

## **HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL**

<b>Title/Subject Matter:</b>	Homelessness Strategy
<b>Meeting/Date:</b>	Cabinet – 12th October 2017
<b>Executive Portfolio:</b>	Cllr Ryan Fuller - Deputy Leader and Executive Councillor for Housing and Planning
<b>Report by:</b>	Head of Customer Services
<b>Ward(s) affected:</b>	All

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### **Executive Summary:**

The Huntingdonshire Homelessness Strategy is a key document setting out how the Council intends to address homelessness issues within the district. It is a sub-strategy to the wider Housing Strategy that was refreshed earlier this year and it is a statutory requirement that the Council has a homelessness strategy.

The Strategy has four main purposes:

- To address the causes of homelessness in the area;
- To introduce initiatives to prevent homelessness wherever possible;
- To ensure that the Council provides sufficient temporary accommodation for those households that are or may become homeless; and
- To ensure that appropriate support is available for people who have previously experienced homelessness in order to prevent it happening again.

The Strategy gives a national and local context to homelessness, explaining the main trends, in particular the growth of homelessness primarily as a result of evictions from private rented sector tenancies.

It also explains the new legislative framework that will be introduced in 2018 when the Homelessness Reduction Act comes into force together with the Trailblazer initiatives being piloted with other agencies. The Trailblazer initiatives aim to re-focus prevention measures in an attempt to stem the flow of homelessness by earlier interventions through a range of agencies working with families.

The Homelessness Strategy, together with the Housing Strategy, explains the options that the Council will follow to deliver an adequate supply of housing providing a range of affordable tenures, to help meet local needs – another key component in the prevention of homelessness by helping households into new homes.

### **Recommendation:**

That Cabinet adopts the Homelessness Strategy 2017

## **1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

- 1.1 The Homelessness Strategy is a major policy item for the Council. The Strategy sets out the key role that the Council plays in preventing homelessness, assisting households where homelessness cannot be prevented and how homelessness can be resolved, primarily by ensuring that there are sufficient options within the private or social rented sectors to provide new homes. The Strategy includes a plan of the actions that the Council will deliver on to help achieve these aims.

## **2. WHY IS THIS REPORT NECESSARY**

- 2.1 There is a statutory requirement for all housing authorities to publish a Homelessness Strategy every 5 years. The refresh of this Strategy was due in 2016 but was held over pending the implementation of the new homelessness statutory framework, contained within the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. The new legislation is due to come into force in April 2018 and much of the action plan focuses on what is required to prepare for the new Act.

## **3. COMMENTS AND OBSERVATIONS OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY**

- 3.1 The Panel were informed that many of the actions proposed are expected to be delivered within the next 12 months and that innovative approaches through the Trailblazer project are likely to identify additional solutions. Actions will be reviewed regularly and the Strategy is a live document which is likely to be refreshed sooner than the 5 year statutory timeframe.

Following a Member's question asking if the Council has considered building homes itself as South Cambridgeshire District Council have done on exemption sites, the Panel were reminded that they are a stock-owning council and that it was generally accepted that the Council does not want to become a social landlord again. However, there are various options being explored through which the Council could help to provide more social housing. A range of options for housing, including modular housing units, are being explored through the Housing Strategy.

Members were concerned about the wider impact of homelessness on residents, with those losing homes often finding it difficult to access jobs, education and other services. The Executive Councillor for Housing and Planning stated that the Council is committed to tackling housing issues to reduce such issues for residents.

A Member raised concerns about the effect of Government changes and further housing development on private landlords as their investments can be affected by housing development where this affects house prices and impacts on their capital appreciation. When asked about how the need to build more housing should be balanced with the impact on private landlords, the Housing Needs and Resources Manager explained that both nationally and locally welfare reforms were making it increasingly difficult for people in private rented homes to move into alternative private rented accommodation when their tenancies end. The increased cost of private renting means that more people are looking for support from local authorities.

It was explained that the current policy for Housing Benefit payments is for payment to claimants but that regulations do allow direct payment to landlords in some cases, such as where there is a record of arrears. Universal Credit

regulations are stricter on when direct payment to landlords can be made so more claimants will receive monthly payments and have to manage their budgets and rent payments as the numbers moving onto Universal Credit increase. While the Council's Rent Deposit and Rent in Advance schemes have been very successful in the past, this solution is increasingly less viable as housing benefit payments are less than market rent for private rentals.

The Panel welcomed the draft Strategy and made a recommendation to Cabinet that they adopt the Homelessness Strategy.

#### **4. KEY IMPACTS / RISKS**

4.1 Homelessness has a devastating effect on households and delivering on the actions contained within the Strategy will help to prevent homelessness and mitigate against its causes. The potential risks are that prevention measures are not successful and that the Council delivers insufficient numbers of affordable housing solutions for households requiring new homes. The Housing Strategy focuses on the delivery of affordable housing, amongst other things, and ensuring that the objectives of that Strategy together with the new Homelessness Strategy are met, will help contribute to the health and wellbeing of our residents, especially those faced with the threat of homelessness.

4.2 As highlighted within the Strategy, the welfare reform programme has been attributed to having an impact on rates of homelessness, particularly where households have been evicted from the private rented sector. With further welfare reforms due, in particular the roll out of Universal Credit, there is a risk that this will further impact homelessness. The full impact of future welfare reforms will need to be assessed as they emerge so that appropriate prevention measures can be investigated and implemented.

#### **5. WHAT ACTIONS WILL BE TAKEN/TIMETABLE FOR IMPLEMENTATION**

5.1 Should the Homelessness Strategy be adopted by Cabinet, it will be effective immediately. A great deal of work has already begun as part of the Homelessness Trailblazer project to pilot new ways of working preventatively, and this work will continue to ensure that the Council is prepared for the implementation of the new legislative framework in 2018. The Action Plan will remain a 'live' document with further areas of work evolving from the pilot initiatives contained within the Trailblazer programme, ensuring that the Council focuses on delivering the most successful prevention activities and initiatives.

5.2 Providing appropriate levels of affordable housing, another key component to the prevention of homelessness, will be monitored through the actions contained within the Housing Strategy Action Plan.

#### **6. LINK TO THE CORPORATE PLAN, STRATEGIC PRIORITIES AND / OR CORPORATE OBJECTIVES**

6.1 The Homelessness Strategy links to specific actions within the Corporate Plan:

- Prevent homelessness where possible by helping households to remain in their current home or find alternative housing (within the Enabling Communities Strategic priority); and
- Ensuring an adequate supply of housing to meet objectively assessed needs (within the Delivering Sustainable Growth Strategic Priority)

#### **7. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1 Preparation of the Homelessness Strategy involves staffing resource that is met within existing budgets. However the Action Plan commits the Council to exploring various activities that will have resource implications, should the Council decide to pursue any of these options. These resource implications will be explored as part of the delivery against the Action Plan.
- 7.2 The cost of providing temporary accommodation for households that become homeless is a significant one. As homelessness has risen the Council has incurred increasing costs as more households have been accommodated in temporary housing. However the most significant resource implications are likely to be associated with the delivery of adequate numbers of affordable housing solutions through the Council's Housing Strategy Action Plan. The cost of providing successful prevention measures, together with these affordable housing solutions will need to be considered as proposals are brought forward.

## **8. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDED DECISIONS**

- 8.1 The Council is required to publish a Homelessness Strategy every 5 years to review homelessness in the area and produce a strategy to say how it will prevent homelessness and fulfil its wider duties under the homelessness legislation.

## **9. LIST OF APPENDICES INCLUDED**

Appendix 1 – Homelessness Review & Strategy – September 2017

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

None

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