



Cambridge City Council's response to homelessness during Covid-19 – an update on progress and next steps

To:

Councillor Richard Johnson, Executive Councillor for Housing

Housing Scrutiny Committee 23/06/2020

Report by:

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Wards affected:

Abbey, Arbury, Castle, Cherry Hinton, Coleridge, East Chesterton, King's Hedges, Market, Newnham, Petersfield, Queen Edith's, Romsey, Trumpington, West Chesterton

Non Key Decision

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 At the end of March 2020, and in line with lockdown measures introduced at the time, the Government asked local authorities to ensure that rough sleepers were provided with emergency accommodation to help reduce the risk of transmission of the Covid-19 virus. The City Council, along with partner organisations, working in the homelessness sector, and the County Council have worked in partnership tackle the significant logistical task of identifying those rough sleeping and at immediate risk and securing accommodation

offers for all of them. The Government gave an initial financial commitment (see 8a of this report) and an invitation to apply for further funding as required.

- 1.2 This report updates members on progress to date, broadly outlines phase two of the council's plan - to secure longer term housing options for those currently accommodated on a temporary basis – and explains how officers will manage the process. It explains why the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy, previously due for publication this month, has been delayed and will now be brought before Housing Scrutiny Committee in January 2021.

2. Recommendations

The Executive Councillor is recommended to:

- 2.1 Note the progress the Council has made on rehousing rough sleepers during the Covid-19 pandemic and endorse the proposed principles for delivering the phase two action plan.
- 2.2 Note that a new Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy will be brought to Housing Scrutiny Committee in January 2021

3. Background

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- 3.1 The Council completed a homelessness review in December 2019 and was expecting to approve a new Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy in June 2020. Officers have engaged with partners and Cambridgeshire County Council in relation to the future commissioning of services that support rough sleepers and those in hostels.
- 3.2 Officers have needed to switch focus towards the more immediate challenges presented by the pandemic and its impact on homelessness and there is an acknowledgement that the landscape may be very different as the economy slowly starts to rebuild and local authorities

and government reassess their respective financial positions. For both operational and strategic reasons, therefore, it seems appropriate to defer the strategy until January 2021.

- 3.3 At the start of the lockdown in March, the Government asked local authorities to bring in all rough sleepers from the streets. In partnership with a number of voluntary sector partners delivering homelessness services (along with their own army of volunteers), the NHS and the County Council, Housing Services had placed 140 rough sleepers in accommodation by 29th May.
- 3.4 The accommodation sourced has been a mixture of hotels, council redevelopment sites and temporary accommodation, university residence and private accommodation and, for some accommodation, the council has been required to provide additional security and cleaning services.
- 3.5 Practical support such as meals, toiletries, limited furnishings and other modern conveniences have been delivered to those needing it. Professional support services have been coordinated alongside the practical support elements and daily deliveries of such items have had the additional benefit of acting as an early warning system when service users have had problems. Staff report seeing real changes in some people who have been rough sleeping for long periods. Council partners such as Wintercomfort, Change Grow Live (the Cambridge Street Outreach Team), It Takes a City and Jimmy's Cambridge have been at the heart of this effort and the Council has been fortunate enough to count on the services of the NHS-led Cambridge Access Surgery (a dedicated primary health care service for homeless people) during this time.
- 3.6 Sadly, some rough sleepers have not yet been accommodated – they have refused help or accepted and not moved in or accepted accommodation and been evicted (more than twice on some occasions). Some have abandoned the accommodation.
- 3.7 Organisations have taken on new roles during the pandemic and there are lessons to be learnt from this experience; there is a need for the homelessness partnership to regroup and rethink its model (including the role of volunteers and mentors) before adopting a new homelessness strategy.

- 3.8 For the purposes of this report, the initial accommodation provided under Covid-19 will be referred to as phase 1 accommodation and the move on housing provision as phase 2.
- 3.9 The Council has launched an operational action plan to deliver phase two accommodation for rough sleepers; the plan is broadly divided into 4 areas, namely, support planning, housing supply, accommodation sustainment and resources.

Support planning

The Council is:

- Conducting support needs and accommodation option assessments and to the 4th June 117 of these had been completed
- Assessing partner capacity and requirements to continue support during phase 2

In preparing the assessments the Council has developed 4 categories of support need:

- Low - able to maintain shared or self-contained accommodation independently with minimal/no support.
- Moderate - able to maintain shared or self-contained accommodation with some support.
- Significant - unlikely to be able to maintain shared accommodation. Able to maintain a licence in supported accommodation or self-contained accommodation with regular support.
- Complex - Likely to need intensive support to manage their accommodation. Likely to have a history of failed hostel stays.

Around half of the rough sleeping cohort currently housed under Covid-19 arrangements fit in to the low and moderate groups and the other half in the significant or complex needs groups.

