

Appendices

None



CABINET REPORT

Report Title

Cabinet Response to the Recommendations from the Overview and Scrutiny Review of Homelessness and Rough Sleepers

AGENDA STATUS:

PUBLIC

Cabinet Meeting Date:	20 January 2021
Key Decision:	No
Within Policy:	Yes
Policy Document:	No
Directorate:	Housing and Wellbeing
Accountable Cabinet Member:	Councillor Stephen Hibbert
Ward(s)	All

1. Purpose

- 1.1 On 11 September 2019, Cabinet received a report on an Overview & Scrutiny Panel Review of Homelessness and Rough Sleepers.
- 1.2 The purpose of this report is to ask Cabinet to approve the response to the Overview & Scrutiny Panel's findings and recommendations.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 It is **recommended** that Cabinet:
 - (a) Accepts Recommendations 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10 and 11 in the Overview & Scrutiny Panel's report on Homelessness and Rough Sleepers; and
 - (b) Congratulates the task and finish group on a high quality and comprehensive report and thanks the group for the time and effort given to produce it.

3. Issues and Choices

3.1 Report Background

3.1.1 At its work programming event in April 2018, the Overview & Scrutiny Committee agreed to carry out a pre-decision review of how Northampton Borough Council and its partners prevent homelessness and respond to those without homes in the borough. An in-depth review commenced in May 2018 and concluded in May 2019.

3.1.2 This review links to the priorities in the Council's Corporate Plan, especially 'Resilient Communities' (helping to prevent, tackle and reduce rough sleeping) and 'More homes, better homes' (helping to implement Northampton's multi-agency homelessness and rough sleeping strategy).

3.1.3 The key lines of enquiry were:

- To gain an understanding of how and why people become homeless
- To gain an understanding of the causes and extent of rough sleeping in the borough, the impact that rough sleeping has on the health, safety and life expectancy of people who are sleeping rough, and the implications for safeguarding and community safety
- To gain an understanding of the work that is currently being undertaken by Northampton Borough Council (NBC), local groups, organisations and voluntary services to engage with rough sleepers
- To consider the effectiveness of the action that is being taken (by NBC and local groups, services and organisations) to help people who are sleeping rough to come off the streets
- To gain an understanding of the 'Housing First' model and consider how best it could be used to reduce rough sleeping in the borough
- To gain an understanding of the nature and extent of 'hidden homelessness' in the borough, including the profile of the people affected and what contact (if any) they have had with NBC, Northampton Partnership Homes or local advice agencies
- To explore various ways of connecting with, and engaging with, harder to reach groups
- To gain an understanding of the specific needs and assistance provided for young people, between the age of 16-25, including care leavers
- To gain an understanding of the specific needs and assistance provided for ex-offenders
- To understand how data, statistics and demographics are gathered and used to meet the needs of rough sleepers, men and women, who are homeless.

3.1.4 A number of meetings were held to gather evidence from a broad range of stakeholders. During this process, a significant amount of evidence was heard.

- 3.1.5 The Overview & Scrutiny Panel's Report includes 11 recommendations. They are broadly focused on how the Council and partner agencies can provide a more joined up approach and response to people who are homeless or sleeping rough.
- 3.1.6 The focus of the recommendations is on multi agency working, increasing the supply of accommodation, the refreshing of Northampton's Rough Sleepers' Strategy, the development of new services and sharing the findings of the Scrutiny Review with Northamptonshire's County Council and Borough and District Councils.
- 3.1.7 A lot has happened, however, since this Overview & Scrutiny Panel Review.

