

Somerset Homelessness Strategy 2017 - 19

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Purpose of the Report

1. For members to adopt the new Somerset Homelessness Strategy 2017-19.

Public Interest

2. District Councils have a statutory duty to adopt a Homelessness Strategy. Our existing Homelessness Strategy for Somerset (2013-16) sets out the strategic goals for the five Somerset Housing Authorities and was extended to 2018 to enable the authorities to work together on a revised Strategy, and fully understand the potential impacts of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

Recommendation

3. That District Executive adopt the Somerset Homelessness Strategy and Review 2017-19 and the associated SSDC Implementation Plan.

Background

4. In 2002 the Homelessness Act placed a duty on Local Authorities to develop a homeless strategy and an obligation to renew every five years. The last strategy was developed with the four other District Councils in Somerset and was adopted in November 2013. The strategy covered from 2013 to 2016. This was extended (by Portfolio Holder agreement) until 2018 to allow time to work on another countywide one. Whilst work was being carried out on the strategy the Government passed the Homeless Reduction Act 2017.
5. The Homeless Reduction Act is one of the biggest changes in housing legislation for twenty years and it is crucial that the Act's implications are included in any strategy going forward.

Current Situation

6. The five Local Housing Authorities have achieved the majority of objectives in the 2013-16 Strategy.
7. In South Somerset these include:
 - Increased the number of direct access facilities and support services for rough sleepers
 - Preserved the direct access hostel provision in South Somerset despite the withdrawal of revenue funding by the County Council.
 - Been active partners on the Somerset and Avon Rough Sleepers steering group
 - Ensured all staff are adequately trained in casework

- Maintained a register of temporary accommodation and kept the use of Bed & Breakfast to an emergency last resort only
 - Delivered a P2i Hub in each area to prevent young people from becoming homeless during the current contract as issued by the County Council.
 - Task & Finish Review completed for Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) and revised policy adopted in 2017 to ensure these are being utilised in the best way for local residents
 - Worked proactively with local landlords to ensure early intervention to prevent tenants being evicted
 - Increased the provision of 1 and 2 bedroom social housing and ensured planners take evidence from Homefinder Somerset into consideration
 - Agreed a Dangerous Offenders Protocol with the police and prison service to reduce the number of clients released from prison presenting to homeless teams without prior warning – responded to 3-6 cases per year through this route in South Somerset
8. In October 2017, the Government passed the Homelessness Reduction Act, which places further duties on local authorities to prevent homelessness, including:
- An extension of the period during which an Authority should treat someone as threatened with homelessness from 28 days to 56 days.
 - The introduction of Personalised Housing Plans for clients to outline the circumstances of homelessness, the housing needs of the client, any support required to secure and sustain accommodation, steps that the client is required to take along with the steps the Local Authority is required to take to assist the client.
 - A new duty to prevent homelessness for all eligible applicants threatened with homelessness, regardless of priority need.
 - A new duty to relieve homelessness for all eligible homeless applicants, regardless of priority need.
 - A new duty on other public services to notify a Local Housing Authority if they come into contact with someone they think may be homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.
9. Similar legislation was introduced in Wales in 2015 and the following outcomes were experienced by Local Authorities:
- A rise in applications and caseload for Housing Options Officers.
 - A rise in the percentage of cases owed prevention and relief duties.
 - A high dropout rate as a result of client withdrawal or client contact lost.
 - A reduction in full duty acceptances.
 - A reduction in temporary accommodation use.
 - A rise in the number of successful homeless prevention cases.
10. The Act became effective from April 2018 and our Housing & Welfare Team are implementing new procedures to ensure we are fully compliant with the requirements of the Act and provide an excellent service to our customers.

The Strategy

11. The Somerset Homelessness Strategy and review is attached at Appendix 1. It includes an Action Plan with 4 priorities for 2018-19:
- I. Support the transition in services required by the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 to reduce and prevent homelessness.

- II. Support clients to remain in their existing accommodation where appropriate.
 - III. Support clients to access suitable and affordable accommodation where appropriate.
 - IV. Build and maintain strong working relationships across partnerships.
12. The Somerset Homeless Managers Group (HMG) will be responsible for the delivery of this strategy and action plan, and for monitoring progress against actions and targets.

SSDC Implementation of the Strategy

13. As the Strategy is county wide and over-arching, we have drafted a local SSDC Implementation Plan to ensure we are delivering each aspect of the Strategy relevant to South Somerset, and closely monitoring progress against each action. This is attached below.

Financial Implications

14. Any resources required to deliver the Actions are identified in the Action Plan. We also have a detailed SSDC Delivery Plan for the Homeless Reduction Act which has the support of the Ministry of Housing & Local Government and has been approved (and will be monitored by) SLT – this includes the allocation of resources against each aspect of delivery.

