

FAREHAM

BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report to Housing Scrutiny Panel

Date **11 July 2019**

Report of: **Head of Housing and Benefits**

Subject: **REVIEW OF HOMELESSNESS**

SUMMARY

It is a statutory requirement for the Council to publish a homelessness strategy that sets out its plans to prevent and tackle homelessness in the area. A comprehensive review of homelessness in Fareham is currently underway and has identified key priority areas for the Council to focus on. These are in keeping with the national agenda on homelessness and dovetail with the priorities set out in the Council's Corporate Strategy and the Homelessness Reduction Act.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the Housing Scrutiny Panel consider and comment upon the findings from the review of homelessness in Fareham as set out in this report thus enabling the production of a draft homelessness strategy. This strategy will be presented to the September meeting of the Executive to seek approval for a period of public consultation.

INTRODUCTION

1. The Homelessness Act 2002 places a duty on all local authorities to carry out a review of homelessness in their area and use the findings to formulate and publish a strategy for the future.
2. There have been a number of significant changes since our last homelessness strategy was published, including the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act in 2018 which was the largest reform of homelessness legislation since 1977.

PAST ACHIEVEMENTS

3. In developing our next strategy, it is useful to reflect upon the objectives and outcomes of our previous strategy. The last strategy formally covered the period 2014 – 2017 and contained 4 key objectives, with specific actions under each objective:
4. Annual reports were made to the then Housing Policy Development and Review Panel to show the progress made in delivering the action plan. However, during the period of the last strategy other events locally and nationally influenced the direction of some of the actions.

Objective 1: *To provide advice, assistance and support to enable homeless and vulnerable households to address their housing needs and to lead independent lives.*

5. The Housing Options Team began a large scale, systems-thinking review of its service in 2015 and identified new and better ways of working. We removed the need for customers to complete housing waiting list application forms and instead invited anyone who had any sort of housing problem or query to talk to a member of the Housing Options Team. The nature of the interviews became more focused on understanding the problem and encouraged a more open, two-way process to find the right solution to each customers problem.
6. This new approach meant that not only were we assisting more people, we were also spending a far longer period of time with them. Therefore, to ensure we were able to meet this demand and to take into account the additional duties placed upon us by the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act, we increased the number of Housing Options Officers from six posts to seven.
7. The number of customers approaching the Housing Options Team for help and advice has grown steadily since the start of the last strategy, from 873 in 2014/15 to 1,346 in 2018/19.

Objective 2: *Adopt sustainable initiatives that deliver housing solutions accessible to those in housing need and that minimises reliance on the use of temporary accommodation*

8. The level of customer demand for assistance set against the availability of social housing and private rental accommodation in the area means that we have not and probably cannot completely eradicate the need to use temporary accommodation.
9. We have seen a reduction in the number of young people and families placed in Bed & Breakfast accommodation however the number of single people and couples has remained fairly static.

10. Whilst it is disappointing that we still find ourselves using B&B at all, the fact that we have been able to show some decline in use is an achievement when set against the increasing demand for services (as mentioned earlier).
11. We have achieved a greater degree of success in enabling customers to access the private rented sector at an earlier stage in the homelessness process, both through the changes in our approach to the advice and support given and in the use of loans to help customers meet the deposit and rent-in-advance requirements of securing private rented accommodation. Since the inception of the last strategy, we have developed closer ties with the Housing Benefit team which has led to an increase in the use of Discretionary Housing Payments for this purpose.
12. We have continued to develop and improve our FareLets service, and now have a total of 55 landlords working with us, providing 76 tenancies for our customers.
13. Following a successful bid for additional funds to Central Government, we are now further improving the offer we can make to landlords wishing to join our FareLets service, in particular the introduction of an additional Tenancy Support Officer to help vulnerable tenants maintain their tenancies and thus reduce the risk of repeated homelessness.
14. We are also making better use of the limited social housing stock. Rather than trying to cater for all those who desire social housing, we focus on those who have an identified need for such housing and for whom social housing offers the most realistic opportunity to resolve that need.

