



POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 29TH MAY 2018

SUBJECT: HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN 2018

REPORT BY: CORPORATE DIRECTOR - SOCIAL SERVICES AND HOUSING

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 Following a request from the Policy and Resources Committee this report is to provide Members with an overview of our homeless services and introduce the emerging areas of focus we will include in our forthcoming Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan. Members will be informed of the key indicators used to inform the strategy development, the existing local delivery mechanisms and partnerships created to respond to housing need. The report will also highlight areas where more collaboration will be needed both within existing council services and with external partners and stakeholders.

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 requires all Welsh local authorities to undertake a homelessness review and produce a four year homelessness strategy from that review. The five local authorities in Gwent have responded to the requirement to produce and publish a four year homelessness plan by working together to produce a regional strategy, delivered through local and regional action plans. A regional approach was approved by Welsh Government and this takes into account the need to consider more partnership and cross boundary working.
- 2.2 Early findings of the homeless review are:
- The number of households requiring homeless advice and assistance has increased by 72% in the past 12 months.
 - Single person's and smaller units of accommodation do not meet demand,
 - We have seen an increase in the number of homeless cases with mental health conditions
- 2.3 The homeless review will enable us to develop our Action Plan which will be presented to Members later in the year.

3. LINKS TO STRATEGY

- 3.1 The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 requires all Welsh local authorities to undertake a homelessness review and produce a four year homelessness strategy.

- 3.2 The production of a Homelessness Strategy and the delivery of services through a local action plan contributes to the Well-being Goals within the Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015:

*A prosperous Wales** P2: **Improve standards of housing and communities, giving appropriate access to services across the county borough.**

Improving Lives and Communities: Homes in Wales 2010 which sets out the national context on meeting housing need, homelessness and housing related support services.

4. THE REPORT

- 4.1 Further to the Housing (Wales) Act 2014, Local Authorities in Wales must carry out a review of homelessness in their area, and must adopt a strategy to reduce homelessness based on their review. The strategy must address the issues identified in the review and must be formally adopted and published by 31st December 2018. A further report will be submitted prior to December to seek member approval of the proposed strategy for CCBC. In practical terms, several key stages of the strategy development have been completed including the review of homelessness in our area, a stakeholder survey has been completed, and focus group sessions with professionals and support organisations have been held.
- 4.2 Detailed information is still being collected at the time of writing and the final review report cannot be provided at this time. However, we do have a good insight into the information which we can summarise within this report as follows:
- 4.3 The number of households requiring housing advice and assistance has gradually increased since the Housing Act (Wales) 2014 'duty to prevent homelessness' was enacted in 2015. Since that time, welfare reform changes have reduced the Local Housing Allowance rates for single people under 35yrs, the 'bedroom tax' has been introduced for those under-occupying properties and housing benefit caps implemented for larger families. Universal Credit has been introduced to certain households but the full implementation will take place in September 2018. These changes in many cases have added to the existing financial pressures on households resulting in affordability issues for existing rented accommodation.
- 4.4 The most commonly reported cause of homelessness in the borough is loss of rental accommodation, typically through falling into rent arrears. However, rent arrears cases have increased throughout all tenures of housing, not just in the private rental market.
- 4.5 Our Civica housing register is used to record all cases of application to the council for housing and homelessness and this system can provide us with detailed information relating to household's reasons for requiring our services. In 2017/18, 2,224 households approached the council for housing advice and assistance due to the threat of homelessness, which is a threefold increase on the number of presentations received in 2015/16. A breakdown of these presentations shows that - single males (37%), female single parent families (23%) and single females (20%) accounted for 80% of all cases.

Types of emergency accommodation provision:

- 4.6 If a household is actually presenting as homeless on the day, or, the homeless prevention team are unable to relieve or prevent a household from becoming homeless and the household is in a priority need group and eligible for assistance they will be offered emergency accommodation in one of the supported schemes in various locations around the borough. Each of the supported schemes is staffed and managed by Supporting People funded services for example Solas and the Wallich. Each of the four accommodation schemes has different acceptance criteria for age groups and household types to ensure the right balance of need and risks are managed. The schemes are not able to accommodate high risk clients for example with high level social care or substance abuse needs and who are referred to specialist providers for assistance.

