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Homelessness Strategy 2013 – 2018

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Introduction

What is homelessness?

1. In law homelessness occurs when a *family* does not have *accommodation*:
 - which is available for its occupation, and
 - to which it has rights of occupation, and
 - to which it has entry and unrestricted use, and
 - which it is reasonable for it to continue to occupy.
2. In practice the number of households known to become legally homeless in East Staffordshire is fairly small. However many people experience the knowledge that they are going to have to leave their accommodation and the stress and struggle of trying to find somewhere else to live. This is illustrated by the fact that on average around 1,300 people have approached the Council each year for housing options advice.

Homelessness Strategy

3. The legislation requires a Homelessness Strategy that is:

“a strategy formulated by a local housing authority for-

 - (a) preventing homelessness in their district;
 - (b) securing that sufficient accommodation is and will be available for people in their district who are or who may become homeless;
 - (c) securing the satisfactory provision of support for people in their district –
 - (i) who are or may become homeless; or
 - (ii) who have been homeless and need support to prevent them becoming homeless again.”

The Homelessness Strategy 2008-2013

4. The Council's previous Homelessness Strategy covered the period 2008-2013. During that period the Council:
 - Integrated homelessness prevention into the Housing Options service
 - Enabled the building and opening of the Reconnect hostel for rough sleepers
 - Introduced the New-tenancy Finance Scheme to enable people to take on a private sector tenancy who could otherwise not afford to do so by providing a loan and/or a bond
 - Provided start-up funding for the YMCA's Mediation Scheme and Young People's Schools Project
 - Supported the Sanctuary Scheme to enable households at risk of violence to keep their homes
 - Developed engagement with private sector providers in order to increase the supply of accommodation accessible to people on low incomes.
 - Offered advice and support to all residents most affected by Housing Benefit changes in order to prevent them losing their homes
 - Accepted full responsibility for the Housing Options service by bringing it back in-house
 - Welcomed the provision by housing associations of 476 new affordable homes

The Homelessness Review

5. This strategy is based on the East Staffordshire Homelessness Review 2013 which is a review of the levels of homelessness and the activities carried out in the Borough to prevent homelessness, secure accommodation for people, and support people to obtain and keep their accommodation.
6. The Review has identified that the main causes of homelessness in the Borough continue to be as follows.
 - Parents, relatives or friends no longer wanting to accommodate;
 - The ending of private rented tenancies including for rent arrears;
 - Breakdown of relationship with a partner, in more cases non-violent than violent.

7. The Review has also identified a number of future challenges which could increase homelessness:
- Home-owners reaching the end of their two-year entitled to Support for Mortgage Interest may then face repossession
 - Possible ending of mortgage lender forbearance - if house prices increase, having been fairly static over the last 5 years, mortgage lenders are more likely to repossess for mortgage arrears because they will be able to recover more value
 - If house prices increase reluctant private sector landlords – those who are only renting out property because they cannot sell it at an acceptable price, may decide to sell and hence will evict their tenants
 - If the cost of borrowing increases from its 4-years of being historical low then more owner-occupiers may fall into mortgage arrears and become homeless
 - Also if the cost of borrowing increases some landlords may fall behind with their mortgages resulting in repossession of the properties leaving the tenants homeless
 - Agreed changes to welfare benefits are even more extensive than those previously seen and are widely expected to lead to higher levels of rent arrears and hence more evictions from rented accommodation
 - Proposed changes to allow easier eviction for anti-social behaviour, although the Government predicts minimal impact
 - If more work continues to become part-time, insecure or uncertain eg zero hours contracts, this may lead to increasing inability to pay for housing and thence to homelessness
 - If earnings continue to increase less than inflation, increasing numbers of working households may struggle to pay for their housing and may become homeless
 - As some households suffer falls in real income because of inflation and benefit cuts, there is evidence to suggest that this will lead to even higher levels of relationship breakdown resulting in additional homelessness

Other Council Strategies and Policies

8. In January 2013 the Council adopted its first Tenancy Strategy in accordance with the Localism Act 2011. In the strategy the Council set out its support for the use of fixed term tenancies in order to make best use of the social housing in the Borough, but with very clear provisions for the end of fixed terms to avoid affected households becoming homeless.
9. The Council periodically reviews and revises the East Staffordshire Housing Allocations Policy. The last revision was adopted in January 2013 and included a number of changes to make allocations fairer. A main component was a new category to assist households affected by introduction of Housing Benefit Social Sector Size Criteria to downsize.
10. The Council's current Housing Strategy was adopted in 2009 and will be revised in 2014, taking account of this strategy.

The housing market in East Staffordshire

11. In comparison to many places, there is housing for sale in East Staffordshire that is relatively affordable for those able to purchase. However the reality is that house purchase is not an option for the overwhelming majority of people who are known to become homeless because they rely on welfare benefits or they have low and insecure incomes and often substantial debts.
12. There is also a significant amount of private rented housing in East Staffordshire, particularly in Burton upon Trent. The 2011 Census revealed that 16% of households in the Borough now rent in the private sector. There are around 2,800 households receiving Housing Benefit in the private sector. Despite this, demand for private rented housing is sufficiently strong to enable many landlords to choose not to rent to people on Housing Benefit, or to rent only to households which can provide a financially secure Guarantor. A particular problem is the shortage of shared accommodation for single people so that many single people needing to claim Housing Benefit cannot find affordable accommodation.