Corporate Priority Implications

15. Council Plan 2016 – 2021:
- Minimise homelessness and rough sleeping.
 - Meet the new duties of the Homeless Reduction Act 2017

Carbon Emissions and Climate Change Implications

16. None

Equality and Diversity Implications

17. A comprehensive Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out County-wide as part of the preparation of the strategy and will be monitored by the Somerset Homeless Managers Group. In addition a further EqA has been completed on our SSDC Implementation Plan which has identified a number of positive impacts as a result of the Strategy being delivered.

Background Papers

Portfolio Holders Decision Countywide Homeless Strategy – Sept 2016 and Dec 17
Somerset Homeless Strategy 2013 - 16
District Executive Minutes & Agenda, November 2013

What is SSDC doing locally to deliver the County-wide Action plan in South Somerset?

Priority 1: Support the transition in services required by the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 to reduce and prevent homelessness	
1.1 Address any staffing skill gaps by recruiting/retraining individuals to effectively deliver what is required by the Act	SSDC has received approx. £49k pa for 3 years in Government New Burdens funding. Assessment of staffing required in Housing has been carried out and we will recruit staff to deliver the service both through Transformation Phase 2/3 and potentially 2 FTE additional specialist staff during 2018. All staff are undergoing HRA specific training, in particular use of the new Personal Housing Plans.
1.2 Share best practice in delivering the Act amongst Somerset Homelessness Managers & Officers	The Housing & Welfare Manager represents SSDC on the Homeless Managers Group and expertise/new developments/training is being shared on a monthly basis to help the 5 LAs respond consistently to the Act. Regular meetings will also take place over the year with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure good practice
1.3 Develop protocols for Public Services, Housing Providers & all other Agencies to refer clients they believe to be homeless or at risk of homelessness	The Housing & Welfare Team are designing new procedures and forms so that all agencies can easily refer clients to SSDC. The effectiveness of this, and numbers of referrals, will be closely monitored. Forms will be consistent with other districts so County-wide agencies can refer easily.
1.4 Maximise partnerships with all existing service providers to ensure the quality of support provided to clients	We have drafted a list of relevant local service providers which we can draw on as part of each client's individual Personal Housing Plan, identifying who they should contact and/or who we should refer to, e.g. Drug & Alcohol services, Citizens Advice etc. The client will sign their PHP to show commitment to working with those agencies. We are currently attending briefings of a number of partnerships/agencies to raise their awareness of the HRA.
Priority 2: Support clients to remain in their existing accommodation where appropriate	
2.1 Review options and availability of tenancy support services both for families and single homeless clients	In 2016-2018 we are working with Yeovil4Family to provide Floating Support for single people and families. This model has proved very successful with 68 families and 29 individuals supported in 2016-17. We are in discussions with a number of floating support providers to provide services from April 2018 onwards as part of our duties under the HRA, and have earmarked approx. £80k for this.
2.2 Review the countywide Pre Eviction Protocol to take account of the Homelessness Reduction Act	There is legislation around pre- eviction procedures for social landlords, to ensure possession is a last resort. Our team will be represented on the county-wide group to review the existing protocols/procedures across the County to ensure we are liaising closely with social landlords. Our housing team will continue to challenge evictions in court as appropriate.
2.3 Review the initiatives currently in place to prevent the ending of Assured Shorthold Tenancies (AST's) in the Private Rented Sector	Our Housing & Welfare Team support landlords to work with tenants and prevent evictions. Where appropriate we put in floating support, offer debt advice and welfare benefits advice to help people maintain tenancies
2.4 Continue to monitor the effectiveness of the P2i initiative in supporting 16-24 year olds to remain in their homes	P2i is the housing support service for 18-24 year olds, currently delivered in South Somerset by Mendip YMCA. In 2017, 141 people were supported through this service. SSDC is represented on the P2i Monitoring Board.
2.5 Ensure housing/homelessness awareness sessions are promoted in schools & colleges in each District	To be led by SCC, to expand on work already initiated by YMCA and Taunton Action for the Homeless.
2.6 Evaluate the "stay safe" at home options available for victims of domestic violence where this choice is suitable.	While there has been a reduction in Refuges in Somerset (now only 1 in Taunton), through the face to face interviews and PHPs all suitable options will be considered for victims of domestic violence. HFS Policy and banding has also been reviewed to ensure consistency across the County.

