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## **Place Scrutiny Committee – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021**

### **Report of the Director of Housing and Community Services**

#### **Homelessness Prevention and Response**

##### **Purpose**

1. This report contains information on the current position in relation to homelessness in the Dudley Borough.

##### **Recommendations**

2. It is recommended that the approach to the response and prevention of homelessness in the Dudley Borough be noted.

It is recommended that Place Scrutiny Committee receives the Homelessness Annual Report and Homelessness Strategy in the new municipal year to maintain sight of the approach and response to homelessness in the Borough.

##### **Background**

3. The Homelessness Prevention and Response Team (HPRT) responds to around 2,500 enquiries each year operating a proactive, prevention focussed approach to homelessness in the Borough. This is evidenced by the relatively low numbers of households who are accepted as unintentionally homeless and in priority need (also known as full duty homelessness). These are usually households containing children or vulnerable adults and where it has not been possible to prevent them from becoming homeless and the local authority has a duty to find alternative housing.
4. During 2019/2020 only 10 households were accepted as having a full homeless duty. Importantly, during the same period over 1,000 households were assisted to prevent homelessness from occurring and is testament to the preventative focus of the service.



5. The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 sought to reform the approach to tackling homelessness to ensure that everyone, regardless of 'priority need', receives some 'real help' in addition to the statutory duty that may be owed only to certain persons. The Act sets out in detail how each case should be managed and has set out in detail the steps that a Local Authority should take to assist every eligible person who is homeless.

Our practice is to take action to prevent homelessness at the earliest possible stage, and we do not wait for someone to become statutorily homeless before assisting. This approach is different to that of many authorities. We accept applications and begin work at a stage where many other services would reach a 'not homeless' decision.

6. Dudley has a low number of rough sleepers. Although the number of people rough sleeping fluctuates at any one point, on the day of the Government's official estimate in November 2020, there were four. There are currently two individuals regularly rough sleeping, one of which is due to move into a property imminently.
7. The Council encourages the community to report people rough sleeping, advertising routes to do so including the national Streetlink scheme. The Council adopts a No Second Night Out model throughout the year which is beyond the statutory requirements to ensure that all rough sleepers have access to and the offer of safe accommodation.

The reasons for becoming homeless or sleeping rough differ for each person. Many of the people who sleep rough display multiple risk factors, which can mean their needs are extremely complex and difficult to resolve. To further aggravate this already complicated issue a small number of individuals within the group of those known to be rough sleeping in Dudley effectively exclude themselves from all existing services due to the complexity of their needs, challenging behaviours, and/or poor housing histories.

To address the issues caused by rough sleeping officers from Dudley MBC chair a multi-agency meeting which sits monthly to discuss and share information about persons known to be sleeping rough and to agree actions. In addition Dudley has implemented the Housing First initiative; a project to provide housing solutions and intensive support to those who have been rough sleeping and to provide outreach street support to those who are reluctant to engage. To date this project has helped several of the more entrenched rough sleepers known in our area into accommodation.



8. Rough sleeping is often the visible side to homelessness however of significant concern to the Borough are the number of people who are assessed as being homeless but do not have a priority need (231 in 2019/20). These are usually single person households or couples without children. The Council makes the best use of its supported housing resources and its own 21,000+ housing stock where possible to make an offer of accommodation to this cohort of people. Where an offer isn't possible or where it is declined, the person/household often goes to live with friends or relatives (often referred to as sofa surfing). These individuals are those who are often most at risk of becoming homeless/sleeping rough in the future as they do not have secure, long term housing in their own right and their circumstances can change at short notice (e.g. relationship breakdown, asked to leave).
9. Dudley has worked hard to prevent the extensive use of Temporary Accommodation that other Councils have, and rarely uses Bed and Breakfast/ Hotel accommodation, particularly for families with children. Temporary accommodation is used only where necessary for short periods whilst other accommodation is sourced and is generally provided within our own stock, including use of the Lye Family Centre. At any point in time there are around 10 households in temporary accommodation.
10. Dudley is fortunate to have a well established Housing Support team which delivers a range of out reach services collectively aimed at sustaining tenancies and preventing homelessness. This work is tailored to the individual but includes checking benefit entitlement, maximising income and providing welfare benefit advice.

The team is split into specialisms and includes a substance misuse service that works closely with Atlantic House, Intensive Family Support Workers which undertake Early Help and Strengthening Families work with Childrens Services, a mediation service and a gardening scheme in partnership with Green Care and Creative Support. In addition, the team undertake, manage and coordinate pre tenancy workshops focussing on education for prospective tenants as well as drop in sessions for more ad hoc support and advice.

The Housing Support service have assisted service users to access in excess of £110,000 one off benefits backdates or grants and in the same period secured benefits and grants exceeding the value of £196,000. In addition the Rents team in Housing Finance have issued over £1m in discretionary housing payments which have supported people through Covid.