- 4.7 There are 55 bed spaces available across the four supported accommodation schemes. Once these are fully utilised, any additional demand for emergency accommodation has to be provided through local bed and breakfast providers. The Wallich support all individuals in B&B accommodation to ensure there is a level of housing related support provision. Over the years, we have, as a last resort, had to rely on bed and breakfast providers to assist us with emergency accommodation needs.
- 4.8 The costs of homeless emergency and supported accommodation provision is paid through housing benefit, however there is a shortfall between the housing benefit and the actual accommodation charge which has to be paid for by the individuals placed. At the end of each financial year the shortfall in payments owed by homeless households has to be paid from the homeless budget, and this has increased year on year. To date we have had financial assistance from Welsh Government to assist with shortfalls in payments owed by our clients. As emergency accommodation provision is more costly, we make every effort to secure move-on accommodation options when we are aware that they are owed a duty of to be housed to reduce any financial burden where possible.
- 4.9 Unless we can secure immediate final housing options, we utilise temporary interim accommodation provision in the private sector which comprises of a mixture of 48 houses and flats, leased by a partner housing association, for the sole use of the council's homelessness service users. We are contracted to pay void costs on these units in the event that we have no homeless household suitable for the accommodation. Last year the void costs for the 48 property scheme was a negligible £3,110 for the whole year, demonstrating near full occupancy throughout the year.

Rough sleeper provisions

- 4.10 In Caerphilly we have not seen evidence of high levels of rough sleepers in the area as is typically reported in the city and port authorities. In the last three years, the annual rough sleeper count, which is conducted on the same night across the whole of Wales for consistency, Caerphilly has identified gradually reducing numbers of actual rough sleepers, whereas the Wales averages are reported to be rising. The statutory requirement to conduct a rough sleeper count is relatively new and the three years worth of data is reported as follows:

Annual Rough Sleeper returns	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Caerphilly	3	4	1
Wales	82	141	188

- 4.11 Whilst we received reports and notifications of rough sleepers throughout the year and work in partnership with a Rough Sleeper team, the annual rough sleeper count provides us with only a one-off snap shot and should not be taken out of context. This point should be considered alongside the number of self reporting cases of rough sleeping, sofa surfing and applicants stating they have no fixed abode. We have been made aware of rough sleepers and street begging in and around town centres however, these are followed up by our rough sleeper coordinator partners Cornerstone Support Services Ltd who make contact with the person, assess their situation, establish what services they may benefit from, such as healthcare, and assist with practical support to access such services.
- 4.12 During the cold weather winter periods, the Caerphilly Churches Night Shelters have been operating to provide a safe, warm overnight place to stay with food and support from a group of volunteers. Initially the night shelters started with a pilot scheme 6 years ago with 3 churches in the Pontllanfraith/Blackwood area. This year 10 churches and their volunteers came together and provided up to 8 bed spaces every night from December 2017 through to just after the recent heavy snowfall in March 2018.

- 4.13 The housing of those leaving custody has changed over the last few years and new arrangements to make early referrals to all agencies have proven to be effective: only those with a vulnerability leaving prison, without accommodation to return to are owed the full housing duty. This has reduced the number of ex-offenders presenting to the council considerably. Where we do have a duty to accommodate, we have early notice that our assistance is needed and additional time to plan for housing.