Housing supply

The accommodation options that are being considered by officers are as follows:

Hostels - Process established to prioritise provision at Jimmy's and hostels

Pods - Sites being identified in consultation with ward councillors. 16 planned across 3 sites by the end of the summer. Two housing association partners identified to lease pods to.

Reconnection - We have long-established reconnection guidelines for those who have not established a local connection with Cambridge City, South Cambridgeshire or Hunts.

Housing First - Working up a programme across Council and housing association stock. Some already delivered pre-covid-19

Shared supported Aiming to use Council stock or private HMO lettings

Private rented sector offers through Town Hall Lettings (THL) - Routes are already well established. Accommodation finders within the Housing Advice Service have been making multiple contacts with private landlords and suppliers of student accommodation given that some may experience under-utilisation during this period

Statutory Homeless offer (interim or permanent) - Routes are already well established. Steps are being taken to free-up temporary accommodation by offering direct lets to households via the Council or housing associations

Voluntary return to friends and family - Not applicable. This is not an option we are planning for but accept that this may happen

The following table highlights the concrete outcomes to date in terms of phase 2 move on:

Housing option	Outcomes to 3.6.20 (numbers housed in phase 2 via this route)
Hostels	5
Pods	0
Reconnection	4
Housing First	0
Supported shared	0
Private rented sector offer through Town Hall Lettings	4
Statutory Homeless offer (interim or permanent)	2
Voluntary return to friends and family	3
Total	18

Accommodation sustainment

- In partnership with Cambridgeshire County Council a successful bid to the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) was submitted to government to provide 3.5 full time equivalent Housing Navigator Roles – these have currently been offered and accepted and start dates are soon to be finalised.
- The Council has also secured MHCLG funding for a modular-homes worker and a shared supported housing worker
- Furnishing new accommodation is being considered as part of the plan
- A review of the role of enforcement services in levering people into support is being carried out with the Police.
- Officers have started to look at more concerted support for those who have No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF).

Resources

- Tenancy sustainment, temporary accommodation and partner resources are under regular review

4 Policy considerations

- 4.1 Delivering a phase two rehousing programme does represent a key opportunity to prioritise rough sleepers for rehousing and give many a chance to turn a corner in their lives. However, it is also important to acknowledge the following challenges that the Council is presented with when trying to deliver this programme:
- 4.2 Accommodating rough sleepers represents only one part of the solution – the council's commitment needs to be matched by a range of support interventions delivered by statutory and voluntary sector partners
- 4.3 Rough sleepers engaging with support provided is a significant key to success; a minority of those provided accommodation in phase 1 have not engaged with the support provided and have abandoned accommodation or have been evicted for a range of issues, many of which have been of a criminal nature.
- 4.4 Rough sleeping is not a static issue; pre-covid-19, the challenge in tackling rough sleeping in Cambridge was that there has long been a steady flow of rough sleepers on to the streets. During the pandemic this flow has increased in intensity and, with a number of people experiencing financial hardship during the last 3 months, it is difficult to predict for how long this increased flow will continue, nor do we know how long social distancing measures and the need to provide phase 1 accommodation will continue. The financial projections detailed at 8(a) of this report are only based on projections until the end of September but it is possible that the requirement to accommodate rough sleepers will continue well beyond that period. Guaranteeing phase 2 commitments to all those housed under phase one will bring with it a high price tag and may come at the expense of others in housing need.

- 4.5 At the same time the council is housing rough sleepers, business-as-usual services to homeless applicants continues. Where the council ends a homelessness duty for a single person in temporary accommodation, the applicant might reasonably ask why they are not offered longer term accommodation.
- 4.6 There are difficulties in delivering a number of housing options for phase two. Officers are looking at hostels, pods, shared housing, private rented sector options through Town Hall Lettings (THL) along with council and housing association direct lets. There are limited land opportunities to place pods on and Hill has been inundated with requests for pods from other local authorities. Shared housing is more manageable on shorter term tenancies and, whilst the council can convert some family-sized accommodation it is not a position to offer shorter term tenancies and would need to do so by leasing via a third party or via Cambridge City Housing Company.
- 4.7 The Government has not committed any additional ring-fenced funds to house those with NRPF and has said there are no plans to amend legislation to allow Councils to assist under homelessness duties. Officers have assessed that around 20 of the current cohort have NRPF but we have 44 foreign nationals in the group as a whole and more detailed work is going on to see if there are more with NRPF than the initial assessment suggested.
- 4.8 The Government has recently raised Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates and whilst this has been positive there is pent up demand in the system which means a more competitive market and a more challenging task for THL to secure properties

5 Principles

- 5.1 Given the above considerations, it is important to consider working to set of agreed principles in delivering the phase two rehousing plan. The principles officers are proposing are as follows:

1. Priority for phase 2 rehousing offers will go to those who are considered most at risk of rough sleeping on a sliding scale
2. This applies equally to those in temporary accommodation placed under a homelessness duty who, ordinarily, would be asked to leave that accommodation at the point the council's duty ends
3. Those who have been evicted from the temporary Covid-19 accommodation for very serious matters or on more than one occasion will not be guaranteed a phase 2 accommodation offer
4. Those who have failed (without good reason) to use the temporary Covid-19 accommodation provided for them will not be offered phase two accommodation
5. For as long as there is a need for phase 1 accommodation those newly verified as rough sleeping will continue be offered accommodation. 'Verified rough sleeping' refers to those sighted rough sleeping as part of a formal street count or seen rough sleeping as part of daily outreach shifts - all will need to be assessed by the housing options team to determine if a statutory duty is owed.
6. The Government has not committed any additional funds to house those with NRPF and has said there are no plans to amend legislation to allow councils to assist under homelessness duties. The council will do all it can to ensure that all foreign nationals entitled to support from public funds gain that support, but where that is not possible the council will support people in this situation with signposting services and help to access these services but cannot guarantee access to phase 2 accommodation as longer term accommodation requires housing costs to be covered on an ongoing basis.
7. By the time the requirement to end phase 1 accommodation is reached the Council will have absorbed the lessons learnt throughout this process and will publish a statement on how it intends to work with partners to tackle rough sleeping moving forward

6. Risks

- 6.1 There is a significant financial risk to the authority, potentially of up to £1.133M (or more if the phase 2 plan is not delivered by the end of September – please refer to 8a of this report in respect of the authority's commitment to the phase two plan). Further waves of infection could lead to further spikes in rough sleeping and increased costs. The workload of “normal” homelessness is expected to be high once landlords are allowed to resume evictions, with potential costs in this too.
- 6.2 Public health – work done to date has established safe accommodation for people at high risk. There are risk assessment and monitoring arrangements in place with public health, including a proactive GP registration campaign county-wide – but risks remain that peaks of infection could occur in hostels, hotels or other settings.
- 6.3 Strategy risks – there is a risk of not delivering the strategy when promised as it was originally due to be with MHCLG in 2019. Officers do not expect any penalty for this, given the circumstances – but see a need to move forward with longer-term plans over the coming months.
- 6.4 Other risks are picked up in 4.2 to 4.8 of this report

7 Future opportunities

- 7.1 A piece of work was commissioned in late 2019 to look at homelessness services across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough and identify opportunities for savings and best practice. Consultants have now issued the draft report.

8 Implications

a) Financial Implications

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The full financial implications of this work are not yet known, nor is the Government's exact commitment to covering these costs, but the Council is committed to investing in the phase two plan. The Council has received a specific allocation of £24,750 to help with Covid-19 rough sleeping costs. The government has indicated that it would expect us to use some of the additional funding (£1.3M) towards this but has also said that upper tier authorities hold responsibilities for public health and housing related support.

Costs are currently estimated at £759k for the period to 30th June and £1.13M to 30th September – this covers lease costs, security, cleaning and other ancillary costs. Some costs may be reclaimed from Housing Benefit (we have had a dialogue about which types of accommodation are eligible and further claims are now in progress). The Government announced more funding for rough sleeping (£433m nationally) but we do not yet have details of how it will be allocated/ bid for. It is not clear when Covid-19 provision will end so costs could be considerably higher if the requirement to house rough sleepers stretches well beyond September. The Council is maintaining careful records of expenditure and will be aiming to cover its costs in full via further bids to the MHCLG.

As highlighted in 4.7 and 5.1(6) of the report there is an additional financial strain related to persons with no recourse to public funds. Whilst such people had to be taken in as part of the public health response, the MHCLG have made it clear that there is no financial support and no changes in homelessness legislation planned to confer any new duties on local authorities in this respect. Members need to be aware that in committing to keeping people off the streets, we carry practical and financial risks in relation to around 20 people who are NRPF. We are currently pushing MHCLG for a commitment to support in this area, to build on a pilot we ran last year – this would require up to £100k.

b) Staffing Implications

As set out in the report (see 'Accommodation Sustainment' under 3.8)

c) Equality and Poverty Implications

No EqIA has been produced as this is a temporary policy approach.

d) Environmental Implications

Neutral. The Hill pods are designed to meet the Future Homes Standard (Building Regulations AD L1A revision, October 2020), which is in excess of current Building Regulations. The pods are rated at 95 (band A) for Energy Performance Certificate purposes.

e) Procurement Implications

None at this stage

f) Community Safety Implications

There are measures outlined in the report to provide appropriate support and link with enforcement services

8 Consultation and communication considerations

The Council has a Covid-19 homelessness group involving key statutory and voluntary sector partners. The group has shaped and delivered the rehousing programme at both phases 1 and 2.

9 Background papers

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

10 Appendices

None

11. Inspection of papers

If you have a query on the report please contact David Greening, Head of Housing, tel: 01223 - 457997, email: david.greening@cambridge.gov.uk.