11. Dudley has participated in the Housing First Pilot project across the West Midlands Combined Authority area from 2018-2021. Housing First involves supporting individuals who have multiple and complex needs or have adverse tenancy histories into a tenancy as a first step and then providing intensive support to help make the tenancy sustainable. This model has proved successful with 30 individuals due to have been supported into stable housing by the end of the pilot in order to provide security and a foundation to address their wider needs. Without this approach, these individuals would likely create significant demand on a wide range of services with Housing First breaking the 'revolving door' cycle that these individuals often describe as having been trapped in.

12. With a shortening supply of new affordable/social housing alongside increased demand during Covid, the homeless prevention and response team are facing increased pressures on the service as a route into housing rather than its primary function as a statutory safety net. Alongside increasing demands by the number of presentations, the complexity of individual circumstances also places greater pressure on the service. Mental and physical health conditions, learning disabilities, substance misuse and domestic abuse are amongst some of the common vulnerabilities of individuals presenting as homeless, often symptoms of core social issues such as deprivation or Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's).

Each presentation is assessed and considered on the individuals circumstances adopting a multi agency approach to complex cases. The team also have Housing Support workers who will work with and support individuals to explore their housing options and personal housing plan to access accommodation.

13. Supported accommodation plays a significant part in helping to prevent homelessness for both young people and for single adults over 25. The Midland Heart provision, Saltbrook Place, which has now been open for over six years, has helped to provide a housing solution for single people of all ages, whether or not they are in 'priority need'. Saltbrook Place provides a mixture of apartment and en-suite accommodation with residents offered one to one support and help with resettlement to permanent housing.

For our young people, aged under 25, YMCA provide Nightstop, Supported Lodgings, and the Highland Road service, whilst CHADD provide our foyer and young parent schemes. These services are in constant use and we continue to provide short term emergency beds at both CHADD and Highland Road for young people in crisis whilst suitable longer term accommodation is sourced.



14. Dudley continues to look for opportunities to develop its services and meet the changing demands of homelessness in the Borough and has been successful in securing grant funding to achieve this. The Housing First Project attracted funding of approximately £425,000 to provide intensive support as well as tenancy set up costs and crisis funds. Due to the success of the delivery of Housing First in Dudley an additional £78,000 has recently been awarded to fund a further intensive support worker to support an additional eight individuals over two years and to meet the Combined Authorities targets for the pilot – this is because other Councils have not been able to deliver to the same targets.

In November 2020, Dudley was awarded approximately £450,000 through the Next Steps to Accommodation Fund a supported housing scheme which will be operational in Spring 2021. This will provide a much needed resource in the Borough and will be managed by the Homeless Prevention and Response Team.

15. The Homeless Prevention and Response Team make use of the Preventing Repossessions Fund and Housing Assistance Grant Fund to provide one off grants in order to prevent homelessness. In addition, they work with Castle and Crystal Credit Union to provide interest free loans to prevent homelessness. These are considered on a case by case basis and may be used to assist people into accommodation through the payment of a rent deposit for a private tenancy, to stabilise mortgage payments or to assist an individual to meet their tenancy obligations which are placing their tenancy at risk.
16. The Covid pandemic has impacted upon homelessness in both the short and probably long term. Traditionally, private tenants being issued with notices accounted for the greatest cause or risk of homelessness and accounted for 19% of enquiries in 2019/2020. With the ban on evictions, this has changed dramatically in the past 12 months and now the “sofa surfing” proportion of people presenting as roofless and therefore in crisis has grown significantly. This is mainly due to relationship breakdown with people no longer willing to accommodate individuals (largely caused by the lockdown impacts on relationships and financial pressures, and concerns about Covid).
17. The extent of the impact on homelessness as a result of Covid is possibly yet to be fully realised due to the ban on evictions, but it is anticipated that there could be an increase in private landlords issuing possession proceedings once that expires. Work is underway with members of the Homeless Strategy Review Group to plan and mitigate the impact of any increased demands to service.



18. Other emerging issues include the impact of individuals with No Recourse to Public Funds. During the Covid pandemic, the Authority has assisted in finding accommodation through the Government's 'Everyone In' initiative however those individuals who are not eligible to receive public services, including the provision of housing. The Government has recently announced that Councils can continue support rough sleepers in this group, but we are working with other services to EU nationals register their dependents as well as themselves through the EU Settlement Scheme so they do not become ineligible for support.

### **Finance**

19. Homelessness services are funded from general fund housing core budgets and government grants.

### **Law**

20. Homelessness is a statutory service, governed by the Housing Act 1996, Homelessness Act 2002, Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, and associated Codes of Guidance and Statutory Instruments.

### **Equality Impact**

21. An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed in relation to the Homelessness Prevention Strategy and the changes to the Housing Allocations policy.
22. The Public Sector Equality Duty under s.149 Equality Act 2010 places positive duties on the Council not just to eliminate such discrimination, but also to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between groups.

### **Human Resources/Organisational Development**

23. This report has no direct implications for Human Resources or Organisational Development.

### **Commercial/Procurement**

24. This report has no direct procurement or commercial implications.

## **Health, Wellbeing and Safety**

25. Homelessness Prevention and Housing Allocation policies have an important role in delivering health, well-being and safety outcomes as there are identified links between homelessness/rough sleeping and poor health, mental health and mortality rates.



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