Partnership working

- 4.14 We actively seek to work with housing related partners. Within the Housing Advice Centre office, we host several colleagues from other service areas:
- Llamau Mediation officer - supports young people to remain in the family home rather than present as homeless. The Llamau Mediation officer routinely achieves an 88% success rate of successful mediation and homelessness prevention.
 - Gofal mental health officers - support to anyone facing homelessness to engage with housing professionals. Failure to manage rent accounts and respond to contact from professionals often leads to eventual eviction proceedings going ahead that might have been avoided earlier. The Gofal mental health officers achieve an excellent level of engagement with clients and prevent many cases of eventual eviction.
 - Llamau Women's Services DV specialist: who intervenes and responds to any request for help and housing in a DV environment. Although a presentation for housing as a result of fleeing domestic violence is a priority need category, the Llamau DV officer works with these households to remain at home and improve safety so as to prevent the upheaval of having to uproot the whole family wherever possible.
 - Cornerstone Support Services, our Rough Sleeper coordinators are based in our Caerphilly family accommodation unit, assisting with housing support and street homelessness incidents. Cornerstone colleagues and Rev. Phillips also work with us each winter to accommodate rough sleepers as described above.
 - Pobl Bond Scheme: the bond scheme officers are present in the Housing Advice centre for one day per week and assess applicants seeking financial assistance to access the rental market.
 - We actively collaborate with Supporting People who provide contracted support providers to both manage and provide housing related support to all clients in our emergency and temporary accommodation. Additional support from Supporting People for homelessness prevention officers to be seconded into our team has been pivotal in the achievement of our positive homeless prevention results.
 - Shelter Cymru provide housing advice surgeries once a week in the Bargoed Citizens Advice Centre, which has been cut from 4 surgeries per week and a weekly presence at the Housing Advice Centre due to staff shortages. Shelter also has an on-line housing advice service.
 - Caerphilly Homes Tenancy Support Officers provide early intervention support to help sustain tenancies and avoid evictions. Where tenancy engagement is proving difficult, assistance from the Homeless Prevention team has been very effective to ensure all evictions are prevented where possible.
 - Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), work with us to help our clients with budgeting help, mortgage rescue, debt relief financial capability skills.
 - Our Supporting People Gateway provide us with the opportunity to refer any homeless service user with a recognised support need through the Gateway service: this mechanism identifies support needs and aligns those needs with the most appropriate agency to provide support. The homeless team referred 51 cases through the Gateway in the last 12 months.

Costs and Funding Pre and Post 2018

- 4.15 Although the introduction of the new homeless prevention duties in November 2015, gave rise to an increase in cases, the number of staff resources has remained the same: 4 Housing Advice officers, who are responsible for investigating and assessing all potentially homeless cases presented to the Council. The only area of staff increase has been through the benefit of homelessness transitional funding which was allocated to assist local authorities to transition from the old legislative regime to the present legal framework. The transitional funding allocation has been generous, allowing us to employ an additional homelessness prevention officer and has given us much needed funding to assist with homeless prevention financial assistance to prevent or relieve homelessness. We have used this funding to train staff on the interpretation of the new housing duties and implement the new code of guidance. With the vast majority of presentations to the service having housing affordability issues, finding alternative affordable accommodation has become increasingly more difficult to achieve and the transitional funding has made it possible for us to demonstrate positive homeless prevention returns for the last few years. Other uses of the transitional funding have been to develop social lettings with a partner housing association, however, the scheme was not successful in attracting sufficient landlords from the private sector so this has discontinued. The winter night shelters for rough sleepers and all associated costs with the annual rough sleeper count have also been resourced through the transitional fund.
- 4.16 For 2018/19 and thereafter, the homeless prevention service has become part of the Authority's core funding arrangements and this will enable us to continue to develop and expand on wider housing options and focus on the necessary resources we need to ensure we provide a full and responsive service. The Homeless Strategy Action Plan will provide details of the areas we will need to focus on in light of the homeless review. Early indications are that we will need to increase the number of officers in response to the 72% increase in new cases in the last 12 months. In addition, we will need to resource access to more single person's housing in the private and social rented sector and shared housing initiatives in all sectors.

Housing Opportunities

- 4.17 On 6th December 2016 the council's housing waiting list changed to a common housing register, incorporating all housing applications for all social housing providers in the Caerphilly borough. Historic council waiting list applications were transposed on the register and the old waiting list points were transferred into one of three bands. The table below (the register dated 16th May 2018) shows the split between the three bands and the numbers of homeless and general housing applicants on the housing register. It must be noted that the housing register changes on a daily basis as new applications and the various back office decisions are determined and recorded.