Objective 3: *Wherever possible, to prevent homelessness from occurring in Fareham by working in partnership with other statutory and independent sector agencies.*

15. We have developed strong working relationships with a number of key agencies and stakeholders to tackle the level of rough sleeping in Fareham.
16. Changes to the structure of Hampshire County Council funding from August 2019 has provided the opportunity to increase the Outreach service for Fareham and Gosport to 1.5 FTE posts.
17. We have recently been successful in a bid to the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, for short term funding to further increase the Outreach Service with an additional 1.6FTE posts, dedicated to people sleeping rough in Fareham. The posts will sit within Two Saints and work alongside the shared service detailed above.
18. The additional 1.6FTE posts will focus on:
 - developing links with prisons and probation services to reduce the number of those leaving custody to no fixed abode,
 - develop more proactive approaches to reconnect rough sleepers to their original district.
 - harness the goodwill of the public, community and faith groups and local businesses to bring together everyone's efforts to support and reduce rough sleeping.

Objective 4: *Monitor the demand on the service and outcomes, to inform future provision and direction.*

19. The introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act forced a review of our IT system. The provider of the system we had been using since 2006 advised us in January 2018 that the existing system could not be redesigned to meet the new data capturing and reporting requirements. As a result, a new system had to be procured and since April 2018 we have been using a system called Locata. The new system has much greater functionality and is enabling improved case monitoring for officers and enhanced analysis of our customers for senior officers to better target resources in the future.

REVIEW OF CURRENT DEMAND AND PROVISION

20. Our review of homelessness in Fareham has included data gathering from internal and external sources.

Fareham's Housing Market

21. The average cost of buying a two-bedroom house in Fareham is £230,000 and the average cost of renting such a property is around £840 per month. For some people, these costs are simply too high and for low income and vulnerable households there is an increasing gap between Local Housing Allowance rates and actual rents due to on-going welfare reforms.
22. High demand for affordable housing is therefore set to continue. Fareham Borough Council's draft Affordable Housing Strategy contains a series of steps that will be taken to deliver more affordable homes over the next five years.

Households approaching the council for help

23. The number of customers approaching the Housing Options Team for help and advice has grown steadily since the start of the last strategy, from 873 in 2014/15 to 1,346 in 2018/19.
24. The main triggers for homelessness in Fareham have remained fairly consistent. Relationship breakdown, eviction by family or friends and the ending of private sector short-hold tenancies are the main causes.
25. We have also seen a small but significant shift from families becoming homeless to single people with increasingly complex needs, in particular around mental and physical health issues and with a changing age profile, toward younger people than would be expected given the general age profile of the Borough. This is a particular issue locally as there are not the sort of supported accommodation options that are available in other areas.
26. Rough sleeping is the most visible form of homelessness and despite significant successes in this area, it is still an issue in the Borough.

PROPOSED OBJECTIVES

27. Our homelessness review has found our approach is delivering effective results in the face of growing demand. It is proposed therefore that we retain our core focus on early intervention and the prevention of homelessness, backed up by high quality joined up support to get people back on their feet when things go wrong. In order to

achieve this, it is proposed that our new Homelessness Strategy will contain the following broad objectives:

1. Meeting Demand
2. Providing Solutions
3. Preventing Homelessness & Supporting Tenancies
4. Ending Rough Sleeping

PROPOSED ACTIONS

28. The Homelessness Strategy will contain an action plan which will give comprehensive details of how Fareham Borough Council will tackle homelessness in the Borough.

Objective 1: *Meeting demand*

29. The nature of homelessness in Fareham is changing. There is a shift from families with children to single people, often needing more complex assistance in order to resolve their homelessness. There is also a changing age profile, with increased numbers of both young and older households. There are problems accessing the private rented sector and home ownership remains out of reach for many.

30. We believe that the first step in meeting these demands is the provision of high quality, consistent housing advice, tailored to the individual and delivered in a sensitive and supportive manner. This is our first and overriding commitment.

31. We will continue to invest in our staff and their training to ensure that they keep up to date with best practice and we will continue to invest in our relationships with key partners.

32. We have recently improved and strengthened the strategic capability within the Housing Options Team, and early work has identified a number of gaps in the information we hold and collect. We will undertake to improve this capacity so as to better inform what we do and place ourselves in a position whereby we can respond more quickly and more effectively to changing demands in the future.

33. Given recent changes to legislation and other developments impacting on housing and homelessness such as the Tenant Fees Act introduced in June this year, we are also aware that our website could provide more information than it does currently. We will also undertake to update all of our factsheets and printed material to ensure they remain relevant to our changing customer base.

