

Homelessness, Temporary Accommodation and the Covid Crisis**Report of the Strategic Housing Lead****1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The Covid Crisis which led to the lockdown of much of society at the end of March 2019 posed significant challenges to homelessness services across the Country. With an initial focus on ensuring the safety of temporary accommodation residents and responding to a call from the Government to offer accommodation to all rough sleepers, the Council and Stockport Homes Group (SHG) worked closely alongside partners from across Greater Manchester (GM) and the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to ensure an effective and co-ordinated approach.
- 1.2 This report provides a summary of the initial impact of the Crisis and the response within the Borough, and outlines some of the longer-term legacy issues anticipated, particularly in relation to people falling into financial difficulties and the potential increased incidence of domestic abuse. Key areas of work that were underway at the time the Crisis started, such as reviewing the Council's homelessness strategy are also again taking centre stage as people move back towards a more normalised environment, and these are also referenced within the report.

2. Initial Response

- 2.1 A key initial concern as the Pandemic began to spread within the Community was how to make temporary accommodation within the Borough as safe as possible for staff and residents. With 121 units of temporary accommodation across three schemes, containing both self- contained and shared flats, deep cleaning regimes were introduced alongside strictly enforced social distancing measures and avoiding the use of communal areas. Unfortunately, this led to a reduction in capacity and services available to residents, although support was maintained through telephone and distanced meetings and food was provided to residents where needed.
- 2.2 There were a small number of flats used as emergency overnight accommodation for people at risk of rough sleeping with a dormitory style lay-out, and these were closed before the lock down was announced with people placed into their own rooms or flats. People at particular risk of complications due to underlying health issues were moved into self -contained accommodation when possible, and an extra five 'off site' self-contained flats set up to provide additional capacity.
- 2.3 Fortunately, despite concerns of the potential for an outbreak, no confirmed cases have been seen within the temporary accommodation schemes at the time of writing (mid August 2020), although infection control measures continue with the option of weekly tests for all residents being looked at with colleagues from Public Health.

- 2.4 Ensuring support and the offer of accommodation for all street homeless people was a further concern, with the Government issuing guidance that everyone should be made the offer of a placement. Although the main housing options service moved to a telephone based service at the end of March 2020, face to face outreach work continued through SHG staff in close co-operation with the Police and third sector organisations like the Wellspring who continued to deliver a reduced level of service. A rise in numbers of rough sleepers was experienced at the end of March and into April and May as people were asked to leave lodging arrangements and it became harder to find alternatives due to restrictions on households combining.
- 2.5 To help meet the increased level of demand, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) leased four hotels in the City Centre with support services being provided by partners across the Sub-region. SHG staff volunteered in the hotels although ultimately only 12 Stockport residents took up placements. These were offered the opportunity to move back into the Borough as soon as capacity was available, but a number decided to remain in the hotels where effective services were offered including a food offer and support with mental health and substance misuse issues. The hotels funded through the GMCA ended in June 2020, with all Stockport residents back within local provision.
- 2.6 To help achieve the move on needed to meet need within the Borough, SHG began allocating nearly all available housing stock to homeless people. This was in line with Government guidance to focus on those most in need at the time, with 29 lettings during April alone. Lettings continued throughout the lock down period, with new tenants supported to arrange utilities and at least basic furniture packages to ensure they could move in. Strategic Housing coordinated work with the Stockport Housing Partnership housing providers to ensure that as they began to relet properties they took a similar approach and linked in with the Homelessness service at SHG.
- 2.7 The Wellspring worked closely with the Council and SHG to support people into accepting accommodation, and to change its offer to meet the social distancing requirements and to respond to the immediate needs of the homeless/risk of homeless population. This included changing the food offer to collection only, with hot food provided to the most vulnerable street homeless, and food parcels to all clients. This work linked in directly with the Council's work to coordinate food provision and was supported by the Council and several Stockport based food businesses, including Allied Bakeries (Allied Bakeries have been providing 200 loaves daily for the Wellspring, foodbanks, SHG Pantry service and community/voluntary groups since the start of the lockdown).
- 2.8 The overall numbers of people engaged with by the Housing Options Team during the first quarter of 2020/21 actually fell by 24 percent from the same period in 2019/20, down to 344 from 451. However, within this the makeup of households changed with less families seen, linked to a restriction on evictions from tenancies, offset by more single people struggling to find somewhere to stay, often as a result of 'outstaying their welcome' while sofa surfing.