Band	Homeless Applicant	Housing Register	Total
Band 1	30	89	119
Band 2	39	1744	1783
Band 3	12	2911	2923
Total	81	4744	4825

- 4.18 On average, 50 new on line general housing applications (including requests to transfer housing) are received each week. Weekly homeless applications vary from as few as 20 to as many as 80 requests for homelessness advice and assistance per week. Not all of the homeless cases result in a statutory homeless duty being owed but all cases do require consideration and a decision as to what service the applicant is entitled to receive. Some applicants will be advised that they are not homeless or threatened with homelessness, others will be owed a duty to help to prevent a homeless event occurring, others will be imminently homeless or homeless on the day and emergency assistance provided. The homeless applicants who are recorded in the table above have been assessed as owed a housing duty and have been placed in a band in accordance with the urgency in each case.
- 4.19 Band 1 homeless applicants are those with an urgent need to move, who are in priority need and owed a duty to secure housing, or are owed a duty as a result of violence.
- 4.20 Band 2 homeless applicants are homeless or threatened with homelessness and owed a duty to help to secure accommodation.
- 4.21 Only one suitable offer of accommodation is given to homeless applicants, which if refused can be reviewed. However, if the original offer is subsequently found by the reviewing officer to be suitable, then the homeless duty will end and no further homeless priority banding awarded. If this occurs, homeless applicants can remain on the register, but will be moved down to band 3. During the last 12 months, 6 requests to review the suitability of the homeless offer were received. All 6 of the cases were held: the properties offered were suitable and the homeless duty properly administered.
- 4.22 The duty to accommodate homeless applicants does not have to be through the social housing route. Indeed, those who are currently on the register are in many cases suspended from offers because they have an outstanding former housing debt which excludes them from housing offers until their debt is below £500. Whilst we have a duty to help to find a suitable housing solution, social housing is not an option for most applicants however, there is an overriding expectation that a 'council' house will be provided. As the numbers on the general housing register demonstrates, social housing is in such high demand that we have to administer the limitations on the allocations policy equally for all general and homeless applicants, and, whilst homeless applicants may be in greater need, they are not entitled to social housing if they are unable to comply with the debt criteria within the allocations policy. For those with former housing debts over £500 and without providing evidence of proactively reducing their debt, the only access to housing will be through the private rented sector.
- 4.23 The private rented sector in the borough varies both in rent levels and availability depending on area. In the more sought after towns, rents are much higher and usually unaffordable for many people, especially single people under the age of 35 years. The local housing allowance rate for single people under 35 yrs. is £53.05 per week. For a family with 2 children needing a 3 bedroom house, the local housing allowance would be a maximum of £103.56 per week. A search on the internet is what we recommend applicants do to widen their opportunities for housing but this will often reveal less than a handful of properties that are affordable and usually in areas far from their preferred locations. With the limitations of the private rental market and the limitations of availability on the housing register, homeless applicants have fewer and fewer housing options in the locations they would like to be.
- 4.24 As a Gwent region, the variations of housing opportunities differ across all boroughs. The Newport area generally has good housing options for single people but less so for families. Families in the Caerphilly area are easier to accommodate in social housing stock, providing they will be prepared to move out of their preferred area of choice. The Bl. Gwent county borough area's social housing stock is more expensive than private rentals in the area, and therefore they have greater opportunities for social housing. The Caerphilly area has pockets of low demand and very high demands across the borough so housing opportunities are better in some areas than others.

Recognition:

- 4.25 In November 2017, members of the homeless prevention team, working with Charter Housing Rents team won the Wales Chartered Institute of Housing Innovation Award for the early intervention approach taken and partnership working to prevent homelessness. The same team were asked to present their private sector landlord incentive scheme at the Cymorth Cymru Housing Conference earlier this year to share good practice with other homeless colleagues in different areas of Wales. In relation to other partnership working our Young Person's Accommodation Officer has recently had a examples of her work with Children's Services published in the Wales Housing Quarterly publication, again an example of good practice and coordination, putting the service user at the heart of our service provision.