National Context

13. The Government published its current Homelessness Strategy *Making every contact count* in August 2012. It principally explains how different parts of Government contribute towards prevention of homelessness. However it also includes “10 local challenges” which it presents as the “Gold Standard” for local authority services.

The Government’s 10 Local Challenges

- (1) Adopt a corporate commitment to prevent homelessness which has buy in across all local authority services
- (2) Actively work in partnership with voluntary sector and other local partners to address support, education, employment and training needs
- (3) Offer a Housing Options prevention service, including written advice, to all clients
- (4) Adopt a No Second Night Out model or an effective local alternative
- (5) Have housing pathways agreed or in development with each key partner and client group that includes appropriate accommodation and support
- (6) Develop a suitable private rented sector offer for all client groups, including advice and support to both clients and landlords
- (7) Actively engage in preventing mortgage repossessions including through the Mortgage Rescue Scheme

- (8) Have a homelessness strategy which sets out a proactive approach to preventing homelessness and is reviewed annually so that it is responsive to emerging needs
 - (9) Not place any young person aged 16 or 17 in Bed and Breakfast accommodation
 - (10) Not place any families in Bed and Breakfast accommodation unless in an emergency and then for no longer than 6 weeks
14. A key feature of the Government's approach is focusing funding for homelessness on the voluntary sector. Hence its £20m Homelessness Transition Fund and its £10.8m fund to improve access to the private rented sector have only been accessible by voluntary sector organisations.
15. Another key feature is the desire to get local housing authorities to do things together. Hence one-off funding has been given to groups of local authorities for work to address homelessness amongst single people. East Staffordshire has been placed into a group together with all the local housing authorities in Staffordshire and Shropshire – 11 councils covering a very large and diverse area (see also paragraph 24).

Staffordshire Context

16. Staffordshire County Council is the Social Services Authority for East Staffordshire. It receives the Government funding for housing support services which have a key role in preventing homelessness and enabling homeless people to access and retain accommodation. It has published its current strategy called *Focusing on the Future, the Housing Support and Independence Strategy 2012-2015*. The Strategy's focus, in line with the County Council's social care and health responsibilities, is on enabling people to live independently.
17. Staffordshire County Council is also the Children's Services Authority and therefore has primary responsibility for accommodating homeless young people aged 16 and 17 and for supporting young people leaving care.
18. The Council is signatory to *Breaking the Cycle*, Staffordshire's Strategy for Tackling Domestic Abuse 2011-2016.

Working in Partnership

19. The Council recognises the role that other partners play in addressing homelessness within the Borough and is keen to continue to work collaboratively.

20. It particularly recognises and welcomes the ability of some organisations to secure funding which is unavailable to the Council. The Council is delighted that following initial funding from the Council for the Family Mediation Scheme, Burton YMCA was able to secure funding for 5 years from a charitable trust. Likewise Burton YMCA has also been able to secure external funding which, with a little Government funding via the Council, has enabled it to commence the Schools Project.
21. The Council was pleased to work with Burton YMCA and Midland Heart to secure Government funding for the Reconnect project and it is pleased to continue to work in partnership with the YMCA and the County Council to ensure that Reconnect is successful.
22. The Council also wants to acknowledge the big part played by Trent & Dove Housing. The fact that the Council now delivers the Housing Options service in house does not mean that Trent & Dove is any less important. It continues to maintain the housing register on behalf of partners and to make allocations on behalf of the Council, and it also employs a Family Support Worker and Young People's Support worker to help its tenants sustain their tenancies and hence avoid homelessness.
23. The Council is pleased to work in partnership with Money Spider Credit Union to deliver the New-tenancy Finance Scheme and the Saving Homes Scheme.
24. As mentioned above, the Government has given the local housing authorities of Staffordshire and Shropshire an amount of one-off funding to develop new ways to address single person homelessness. The funding has to be spent on cross-boundary actions – it cannot simply be divided up between the different councils. The Council is grateful to Shropshire Council for acting as accountable body and commissioning body for the Staffordshire & Shropshire Prevention Partnership and is pleased to be working alongside other partnership members.

The Council's Strategy

25. The Council's strategy to address homelessness has three main components:

- (1) Avoidance of homelessness
- (2) Prevention of homelessness
- (3) Availability of accommodation

Avoidance of homelessness

26. A distinction is made between avoidance and prevention. Avoidance in this context is about avoiding the causes of homelessness.

27. A recurring theme throughout the Homelessness Review has been that many people still expect that the Council or others will be able to provide them with accommodation if they become homeless. Hence there is a need to correct this misplaced expectation.

28. The YMCA's Schools Project has an important part to play in educating young people about the availability of accommodation and about planning to leave home successfully.