3.2 Protecting rough sleepers from COVID-19

- 3.2.1 In response to Dame Louise Casey's sudden "EVERYONE IN" instruction for local housing authorities to provide housing for rough sleepers and people who have communal sleeping facilities "by the weekend", the Council 'block booked' a total of 85 rooms in the Travelodge Hotel (Gold Street) and the Holiday Inn (Grange Park) for a period of 12 weeks from 27 March 2020.
- 3.2.2 Following an extension of the 'block booking' arrangement until 30 June 2020, the rough sleepers were transferred from the hotels to one of the University of Northampton's halls of residence on 1 July 2020. The hall of residence continued to be used as emergency housing for rough sleepers until 14 December 2020.
- 3.2.3 During the 8½ months that the Council was providing rough sleepers with emergency accommodation, more than 170 men and women spent at least one night in the hotels and/or hall of residence and, of these, 135 were helped to move into settled housing. During the same period, another 73 people (who were at imminent risk of having to sleep rough) were helped to move into settled housing without needing to be placed in emergency accommodation.
- 3.2.4 More than half of the people who were helped to move into settled housing had been sleeping rough for a long time (including dozens of Eastern Europeans who had been living in makeshift shelters and tent encampments on the outskirts of Northampton) or had been sleeping rough for an extended period on a number of occasions
- 3.2.5 Since July 2020, the Council has been working with International Lighthouse (a Northampton-based community interest company) to provide non-UK nationals with specialised casework-based immigration and welfare benefits advice, delivered by native speakers. Many of them have been helped to obtain passports, identification, bank accounts and Universal Credit in order to remove the barriers that have previously prevented them from moving on into settled housing.

3.3 Government funding to provide more homes for rough sleepers

- 3.3.1 In August 2020, the Council made a successful bid for a share of the Government's Next Steps Accommodation Programme (NSAP). It was awarded £607,400 to help meet the cost of providing emergency housing, establishing a 'Somewhere Safe to Stay' Hub and continuing to work with International Lighthouse. It was also awarded £1,819,500 towards the cost of a £3,084,000 scheme to purchase and refurbish 15 one-bedroom homes and 3 five-bedroom HMOs. The balance of £1,264,500 will be met from borrowing through the HRA.

- 3.3.2 This additional funding has enabled Keystage Housing (a Luton-based housing association) to establish a 27-bedroom 'Somewhere Safe to Stay' Hub for homeless men and women, and provided the Council with the funding it needs to purchase and refurbish 15 one-bedroom homes and 3 five-bedroom houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) for use as supported housing for rough sleepers.
- 3.3.3 Another £252k of funding is being provided to enable Northampton Partnership Homes and NAASH to employ two full-time Tenancy Sustainment Officers (one each) to provide the residents of the 15 one-bedroom homes and the 3 five-bedroom HMOs with tenancy support for three years with effect from 1 April 2021.

3.4 Response to Overview & Scrutiny Recommendations

3.4.1 It is recommended that Cabinet accepts 9 of the 11 recommendations in the Overview & Scrutiny Panel's report. Its response to each of the Panel's recommendation is set out below.

3.4.2 RECOMMENDATION 1: The Housing First model is introduced by the Council.

Cabinet Response

- 3.4.3 Although 'Housing First' will still play an important role in helping to tackle rough sleeping in Northampton, its significance has been reduced by the success of the borough's response to "EVERYONE IN" (see Section 3.3 of this report) and a rough sleepers' tenancy sustainment initiative that was introduced in 2018/19.
- 3.4.4 In many respects, the placement of rough sleepers in hotel accommodation was very similar to 'Housing First' in that it provided rough sleepers with an unconditional offer of somewhere safe and warm to stay with access to round-the-clock support. Most of the men and women who stayed in the hotels – including a significant number of Northampton's most entrenched rough sleepers – seized the opportunity to engage with services, address the causes of their homelessness and rebuild their lives.
- 3.4.5 During the past two years, the Council's Street Services Team has been working closely with Northampton Partnership Homes and NAASH to deliver a multi-agency resettlement and tenancy sustainment service for people who have been sleeping rough for a long term or have been caught up in a cycle of repeat homelessness and would not normally be considered for housing by social landlords or private landlords.
- 3.4.6 The rough sleepers' tenancy sustainment initiative has provided a very effective, rapid rehousing pathway for some of the borough's most entrenched rough sleepers.
- 3.4.7 To implement Recommendation 1, government funding will be sought (as part of West Northamptonshire Council's Rough Sleeping Initiative bid) to establish a 'Housing First' pilot scheme in Northampton during the first six months of 2021/22.