5. WALES AUDIT OFFICE REPORT ON HOMELESSNESS DEMAND

- 5.1 In January 2018, the Wales Audit Office published a comprehensive report on how local government manages homelessness demand. Whilst the auditors visited several local authorities across Wales to establish an understanding of how various services are achieved locally, Caerphilly was not one of the authorities visited. The statistics reported in the report are taken from the publically available information on the internet. Caerphilly has always achieved a good level of homelessness prevention in comparison to the rest of Wales; however, prevention work can only be achieved with sufficient financial commitment to enable us to provide a variety of solutions to our local homelessness demand. The Audit Report recognises that homelessness is typically a result of:-

- poverty,
- lack of affordable accommodation,
- unintended welfare benefit policy misalignment from Westminster to our devolved state,
- low educational achievement
- high unemployment
- substance misuse and other addictions
- mental health
- Additionally in Wales the homelessness legislation promotes the use of the private rented sector as an effective solution to homeless prevention when the national welfare reform policy has reduced the housing benefit entitlement to this group to levels where rents are massively unaffordable and unsustainable.

6. FUTURE HOUSING CONSIDERATIONS

- 6.1 To access private rental properties, the only affordable and potentially sustainable housing solution for many single people in the Caerphilly borough is to share their housing costs with others. Whilst house sharing in city based authorities and areas with university and college accommodation is accepted as normal, people do not aspire to share housing as a solution to their needs. As noted in the Wales Audit Report, single people account for half of all homelessness applications across wales, and in Caerphilly this is no different.
- 6.2 The general social housing demand is increasing as reflected by the single person applicant numbers recorded on our housing register: up from 1,755 (48.55%) of all applications in Jan 2017 to 2,187 (49.85%) in January 2018. The Local Housing Market Assessment 2018 (currently in draft) tells us that the majority of properties in the county borough are semi-detached (40%) or terraced (35%), at proportions significantly higher than the Welsh average. There is a high proportion of pre-1900 terraced housing in the former mining communities, as is the case in other valleys authorities. There are also a number of large social housing estates comprising predominantly of 2 and 3 bedroom semi-detached properties, which would account for a large proportion of the semi-detached housing stock, particularly in some areas. There are a much lower proportion of detached dwellings in the county borough when compared to the Welsh average (16.3% compared to 27.7% across Wales). The proportion of flats/single person's accommodation is also lower than the Welsh average.

6.3 The single person's social housing stock levels in the borough do not meet demand now and are unlikely to do so unless we can:-

- make shared housing a realistic option,
- re-designate under-utilised stock,
- Insist that housing provider partners who are planning to build social housing have a substantial percentage of single person's housing planned within their schemes.
- Develop new council housing targeted at meeting demand.

Several of the above points are already under consideration by officers and will be reflected and actions monitored through the Homeless Strategy Action Plan and the forward work of the Housing Strategy team.

6.4 The fundamental purpose of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014, Part 2 in Wales is to prevent homelessness occurring in the first instance, or relieve it by finding a sustainable alternative solution. Sourcing properties in the private sector requires us to provide ever increasing financial incentives to encourage private landlords to accept people, usually on benefits, without guarantors, with poor tenancy management skills and a history of debt. Whilst we have relied on the transitional funding grant for the past three years to help us achieve and maintain good levels of homelessness prevention, we will not be able to sustain this level without either more single person's accommodation options in the (more affordable) social housing arena, the provision of house sharing opportunities with social and private housing providers and more staff resources to take earlier action to retain existing tenancies and support new tenancies. We are unable to respond to central government welfare reforms for single people in the private rented sector unless we can do more to encourage shared housing options, with both private landlords and our housing customers. We have shown to good effect that homelessness prevention and relief can work and we will continue to focus our resources to reduce actual homelessness at every opportunity.

7. HOUSING (WALES) ACT 2014, SECTION 95: DUTY TO CO-OPERATE

7.1 In developing the 2014 Housing Act, the Welsh government recognised that tackling homelessness needs a multi-agency response in order to be effective. It introduced a specific duty under Section 95 for local authority social services and housing associations to co-operate with homelessness services. The Wales Audit report summarises that the new duty to co-operate is not working consistently across Wales and that key partners are not always effective in supporting homelessness prevention.