3. Post lockdown period

- 3.1 As restrictions lifted, the expectation was that an increase in domestic abuse would be seen due to the stresses of lockdown and inability to access services. An operational group was set up by the Safeguarding Lead at the Council to oversee the response and some services did begin to see more calls from people than in the pre-covid period. Arrangements were put in place to jointly manage related homelessness cases with Stockport Without Abuse, but actual numbers seen have remained relatively static.
- 3.2 It is unclear whether this situation will change as schools reopen and cases are more readily identified, and significant publicity has been made available to encourage people not to 'suffer in silence'. Building on the work undertaken during the Covid period and relationships developed, an audit of housing services relating to domestic abuse is being undertaken to ensure provision is as effective and seamless as possible.
- 3.3 Rough sleeper outreach work is also being further developed with additional funding received from the Government's Rough Sleeper Initiative for a 'Navigation Worker'. Based within SHG, this post will work with the most entrenched rough sleepers who have repeatedly declined accommodation or were evicted from it since March. The vast majority of these individuals have multiple and complex needs, and this worker will help people engage with mental health and drug and alcohol services, as well as motivating them to make positive life changes.
- 3.4 The GM Housing First Pilot, providing accommodation with intensive support, also began taking new referrals in August 2020 to provide sustainable homes for homeless people with complex needs, with ten tenancies available in Stockport during 2020/21. A bid to MHCLG for money to purchase additional flats to use as social housing is also now coming to fruition after development delays in the first quarter of the year, with a minimum of six one bedroom properties coming on line over 2020 and the potential for another six by the end of the financial year.
- 3.5 A positive outcome from the Covid Crisis is the way that services and partner agencies have collaborated, and this has included between the statutory and third sector. SHG and the Wellspring are starting joint outreach sessions and co-ordinating visits more effectively to maximise their impact, including looking at co-location opportunities to improve communication.
- 3.6 The Housing Options Team began to offer face to face appointments to customers again during August at SHG's Cornerstone offices, although these are by appointment only at the moment to maintain limits on numbers of people in the building. It is hoped to extend this where guidance and risk assessments permit, particularly for customers who struggle to access services by phone and language barriers exist. This is particularly important for asylum seekers receiving leave to remain in the Country and having to leave Home Office accommodation, where a moratorium on evictions has now ended.
- 3.7 The initial expectation was that the restriction on tenants being evicted would end in August 2020, however there was been a welcome extension of a further month and additional requirements that will filter/restrict cases coming to court with longer lead in periods before possession orders can be obtained. The Housing Options

Team are still working with people where a landlord has expressed that they wish to end tenancies to avoid a cliff edge of homelessness in the future, and the Council has been reaching out through social media and other communication channels to ensure tenants are aware of the services available.

4. Future Work

- 4.1 The Council's current homelessness strategy comes to an end in April 2021 and work is underway to identify key priorities for the future. Given the uncertainty around Covid and its impacts, this will be for a two-year period and aims to draw in all partners across the Borough and ensure alignment with work on a GM level.
- 4.2 A full review of homelessness in the Borough is currently underway, with a large 'virtual' stakeholder event planned for 16th September. Key objectives will focus upon:
- The ongoing Covid response
 - Tackling homelessness from the private rented sector and increasing the supply of quality homes, including affordable homes
 - Developing improved services and outcomes for people with multiple and complex needs
 - Improving the health and wellbeing of homeless people and identifying levels and types of need
 - The response to domestic abuse across the Borough
 - Expanding social housing and affordable housing provision

5. Conclusion

- 5.1 The Covid Crisis has posed a number of challenges for homelessness services, with some still likely to be felt in relation to evictions by landlords, the economic situation and domestic abuse. There are also concerns that future increases in infection levels or an outbreak in a temporary accommodation scheme could prove problematic over the winter period. At the same time, services have sought to develop and evolve to meet changing circumstances, developing more effective working relationships and new approaches. The development of a new homelessness strategy over the course of the year provides a real opportunity to build on existing work as well as deal with the legacy of the Covid Crisis.

Further information

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