3.4.8 **RECOMMENDATION 2: Additional bed spaces are provided to meet the needs of homeless women in the borough.**

Cabinet Response

- 3.4.9 The establishment of the 27-bedroom ‘Somewhere Safe to Stay’ Hub in November 2020 provides an excellent replacement for Northampton’s dormitory-style nightshelter which was forced to close in March 2020 due to COVID-19.
- 3.4.10 Unlike the nightshelter, the ‘Somewhere Safe to Stay’ Hub accommodates men and women and is staffed around the clock. Almost two thirds of its 27 bedrooms are ensuite and great care has been taken, during the design of the layout of the building, to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the women who stay in the Hub.
- 3.4.11 The Council has worked successfully with its partners – especially NAASH and Midland Heart Housing Association – to increase the supply of supported housing and private rented accommodation that is available to meet the needs of men and women who are sleeping rough or at risk of sleeping rough.
- 3.4.12 As explained in Section 3.3 of this report, the Council has been awarded government funding of £1,819,500 towards the cost of a £3,084,000 scheme to purchase and refurbish 15 one-bedroom homes and 3 five-bedroom HMOs to meet the needs of rough sleepers. The balance of £1,264,500 will be met from borrowing through the HRA. These additional homes will be available by the end of March 2021.
- 3.4.13 Recommendation 2 has been implemented.
- 3.4.14 **RECOMMENDATION 3: Housing solutions are found for homeless people (mainly East European) who are not eligible for benefits and are therefore unable to access settled housing.**

Cabinet Response

- 3.4.15 Prior to “EVERYONE IN” in March 2020 (see Section 3.3 of this report), finding housing solutions for non-UK nationals who were not eligible for benefits – including the large cohort of Eastern Europeans who had been sleeping, for many years, in the makeshift shelters and tents on the outskirts of town – was a conundrum.
- 3.4.16 During the 8½ months between 27 March – 14 December 2020, the Council provided more than sixty non-UK nationals with emergency housing. Although many of them were initially unable to move on into settled housing due to the lack of identification, a passport, a bank account or eligibility for Universal Credit, the vast majority were subsequently helped to overcome those barriers during their stay.
- 3.4.17 The involvement of International Lighthouse (see Paragraph 3.2.5) – together with the deficit funding that the Government provided to offset the rent loss resulting from the non-UK nationals’ non-payment of rent – has enabled most of the Eastern Europeans to resolve any outstanding issues in relation to their immigration status and eligibility for benefits. This has enabled them to move on into settled housing.
- 3.4.18 Where a non-UK national is not eligible for benefits, they will be offered assistance in preparing a CV and applying for employment. If language is a barrier to their employment, they will be offered English classes.
- 3.4.19 Recommendation 3 has been implemented.

3.4.20 **RECOMMENDATION 4: Northampton's Rough Sleepers' Strategy is refreshed (with the meaningful involvement of local agencies) to reflect the current homelessness situation.**

Cabinet Response

3.4.21 Northampton's Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy was co-produced with the meaningful involvement of local agencies and following a series of workshops. It was approved by Cabinet in May 2020.

3.4.22 In developing this Strategy, the Council organised a number of stakeholder events:

- On 24 July 2019, a half day multi agency Rough Sleepers Workshop was attended by 50 representatives from local services and organisations;
- On 1 October 2019, a second half day multi agency Rough Sleepers Workshop took place, attended by representatives from a wide range of services and organisations, to review Northampton's strategy for tackling rough sleeping; and
- On 15 November 2019, a half day multi agency Family Homelessness Workshop was attended by 40 people from 16 different organisations. This included Registered Providers, Northamptonshire County Council and a wide range of voluntary and community sector organisations.

3.4.23 During these events, stakeholders identified the strategic priorities and how all services and organisations can work better together to tackle, prevent and reduce homelessness and rough sleeping in Northampton.

3.4.24 Recommendation 4 has been implemented.

3.4.25 **RECOMMENDATION 5: A plan is developed for strengthening equal relationships and partnership working between the Council, partners, organisations and the voluntary sector.**

Cabinet Response

3.4.26 In May and June 2019, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and Homeless Link facilitated a series of mediation sessions that were designed to improve partnership working and relieve tensions between the Council, faith groups and the community and voluntary sector.

3.4.27 With the assistance of the MHCLG and Homeless Link, a plan was developed to encourage co-production, co-operation and communication, and to establish a Single Homelessness Forum that would have an Independent Chair and would be involved in, and consulted on, all issues relating to single homelessness and rough sleeping.

3.4.28 The Single Homelessness Forum has played a key role in building trust between agencies and planning the delivery and/or integration of services. Throughout COVID-19, a core group of Single Homelessness Forum members has met weekly or fortnightly to share information and plan and co-ordinate activity.