7.2 It can be seen in the all Wales statistical information that presentations from households in rent arrears in the social housing sector in Caerphilly increased from 12 cases in 2015/16 to 60 cases in 2016/17. The 2017/18 data on social housing evictions is currently unavailable. Whilst a duty to co-operate to prevent as many households from becoming homeless as possible, all landlords have a responsibility to manage their revenue account in order to provide a full housing service (including repairs and improvements to its stock). An in-depth analysis of what has led to the 5 fold increase in rent arrears cases in social housing in the borough cannot be considered within the confines of this report; however, there is a case to consider in more detail how our local social landlords are demonstrating their compliance with the Section 95 duty to co-operate to assist us to prevent homelessness in our area. In relation to the Caerphilly Homes social housing providers, a team of Tenancy Support Officers are employed within the Rents Service to identify and take early intervention actions to sustain council tenancies. This team works closely with the Homeless Prevention team to resolve and alleviate the threat of homelessness wherever possible.

8. FURTHER LEGISLATION CHANGES PLANNED

- 8.1 It is the intention of the Welsh Government to remove 'intentionality' from the definition of homelessness for families with children. From 2019, local authorities will have a duty to provide accommodation for intentionally homeless families unless they have previously been found to be intentionally homeless in the past five years.
- 8.2 In effect, any family with children must be accepted as owed a duty of housing and we must disregard the reasons why they lost their former accommodation. It is not possible to estimate the impact that this change in homelessness definition will have at the present time because we are yet to understand the full implications that Universal Credit will have on future homelessness presentations by families with children. However, we have seen from the 2017/18 annual statistical return that single parent families with children are more likely to be threatened with homeless than any other of the client groups recorded.

Caerphilly Homelessness Annual returns 2017/18

	Couples with children	Single parent household Male	Single parent household Female	Single male	Single female	Other households	Total
Rent arrears Social housing	15	3	47	14	11	11	101
Rent arrears private housing	4	1	17	4	6	5	37
Loss of rented or tied accommodation	44	7	69	32	32	27	211

- 8.3 Overall, the Council has been effective in providing a service to those affected by the threat or actual homelessness and through the knowledge base and commitment of funding to this statutory service, we are in a good position to develop an effective Homeless Strategy Action Plan, which will be presented to Members in the autumn.

9. WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS

- 9.1 This report contributes to the Well-being Goals as set out in Links to Strategy above. It is consistent with the five ways of working as defined within the sustainable development principle in the Act in that:

Long Term – supports the sustainability of cohesive communities for tenants and residents; providing a fair and transparent service to promote a stable community environment.

Prevention – supports tenants and assists in the prevention of eviction and homelessness. It supports the well-being of tenants and residents.

Integration – works alongside a wide range of support initiatives

Collaboration – joined up working arrangements within the organisation and with outside agencies to make every effort to work with their tenants and assist them to sustain tenancies.

Involvement – Engages tenants, residents and support agencies in relation to sustainment of tenancies.

10. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 This report is for information purposes only. There are, therefore, no equalities implications arising from the report.

11. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 There are financial implications to funding the future of the homelessness service for the county borough. With the change in the funding arrangement from a protected grant basis to an allocation as part of the overall grant to the Authority, Members and officers must balance the need to provide a statutory service to prevent homelessness and provide accommodation under emergency and temporary circumstances alongside other financial commitments. Debt recovery from customers whose accommodation costs are not provided for under housing benefit entitlements is essential to the overall budget management of the homeless service as a whole: unless maximum recovery can be achieved, the costs to the remainder of the service may in effect reduce the overall budget by more than half.

12. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1 There will be personnel implications as a result of the increase in homeless requests for service in the past 12 months and a review of personnel resources will be addressed as part of the Homeless Strategy Action Plan.

13. CONSULTATIONS

- 13.1 There are no consultation responses that have not been reflected in this report.

14. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 14.1 It is recommended that Members note the contents of the report.

15. REASON FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 15.1 The purpose of the report is for information only.

16. STATUTORY POWER

- 16.1 Housing (Wales) Act 2014.

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Cllr James Pritchard -- Chair of Policy and Resources Committee
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