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| Report for: | Housing and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee |
| Date of meeting: | 13 June 2018 |
| Part: | 1 |
| If Part II, reason: | |

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| Title of report: | Preventing and Tackling Homelessness |
| Contact: | <p>Cllr Margaret Griffiths – Portfolio Holder for Housing</p> <p>Cynthia Hayford – Homeless Prevention & Assessment Team Leader</p> <p>Carly Thomas – Homeless Reduction Project Lead</p> |
| Purpose of report: | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The purpose of this report is to provide the committee with an update on the housing service's progress against the commitments set out in the Homelessness Strategy 2016 - 2020. 2. Provide an update on the Council's preparation for the Homeless Reduction Act, which was implemented on 3 April 2018. |
| Recommendations | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. For members to receive a full progress update on the housing service's approach to preventing and tackling homelessness, and review this in line with the commitments set out in the strategy. 2. For members to note the implications of the outlined challenges and trends impacting on the housing service's response to preventing and tackling homelessness; in particular, the growing demands on the service. |
| Corporate objectives: | <p>Preventing and tackling homelessness contributes to the follow corporate objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A clean, safe and enjoyable environment • Building strong and vibrant communities • Providing good quality affordable homes, in particular for those most in need |
| Implications: | <p><u>Financial</u></p> <p>This report will offer an overview of the financial implications on the homelessness service of both increasing demand, and the introduction of new duties through the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (HRA), and will set out how this strategy will help to offset this.</p> <p>With the increased duties now placed on Housing Authorities,</p> |

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| | applicants are likely to remain in temporary accommodation, which undoubtedly will have an impact on resources. |
| 'Value for money' implications | <p><u>Value for money</u></p> <p>Throughout the Preventing and Tackling Homelessness Strategy there is a commitment to streamlining processes and taking a preventative approach so value for money can be achieved. One area that is key to this is raising standards in the private rented sector.</p> |
| Risk implications | Housing Risk Assessment is presented to the committee on a quarterly basis. |
| Health and safety Implications | There are no direct Health and Safety implications arising from the strategy. |
| Consultees: | <p>Cllr Margaret Griffiths – Portfolio Holder for Housing</p> <p>Natasha Beresford – Strategic Housing Group Manager</p> <p>Emily-Rae Maxwell – Strategy Improvement & Engagement Team Leader</p> <p>Homelessness Forum partners</p> |
| Background papers: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homelessness Strategy 2016-2020 • Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 • Homeless Reduction Act Project Plan • Homeless Link report |
| Glossary of acronyms and any other abbreviations used in this report: | <p>H&COSC – Housing and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee</p> <p>NPSS – National Practitioner Support Service</p> <p>HRA – Homeless Reduction Act</p> <p>MHCLG - Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government</p> <p>HART – Homeless Action Review Team</p> <p>HAS – National Homelessness Advice Service</p> <p>HMO – House of Multiple Occupation</p> |

1. Introduction

- 1.1 In October 2016 the new Preventing and Tackling Homelessness Strategy 2016 – 2020 was presented to the Housing and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee (H&COSC).
- 1.2 It was agreed that H&COSC would take ownership of this strategy and monitor the housing service's performance against the five commitments set out within the strategy.
- 1.3 The purpose of this report is to provide members with a progress update for each of the commitments and outline both national and local considerations that impact upon the council's homelessness service.
- 1.4 This update will include key pieces of work undertaken over the past year by the housing service, including an update on the HRA following its implementation in April 2018 and commitment to achieving a gold standard housing options service, by completing ten local challenges set by the National Practitioners Support Service (NPSS).

2. Homeless Reduction Act update

- 2.1 Detailed guidance and consultation was undertaken by the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Governments (MHCLG) ahead of the implementation of the new Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which subsequently came into effect on 3 April 2018.
- 2.2 All new recruitment in relation to the HRA and Flexible Homeless Support Funding, which was reviewed by H&COSC and subsequently cabinet on 31 July 2017 has been completed and Officers are in post.
- 2.3 The service took the decision to create a secondment opportunity and implement a HRA Project Lead, this post was advertised and implemented with effect from October 2017, which led to a detailed project and communications plan developed by the HRA Project Lead. From the outset of the project, the service took the decision to start working with the principles of the new legislation in advance of the Act's implementation, so as to ensure Officers were sufficiently prepared and confident in the new requirements.
- 2.4 The management of the project has been comprehensive and has seen the housing service leading on the development of not only local but also County arrangements, to ensure a consistent approach to the HRA and joint working wherever possible. The service has led on developing a Local Connection Referral Protocol which has been put into place with all ten districts in Hertfordshire. This is an agreed approach to cases where the applicant's local connection lies with another district in Hertfordshire. MHCLG has requested and been provided with a copy of this to be considered when advising other local authorities in the country on good practice.
- 2.5 Pathways have been developed for key vulnerable client groups. These ensure that the service is notified at the earliest possible point of impending homelessness for these groups. Not only does this maximise the ability to provide meaningful and tailored support to try and prevent/relieve homelessness for that client, but it also improves joint working relationships with local partners.