Where ‘stay safe’ at home is not an option, review banding, policy and processes around domestic violence to ensure consistency.	
2.7 Explore the options to provide mediation services to different age groups/client groups	We are currently looking for a mediation agency to provide this service in South Somerset. This is a crucial element of delivering the HRA and we have £10k set aside in the Housing & Welfare Budget to deliver this. Staff will also be trained in mediation skills for working directly with clients.
Priority 3: Support clients to access suitable and affordable alternative accommodation where appropriate	
3.1 Review available options for the use of Social Lettings Agencies and the services offered by existing Social Lettings Agencies to improve access to affordable private rented sector accommodation	Sedgemoor and West Somerset have set up successful lettings agencies. They are managed by the council and are enabling increased options for tenants seeking good quality and affordable private rented sector accommodation. Initial work on a feasibility study of setting up our own social lettings agency in South Somerset has been carried out.
3.2 Reduce the impact that Universal Credit is having on private landlords and agents shying away from households in receipt	Our SSDC Welfare Advice team and our Housing team support clients applying for and managing their UC claims. We work closely with the DWP Partnership Manager to resolve complex cases and liaise directly with landlords to reassure them that rent can be paid. We raise awareness of UC through our regular Landlord Forum and newsletter.
3.3 Continue the development of the Tenant Accreditation Schemes and ensure consistency provision and availability throughout the County	Tenancy Accreditation is currently delivered through Homegroup to our tenants at Pathways Hostel. In 2017/18, 93% of their tenants engaged with the Home Achievement Programme. We are looking to expand the scheme to cover other clients across the district to improve their ability to maintain a tenancy and live independently; we have ringfenced £10k in the Housing & Welfare budget to develop this.
3.4 Monitor the success of the Lodgings Scheme in Sedgemoor, Taunton Deane & W Somerset and consider roll out to other Somerset Districts	Once the other schemes have been evaluated we will explore options for this scheme, for South Somerset.
3.5 Explore options to increase the number of single units available to single homeless clients, particularly the 25-34 year age group	Our Strategic Housing Team ensure that suitable property mixes are sought when new affordable housing schemes come forward, to include an appropriate proportion of 1 bed properties. SSDC has also recently allocated capital funding for BCHA for 5 x 2 bed properties for shared move-on from supported housing.
3.6 Work with social housing providers to ensure that there are transparent and fair tenant selection practices. Monitor skipping reasons more closely.	This will be monitored closely through HMG and HFS monitoring board
3.7 Develop Somerset wide Rough Sleepers Strategy	Our most recent rough sleeper count totalled 4 in South Somerset. We work closely with (and fund) the rough sleeper outreach team at Pathways hostel and work with rough sleepers on a range of options to help them into suitable accommodation. We instigate emergency cold weather provision on a number of occasions during winter months as the temperature drops below zero, to offer all rough sleepers a bed for the night.
3.8 Raise awareness amongst Planners and Enabling Teams on the need and demand for particular units of accommodation	SSDC has a thorough analysis of the requirements for particular units of accommodation in various locations; this translates into tailored requirements into individual Section 106 Agreements.

Priority 4: Continue to build and maintain strong working partnerships to deliver cost effective and responsive services	
4.1 Improve partnership working between Community Mental Health Teams and Drug/Alcohol dependency support to improve outcomes for dual diagnosis clients	Working with these agencies will become a crucial aspect of our new individual Personalised Housing Plans. From 1 st April we will allocate a 2 hour appointment for each client so that their full circumstances can be taken into account and tailored solutions discussed. We are developing new referral pathways and each client will have a commitment to maintaining their engagement with these services as appropriate.
4.2 Continue to work with Community Mental Health Teams, Hospitals, Prisons and Probation to develop a protocol to ensure that clients are not discharged/released without suitable accommodation	<p>We liaise closely with prisons, mental health teams and hospitals in South Somerset to try to find suitable accommodation for people being discharged, however we experience an increased number of last-minute/emergency cases. We are developing a much clearer referral pathway which will ensure these providers give us much more warning/preparation time to work with clients before their release/discharge, in order to avoid them becoming homeless.</p> <p>The Dangerous Offenders protocol is currently being reviewed with Probation services across Somerset, Bristol and B&NES so that we are better co-ordinated across the region to support these clients.</p>
4.3 Work with Registered Providers to maximise the creation of new properties using creative design solutions in the right locations	Our Affordable Housing Delivery Programme is tailored to take this into account. Where viability forces a lower level of affordable housing under planning obligations, we ensure that it's the most needed properties that are preserved. In addition, SSDC has our own capital budget to build or acquire the most urgently needed properties where required.
4.4 Continue to share best practice within the HMG	The Housing & Welfare Manager represents SSDC on the Homeless Managers Group and expertise/new developments/training is being shared on a monthly basis to help the 5 LAs respond consistently to the Act. Regular meetings will also take place over the year with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure good practice
4.5 Provide briefings for elected Members periodically on the work of HMG	The Housing & Welfare Manager provides an update at the Housing Portfolio Briefing for all Members (quarterly)

In addition a high priority for SSDC is maintaining a range of suitable temporary accommodation for use when required, and spreading the risk across a range of social housing providers. This will be crucial for our ongoing priority of preventing homelessness and the delivery of the Homeless Reduction Act.