

**WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL**  
**ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**  
**THURSDAY 19 JANUARY 2017**  
**HOMELESSNESS UPDATE**  
**REPORT OF THE GROUP MANAGER FOR REVENUES AND HOUSING SUPPORT**  
**(Contact: Jon Dearing, Tel: (01993) 861221)**

The report is for information.

**1. PURPOSE**

To update on the current situation in relation to homelessness and associated future challenges.

**2. RECOMMENDATION**

That the content of the report be noted.

**3. BACKGROUND**

- 3.1. This report is intended to give Members an update in relation to the two key strands of homelessness within the District; the general duty and need within WODC and the provision of homelessness services to those with complex needs. Information is also provided in relation to the future changes and challenges.
- 3.2. As mentioned above, the homelessness response within the District can be divided into two main strands. There is the general homelessness duty that WODC has a Housing Authority and the provision of specialist support services to those individuals that have 'complex needs' (i.e.: are homeless but also have mental health issues; drug/alcohol issues; anti-social behaviour etc.).
- 3.3. **Homeless Pathway.** Following Oxfordshire County Council's announcement in early 2016 that they would be phasing a withdrawal of funding for complex needs provision, this has been the focus of a County-wide review and a report to WODC's Cabinet on 21<sup>st</sup> September 2016. A detailed update in relation to this piece of work is provided as Appendix A.
- 3.4. **General Homelessness Duty.** The Council, of course, also has legal responsibilities in relation to all homelessness within the District. In order to provide some insight into the complexities around these responsibilities it would be useful to explain what are known as the 'five tests'. Upon a household/individual presenting to the Authority as homeless the Housing officer must establish whether they are:
  - I. **Homeless.** That is that they do not have (or within the next 28 days, will not have) accommodation available to them that is reasonable and suitable for them and their household to live in. An applicant can therefore have a roof over their head but be accepted as 'homeless at home'.
  - II. **Eligible.** It must be established that they are legally eligible for assistance. For example, their status as a UK citizen and their 'leave to remain' in the UK must be verified.

- III. **In Priority Need.** There is an assessment of their need in terms of their vulnerability. Those that can be accepted as in priority need are, for example, households including dependent children; households where a family member is pregnant; households where a family member has a physical disability or mental health issues.
  - IV. **Intentionally Homeless.** The extent to which the applicant/s own action, or inaction, contributed to their homelessness (or threatened homelessness) is an important factor. For example, the Council will not generally have a duty to someone who is homeless because they have rent arrears with their current landlord.
  - V. **Local Connection.** In order for WODC to have a duty to a household/individual making a homelessness application they must have a connection to the District, as defined in Section 11 of the WODC Housing Allocations Policy (Appendix C). If an applicant meets the other four tests a homelessness duty would exist but it would be for WODC to establish which other part of the country they had a local connection to and then liaise with that Housing Authority.
- 3.5. The Revenues and Housing Support Service keeps detailed records on Homelessness activity, which we are required to report (quarterly) to the Department for Communities and Local Government. The following summarises the trends over the last two years:
- As shown in Appendix B, apart from a spike in winter 2015, the number of homelessness applications (as well as the number of those being determined as eligible, unintentional and in priority need) has remained at a consistent level over the last two years. The graph at Appendix B also shows that the number of homeless applications made as a result of rent or mortgage arrears are very low; being at zero since June 2015.
  - On average, 86% of households presenting as homeless are considered in priority need because they either include at least one dependent child and/or a family member who is pregnant.
  - The second most common reason for being considered in priority need (in fact the total remaining 14% during 2015/16 and 2016/17) is physical disability or mental illness.
  - The three most common reasons for making a homelessness application are:
    - I. Parents no longer being willing to accommodate adult children within the family home,
    - II. Non-violent breakdown of a relationship,
    - III. Termination of a Private Assured Shorthold Tenancy (for example, where the owner has decided to sell the property or re-occupy it themselves).
  - The work of the Housing Team is very much focused on prevention. However, for those who cannot be prevented from becoming homeless, the most common outcome is temporary emergency accommodation followed by a tenancy with a Registered Provider.

3.6. Homelessness is a continuous problem and there are some future challenges that need consideration, discussion and policy change as we move forward. The key issues on the horizon are:

- I. Availability of housing; in terms of the Private Rented Sector, the availability of new affordable homes and the development programmes of Registered Providers within the District (in particular Cottsway Housing Association).
- II. Availability and cost of Emergency Accommodation. The use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation is not considered ideal by the Authority, the clients, the voluntary/community sector organisations or the LA Ombudsman (who recommend that no household should spend more than six weeks in this type of accommodation).
- III. The availability of funding for the Homeless Pathway (see Appendix A) from April 2020. The current pooled County/OCC/District financial contributions are only guaranteed until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020. The withdrawal of the County Council's contribution, in particular, will pose significant challenges.
- IV. The continued impact of welfare reform; and in particular the impact of the lower Benefit Cap which took effect in West Oxfordshire from 7<sup>th</sup> November 2016 and the continued roll-out of Universal Credit. The impact of these changes makes it increasingly difficult for households to maintain rental payments (in particularly private sector rents) and maintain their existing tenancies.
- V. The introduction of a Homeless Prevention duty within England, similar to that already introduced within Wales. There are several measures, and new legal duties, that the Government are proposing to introduce as part of the Housing Reduction Bill (currently being considered by the House of Commons). Clause 4 of the Bill imposes an extended duty on Housing Authorities to take reasonable steps to help prevent any eligible person who is at risk of homelessness from becoming homeless. The Bill extends the period for which people are considered threatened with homelessness from 28 to 56 days before they are likely to become homeless. The changes will mean that intensive prevention activity will commence much earlier and not just with those in priority need. New burdens funding is likely to be awarded to support these new requirements but details have not yet been announced.

#### **4. ALTERNATIVES/OPTIONS**

4.1. None applicable.

#### **5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

5.1. There are no financial implications associated with this report.

## **6. RISKS**

6.1. There are no risks associated with the report.

## **7. REASONS**

7.1. To update on the current position in relation to homelessness within the District.

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Background Papers:

None