delivered to increase the pipeline for suitable and affordable accommodation within the next 12 months, it

may mean unfortunately that we have no other option to consider bed and breakfast and hotel accommodation to meet demand and our Homeless statutory duty as a Local Authority.

The Council continues to robustly deliver the homeless strategy with all stakeholders and the homeless partnership. A partnership steering group meeting in January 2023 will review the action plan and reflect on the past 12 months to re-priorities as needed to include the new challenges such as the cost of living and asylum dispersal. A recent review of the plan objectives show that we are successfully delivering over 80% of the expected outcomes and on track to deliver all objectives over the next 2 / 3 years in a collaborative and partnership approach.

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 and Ukrainians, are welcomed to the borough and the potential impact of the new Home Office Dispersal and resettlement programme
- The challenges of the cost of living and the general increases in Homelessness
- 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.

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**List of Background Papers:-** None.

**Contact Details:-** Phil Cole, Head of Homelessness & Housing Options