- 3.4.29 The Media Releases issued by the Single Homelessness Forum have proved very effective in communicating important points in a consistent and measured way.
- 3.4.30 Recommendation 5 has been implemented.
- 3.4.31 **RECOMMENDATION 6: A social media strategy is developed to ensure that the Council is able to provide members of the public with accurate information about homelessness, rough sleeping and what is being done to tackle it.**

Cabinet Response

- 3.4.32 The Council has substantially increased the amount of information it provides about rough sleeping and homelessness on its website, and it is planning to extend this in January 2021 to include the number of rough sleepers found 'bedded down' during the daily outreach sessions undertaken by its Street Outreach Team.
- 3.4.33 However, as part of the plan to improve partnership working and relieve tensions between the Council, faith groups and the voluntary sector (see Recommendation 6), it was agreed that the Single Homelessness Forum – rather than the Council – will take the lead in engaging with the media on matters relating to rough sleeping.
- 3.4.34 Although careful consideration was given to the merits of developing a social media strategy that provides members of the public with accurate information about homelessness and rough sleeping, it was quickly evident that a lot of the people who are most active on social media are not interested in the facts or, indeed, the truth.
- 3.4.35 Whilst it is not always possible to avoid criticism on social media, the Council's use of its website and the Single Homelessness Forum's Media Releases to provide members of the public with accurate information seems to be working.
- 3.4.36 For these reasons, it is proposed that Recommendation 6 is not implemented.
- 3.4.37 **RECOMMENDATION 7: A multi-agency publicity campaign (supported by an 'alternative giving' scheme and information about how people can help homeless people) is developed to discourage members of the public from giving money to people who are begging.**

Cabinet Response

- 3.4.38 Northampton's Single Homelessness Forum has established a Task and Finish Group to investigate and evaluate a variety of 'alternative giving' schemes operating in different parts of the country, consult with local technology providers to establish what can be developed in Northampton, and make recommendations to the Forum.
- 3.4.39 Although COVID-19 has delayed the work of the Task and Finish Group, members of the Group will be contacting 10 'alternative giving' schemes in January 2021 to gather standard data that will inform the Group's decision making. Depending on when they meet with the local technology providers, it is hoped that the Task and Finish Group will be able to submit its recommendations to the Forum in April 2021.

3.4.40 To implement Recommendation 7, the Single Homelessness Forum will need to establish an 'alternative giving' scheme and place it at the heart of a multi-agency publicity campaign that is designed to show members of the public how they can help homeless people and why they should not give money to people who are begging.

3.4.41 **RECOMMENDATION 8: A copy of [the Overview & Scrutiny Report] is issued to all Councillors within the other sovereign Councils of the proposed West Northamptonshire Unitary Authority – Daventry District Council, Northamptonshire County Council and South Northants Council. The report is also shared with Councillors of the proposed North Northamptonshire Unitary Authority.**

Cabinet Response

3.4.42 Recommendation 8 was implemented by the Council's Democratic Services Team.

3.4.43 **RECOMMENDATION 9: The Council considers updating its recruitment policy to include a commitment to interview of all people who have personal experience of rough sleeping” if they meet the essential criteria in the person specification.**

Cabinet Response

3.4.44 Throughout the past few years, people who have 'lived experience' of rough sleeping have been actively encouraged to volunteer in the nightshelter and apply for paid employment within the Street Outreach Team.

3.4.45 The Human Resources Team has advised, however, that the Council would breach its equal opportunities obligations if it guarantees an interview to an applicant who meets the essential criteria and has slept rough when other applicants who also meet the essential criteria but have not slept rough are not offered an interview.

3.4.46 For these reasons, it is proposed that Recommendation 9 is not implemented.

3.4.47 **RECOMMENDATION 10: Mental health and psychology professionals are consulted on the new homelessness and rough sleeping strategy.**

Cabinet Response

3.4.48 Hundreds of organisations and individuals were consulted on Northampton's new homelessness and rough sleeping strategy, including health professionals.

3.4.49 As explained earlier in this report, Northampton's multi-agency approach to rough sleeping has been completely transformed by "EVERYONE IN" and the way in which rough sleepers have engaged with local services since the end of March 2020.

3.4.50 The establishment of the 'Somewhere Safe to Stay' Hub (a specialist homelessness assessment facility) in November 2020 provides an ideal venue for multi-agency working and will actively encourage the meaningful involvement of mental health and psychology professionals in the planning and provision of care.

3.4.51 Recommendation 10 has been implemented.

3.4.52 **RECOMMENDATION 11:** Whilst acknowledging data protection constraints, an integrated system, hosted by Housing and Wellbeing that can be used by all relevant agencies, is explored by the proposed West Northamptonshire Unitary Authority.