Objective 2: *Providing solutions*

34. While ensuring the provision of high-quality advice and information is an essential foundation and necessary to empower those who are able to help themselves, and support those who cannot, it must be backed by effective solutions. It is also clear that not everyone who wants a social housing tenancy can have one, and that this is often not a realistic solution to homelessness or the threat of homelessness.

35. The private rented sector will continue to play an important role in tackling homelessness. Even with the introduction of the Tenant Fees Act in June 2019, we recognise that it can still be difficult for people to access the private sector due to the requirements to find large deposits and rent in advance and because many landlords

are wary of taking on people in receipt of benefits.

36. We will update and improve the offer to private sector landlords as part of our FareLets scheme. It is anticipated that many of the costs of renting privately will be shifted to landlords as a result of the Tenant Fees Act, and we will explore ways to improve the financial benefits to landlords in order to make the FareLets scheme more competitive than it is at present. We have already seen an increase in the number of enquiries in relation to the scheme and hope to capitalise on this and see a growth in the number of affordable, private rented properties.
37. We have already increased the number of Tenancy Support Officers working with households in temporary accommodation since the last strategy was published and will look to extend this service again. We recognise that tenancy support is not only crucial to those households who rely on it, but also in attracting private landlords to work with us.
38. Although we accept the very real difficulties, we think it is still important to commit to a reduction in the use of temporary accommodation and eradicating the use of Bed & Breakfast. This will not happen overnight and will require progress to be made in other areas, such as the Affordable Housing Strategy and the Allocations policy, as well as movement on the building of more affordable homes in the Borough.
39. As a first step, we will aim to reduce the amount of time spent in temporary accommodation and, if we do have to use Bed & Breakfast, we will aim to reduce the amount of time in this accommodation from weeks to days. We will also investigate the use of the private sector to provide more suitable emergency accommodation, as well as investigating options for purchasing property and increasing the number of supported lodgings schemes for younger or more vulnerable single people.

Objective 3: Preventing homelessness & supporting tenancies

40. Many of the objectives set out above will also help to deliver on our third broad aim, to prevent homelessness from occurring in the first place. A large part of this is providing support for those who need it to maintain their tenancies.
41. To further enhance this objective, we will also look at strengthening our mediation capability, whether by engaging the services of an outside agency, or enabling existing staff to receive additional training in this area. Family evictions and evictions by friends are the two leading causes of homelessness in the Borough, and if we are to tackle homelessness we need to find a way of reducing these numbers. We will also look at utilising the expertise of partner agencies such as Inclusion Services to provide on-going support to those with substance misuse issues.
42. We will explore how we can develop better working relationships with key agencies, such as Social Services and Mental Health Teams, domestic violence agencies, Probation and substance misuse services, with the aim being to formalise joint working arrangements.

Objective 4: Ending street homelessness

43. Street homelessness is the most visible form of homelessness and, perhaps, the most challenging to deal with. It is also one of the costliest not only in terms of the resources required to effectively tackle it or to the wider community, but also on the lives of those

rough sleeping. We have already taken major steps in trying to tackle the issue in a firm, but compassionate manner, and we will expand on these efforts over the coming years.

44. As detailed previously, we have gained funding from Central Government to increase the number of Outreach workers provided by our partner, Two Saints, by an additional 1.6FTE posts, which will be dedicated to the Fareham area alone. We will explore ways to provide flexible short-term bed spaces thereby ensuring we can meet emergency demand such as hospital discharges and prison releases
45. We have also made plans for a sublet scheme to help accommodate those rough sleeping or ready for move-on from the hostels. The scheme operates by our partner agency, Two Saints, identifying suitable candidates, who are then made an offer of accommodation through the waiting list. Two Saints will manage the tenancy until such time as the customer is ready to do this for themselves. We will also explore how we can move toward the 'Housing First' model.
46. To address growing concerns about street begging we will further explore ways for people to donate in ways that do not inadvertently support and encourage it.

NEXT STEPS

47. Members are asked to provide their views on the proposed objectives and associated actions detailed in this report which will enable officers to produce a draft Homelessness Strategy for presentation to the Executive in September 2019. A period of public consultation will follow and the results of which will be brought back to the Housing Scrutiny Panel in November 2019.
48. Any necessary changes will be incorporated into the document before the Homelessness Strategy is returned to the Executive with a recommendation to adopt it.

Background Papers: None

Reference Papers: None

Enquiries: For further information on this report please contact Caroline Newman (Ext 4645).