- 2.6 Ongoing work is also being undertaken to see which of these pathways can be extended across the County.
- 2.7 A Homeless Prevention Hub has been set up as a sub group of the Homeless Forum. This involves all local partners working together to develop a virtual hub and an agreed notification form which focuses on the principle of a single point of access concept for clients.
- 2.8 Personalised Housing Plans are provided to every applicant detailing their housing and support needs. These plans are tailored to the client's needs and are reviewed throughout the process as the client's circumstances change.
- 2.9 New procedures and casework toolkits and have been produced in order to ensure a consistent approach across the service to comply with the new legislation. This has included development of new script information for the council's Customer Service Unit as first point of contact. We have altered the approach process to include a Triage Officer, where all cases are triaged and given initial advice before being referred to the Homeless Prevention Team which has been invaluable. We have been able to achieve a high number of positive outcomes through early intervention in this way. Using New Burdens funding allocated by MHCLG our case management system Civica has been upgraded. This is to ensure we are able to record the new stages of a case in line with the legislative requirements. We also have a new core suite of letter templates, linked to the HRA that still include all relevant case law but have a more personable approach to them, making it easier for clients to understand them.
- 2.10 It cannot be denied that there has been an impact in terms of increased workloads for staff. Average caseloads are around 40-50 cases per officer, there are 5 full time Homeless Prevention & Assessment Officer roles within the service undertaking this casework. There are several factors that contribute to this. These include a significant increase in the administration of new cases, combined with working to the increased duties for a larger pool of applicants as the HRA extends the same level of duty to all applicants provided they are eligible for assistance. There were also legacy cases that had to be completed under the old legislation as these had been opened pre HRA. This has meant that Officers have been working on two different processes within the same system which has increased time spent on each case.
- 2.11 Training has been provided by both NPSS and National Homeless Advice Service. The NPSS having noted the work Dacorum has done has also requested examples of this to be included in a good practice guide for other local authorities.
- 2.12 It is important to highlight that the service has been noted for taking a proactive approach to absorbing this change in legislation. The appointment of the dedicated Project Lead and early recruitment has meant that the service had all additional staff in place ahead of implementation. This has not been the case for many authorities, locally and across the country. The service is now working to new legislation and ensuring we are compliant with all new duties that exist.

3. Strategy update

3.1 To deliver Commitment One: Continue to build partnerships across different sectors and lead Dacorum's response to preventing and tackling homelessness, the housing service has;

- A Homelessness Forum which is strategically led and directed by the Group Manager, Strategic Housing and Chaired by an elected voluntary sector representative, the Chief Executive of DENS. The forum has increasing engagement from the statutory and voluntary sector including local registered providers, charities, Adult Care services, mental health and Police. The service is currently engaging with a number of new organisations, churches and the local MP to increase involvement in the forum and improve outcomes.
- New pathways and referral processes have been developed, with commitment from all relevant organisations, in relation to: Hospital Discharge; - Mental Health; - Prison; - Care Leavers; - Ex Armed Forces; - Domestic Violence.
- The service is actively engaging with DENS, Hertfordshire County Council and other stakeholders, to undertake performance reviews and audits of the Elms contract.
- A virtual homeless hub has been established to ensure the services response to changes in legislation and a mutual referral process for all clients accessing housing advice and prevention services. We now have a referral pathway with Fire Service relating to rough sleepers.
- Developed a communications plan to ensure that our partners and residents are aware of our response to homelessness, which impacts on the whole community. Currently the service is developing a series of short videos with our corporate Communications team to raise awareness of homelessness. As part of our regular updates on the development of key projects, the Homeless Forum issues a quarterly newsletter providing vital information, which includes access to grant funding opportunities to deliver key projects.

3.2 To deliver Commitment Two: Work together with partners and residents to understand the causes of homelessness and increase the help Dacorum services can offer, the housing service has;

- Commissioned a report in partnership with Homeless Link to inform how a Housing First model to support people with complex needs experiencing homelessness into accommodation could be implemented in the borough. The Homelessness Action Review Team (HART) are currently investigating good practice models further and will be developing a model that is in keeping with the local need and demographic of clients. It is intended that a business case on the proposed model will be presented to the Housing Senior Management Team and Portfolio Holder for consideration later in the year.