Cabinet Response

3.4.53 This is a very large piece of work that will need to be considered by the new Council in 2021/22 or subsequent years because the primary focus has been to ensure that, by vesting day, the new Council is 'Safe & Legal Plus'.

3.4.54 Work is underway to ensure that the Jigsaw homelessness case management software system can be used by all of the Housing Options and Homelessness staff across the whole of West Northamptonshire.

3.4.55 For these reasons, it is proposed that Recommendation 11 is deferred until 2021/22.

3.5 Choices (Options)

3.5.1 Cabinet could choose not to adopt any of the Overview & Scrutiny Panel's recommendations. However, this is not the preferred option.

3.5.2 Cabinet could choose to adopt all of the Overview & Scrutiny Panel's recommendations. However, this is not the preferred option.

3.5.3 Cabinet could choose to adopt some of the Overview & Scrutiny Panel's recommendations. This is the preferred option and it is recommended that:

- Recommendations 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10 and 11 are accepted and that, for the reasons given in this report, Recommendations 6 and 9 are not implemented.

3.5.4 Cabinet is asked to note that, of the nine recommendations that are recommended for acceptance, six have already been implemented.

4. Implications (including financial implications)

4.1 Policy

4.1.1 The action that the Council is proposing to take is in line with Council policy and reflects the priorities in the Corporate Plan 2019 - 2021.

4.2 Resources and Risk

4.2.1 Implementation of the recommendations in the Overview & Scrutiny Panel's report will be met from the Housing & Wellbeing Service's existing resources.

4.2.2 As a number of the recommendations are expected to result in a reduction in homelessness, their successful implementation will complement a lot of the work that is already being done.

4.2.3 The Housing & Wellbeing Service and Finance Team will set up appropriate arrangements for assessing and monitoring the impact that these actions have on the nature, extent and financial cost of homelessness in the borough. Implementation of the recommendations will be monitored by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

4.3 Legal

4.3.1 It is noted that the following recommendations, made above, have been deferred:

- Recommendation 1 pending provision of grant funding
- Recommendation 7 pending the establishment of an 'alternative giving' scheme
- Recommendation 11 which has been deferred for further consideration by the West Northamptonshire Council in 2021/22

4.3.2 Legal issues will need to be considered in relation to the deferred recommendations as and when they fall to be considered further by Cabinet in due course.

4.4 Equality and Health

4.4.1 Implementation of the recommendations will have a positive impact on people with protected characteristics.

4.4.2 A Community Impact Assessment was completed as part of the Overview and Scrutiny process, and this has been updated to take into account the Overview and Scrutiny Panel's recommendations.

4.5 Consultees (Internal and External)

4.5.1 The Panel took sought evidence from a wide range of Stakeholders and Councillors from Northampton Borough Council:

Internal expert advisors

- Cabinet Member for Housing and Wellbeing, NBC
- Housing Options and Advice Manager, NBC
- Cabinet Member for Community Safety, NBC
- Chair of the Community Safety Partnership (CSP)
- Community Safety Team

External expert advisors

- Head of Protecting Vulnerable Persons, Northamptonshire Police
- Director, NACRO
- Service Director, NAASH
- Director of Public Health, Northamptonshire County Council
- Director, Adult Social Care
- Director, Housing First (England)
- Manager, Northampton Hope Centre
- Service Manager, Salvation Army
- Service Manager, Jesus Army
- Chief Executive, Central Northamptonshire CAB

- Homelessness Charities (eg Shelter, Crisis, Joseph Rowntree Trust, Big Issue)
- Healthwatch Northamptonshire
- Director, Maple Access

4.6 How the Proposals deliver Priority Outcomes

4.6.1 Implementation of the Overview & Scrutiny Panel's recommendations will help meet 3 of the priorities in the Corporate Plan:

- **Resilient communities:** It will help tackle, prevent and reduce homelessness and rough sleeping, and support vulnerable people to achieve their full potential.
- **More homes, better homes:** It will help implement Northampton's multi-agency homelessness and rough sleeping strategy.
- **Exceptional services to be proud of:** It will use public resources effectively and put the customer first.

Appendices

None

Background Papers

Overview & Scrutiny Panel Report on Homelessness and Rough Sleepers May 2019

Phil Harris
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