- No Second Night Out Policy has been developed and implemented, it is currently under review in line with legislative change to ensure it remains fit for purpose.
- Awarded a total £10k of homelessness prevention grants to Voluntary & Community organisations in 2017-18 to fund small projects to prevent and tackle homelessness in Dacorum. Projects include:
 - DENS Housing Legal Clinic – to be based at their newly developed Open Space to offer support for people who do not have secure and stable tenancies and at risk of losing their accommodation.
 - South Hill Centre housing advisor post – work with vulnerable women in Dacorum currently delivered through its ‘Cherished’ activity to include more focussed support round housing.
 - Herts County Council/ Youth Connexions life skills training course for young people (teaching budgeting and home management skills to prevent homelessness)
 - Dacorum Community Trust temporary accommodation starter pack fund- targeting homeless people/ families who attend their offices for practical help and support. Families that have been offered temporary accommodation and referred to them by Council Officers and DENS
- Launched Tenant Academy in September 2017, which allows DBC tenants and leaseholders as well as homeless clients living in housing service temporary accommodation to access training and skills courses.
- Grant funding of £35,000.00 provided to Hightown for Dacorum Safer Haven (refuge in Hemel).
- Grant funding of £5000 provided to Herts Young & Homeless (HYH) to deliver home truth education sessions in secondary schools around the borough.

3.3 To deliver Commitment Three: Improve access, security and stability within the private rented sector and help Dacorum residents to remain in their homes, the housing service has;

- A dedicated Private Sector Housing team has been established for the council and now sits within Strategic Housing. This means the service has a holistic approach to tackling rogue landlords and supporting tenants through housing advice.
- The Private Sector Housing team are now able to take a proactive approach to identifying landlord harassment, retaliatory evictions, and have a new identification marker on the housing register form relating to HMO's to enable us to identify PRS accommodation.

- The housing service have been proactive in raising the profile of Universal Credit and the impact this will have for the Private Rented Sector and Affordable Housing in the borough due to the increased likelihood of arrears and therefore risk of homelessness.
- The housing service has also explored the impact Universal Credit will have for people trying to access the Private Rented Sector and is scoping out the use of discretionary housing payment to cover the first payment whilst an application is being processed.
- We refer cases to Herts Mediation and Living Stable Lives for further support where there is a breakdown in relationship between the tenant and landlord or there is an opportunity to sustain the tenancy.
- Our partnership with the National Landlords Association has meant Dacorum Landlords can now easily access formal training on property management and support through a dedicated advice line.
- Use of Homeless prevention funding to prevent homelessness from the private rented sector and improve access: In the last financial year we have prevented 14 families from becoming homeless from the private sector and provided assistance with deposit payments for accommodation from the Homeless Prevention Fund. The total amount spent in 2017/18 was £10,865, arrangements are made directly with the tenant and landlord, to re-coup this money back into the Homeless Prevention Fund when the deposit is released from the protection scheme.

3.4 To deliver Commitment four: Empower Dacorum residents to make informed decisions about their housing options the housing service has;

- Currently undergoing a review of the website content to make it easier for residents to access information relevant to their situation
- We improved our Enhanced Housing Options toolkit, which is accessible via the Moving with Dacorum site so clients can self-service and access housing advice at all times and ensured that all information is correct in line with current legislation and reflective of local services.
- Created a virtual homeless hub in Dacorum with representatives from key partners to ensure all housing advice given throughout the borough is consistent and in line with legislation and DBC policies.

3.5 To deliver Commitment Five: Reduce the effect of homelessness on young people and families, the housing service has delivered the following:

- We work closely with Herts Mediation to offer impartial and independent mediation for families to help resolve disputes that could lead to homelessness.

- We haven't placed any applicant in Bed & Breakfast since June 2016.
- We provide funding for Herts Young & Homeless to deliver Home truth sessions in secondary schools in Dacorum. The Housing Service regularly evaluates these sessions to ensure that they are effective and have a positive impact on the targeted client group. It is considered that these sessions are valuable in assisting in the prevention of homelessness from this client group.
- We have recently refurbished our temporary accommodation at Leys Road to ensure that households can continue to be accommodated in a safe and secure environment.

4. Conclusion

- 4.1 The housing service is on track to deliver against the five commitments set out in the Preventing and Tackling Homelessness Strategy 2016 – 2020. During 2019, the service will commence a full and formal review of the strategy, ahead of its expiry and to inform the approach and development of the new strategy.
- 4.2 The housing service has successfully achieved ten local challenges set out by the NPSS and has achieved the Gold Standard. We are the first local authority in the Eastern Region and Hertfordshire to achieve this status and the thirteenth in the country.
- 4.3 There have been a number of changes introduced by the Homelessness Reduction Act (2017) which could have impacted upon the progress of the strategy. To avoid this impact, we have formed a Homeless Action Review Team (HART), a formal sub-group of the Homeless Forum, which consists of members from across the housing service and includes other homeless forum members. This is to ensure that our strategy and overall approach to homelessness is consistent and compliant to the new statutory duties.
- 4.4 A significant amount of work has been undertaken over the past couple of months by HART to review each of the five commitments and the group will continue to review its progress in partnership with the Homelessness Forum. The group is also actively undertaking a number of key projects linked to achieving the strategy commitments.

5. Recommendations

- 5.1 For members to note the performance in relation to the delivery of the Preventing and Tackling Homelessness Strategy 2016-2020 and to offer comments.
- 5.2 For members to consider the format and content of the report and advise if there are particular areas of scrutiny that they wish to consider going forward.