29. Housing support services commissioned by the County Council play an important role in helping people avoid homelessness. The Council will seek to work with the main Floating Support provider to maximise the impact of the service.

30. The Council will also seek to work with the County Council to agree ways to make Floating Support even more efficient and effective. Families in need receive early intervention from the County Council's Families First service. The Council suggests to the County Council that to avoid duplication and increase impact, the Families First service could have responsibility for providing housing support for households with children rather than this being provided by the separate Floating Support service as currently. The Council would then like to see the main Floating Support service focussing on households without children and being delivered in conjunction with the Council's Housing Options service.

31. An issue identified through the Homelessness Review is the support available to parents to help them keep their young people aged 16+ at home.

32. At the time of writing the Council is still waiting to learn what role the Government expects it to play in assisting people to claim Universal Credit.

33. There is also the need to encourage people to do what they can to avoid the causes of homelessness. As Universal Credit is rolled out it is going to be important to remind people that they must pay the rent and to point them to banking services and other sources of help which will help them to manage their finances. The Government has promised solutions to this issue but the Council and partners may need to add to these.
34. The Council welcomes the new emphasis on prevention in the Staffordshire Strategy for Tackling Domestic Abuse.
35. The Council's internet site provides a wide range of advice about the causes of homelessness and finding accommodation and this is an appropriate way to communicate with people about avoiding homelessness.
36. Encouraging people to make planned moves so that they are in more of a position to find good quality accommodation from a reputable landlord could avoid them becoming homeless, although their ability to choose can still often be constrained by affordability.
37. Government funding for Discretionary Housing Payments has increased as a result of welfare benefit changes but is still expected to come under increased pressure. It will be important to ensure that funding reaches those most in need so that they can avoid falling into rent arrears.
38. It is however important to recognise that not all causes of homelessness are things that residents can themselves avoid. A main issue is that private sector tenancies are inherently insecure and after 6 months landlords can end the tenancy for reasons of their own that are nothing to do with the tenant.

Prevention of homelessness

39. Prevention of homelessness is about dealing with an already present cause of homelessness so that the home is not lost, or more typically enabling someone to find themselves alternative accommodation.
40. The Housing Options service will continue to be the primary service providing advice and assistance to people facing homelessness in the Borough. The Council will monitor its service delivery against the Gold Standard.
41. Housing Options has made active use of the Government's Mortgage Rescue Scheme and will continue to do so for as long as the Scheme survives.
42. Only a few clients have qualified for the Saving Homes Scheme but it remains a valuable tool for the small number of households that can be helped.
43. The New-tenancy Finance Scheme is already available to all homeless client groups. However the Council needs to review the bond component of

the scheme.

44. The Homelessness Prevention Fund is a valuable option where other schemes cannot assist and criteria are satisfied.
45. The YMCA's Family Mediation scheme can play an important on-going part in helping to resolve family conflict so that young people do not leave home or make a planned move.
46. The Sanctuary Scheme enables households at risk of violence to safely stay put rather than losing their homes. It no longer receives funding from the Staffordshire Strategic Partnership and is therefore now reliant on funding from the Council.
47. Since the closure of Burton County Court the Council is making accommodation available to enable DHA (previously called Derbyshire Housing Aid) to provide eligible East Staffordshire clients with free legal advice.
48. The Council has continued to provide funding to East Staffordshire Citizens Advice Bureau and to Burton YMCA. It hopes to be able to continue funding of community organisations into the future.
49. One project already commissioned by the Staffordshire & Shropshire Prevention Partnership is an interim Rough Sleepers Outreach Project covering southern Staffordshire. This is primarily intended to locate and assess the needs of rough sleepers and to then connect them into local services eg Reconnect (paragraph 51 below). This pilot project started in spring 2013 and will last for 6 months. The partnership will need to consider longer term arrangements thereafter.

Availability of Accommodation

50. Securing new accommodation is the main solution for residents facing homelessness.

Emergency Accommodation

51. The Reconnect project was intended to provide emergency access accommodation but in practice this has not been achieved. The YMCA and the Council need to work together to resolve the issues.
52. The need for households to use bed & breakfast accommodation as interim accommodation has increased particularly over the last year, at considerable additional cost to the Council. The Council therefore needs to secure alternative arrangements.

53. More and more hostels in other places are now only available to people with a local connection to that place and hence are normally unavailable to people from East Staffordshire. One particular hostel at which many clients secured accommodation is now no longer available. Reconnect is the only hostel currently commissioned by the County Council to provide emergency access accommodation for Staffordshire. The Council will therefore seek to work with the County Council and the other local housing authorities in Staffordshire to devise a strategy for emergency access hostel accommodation.
54. The Council will seek to work with Staffordshire County Council to ensure the availability of emergency accommodation for young people aged 16 and 17.

Settled Accommodation

55. The Council will continue to periodically review the East Staffordshire Allocations Policy and plans to carry out a consultation exercise to inform future revisions of the policy.
56. The Council will continue to work with developers and housing associations to secure the delivery of new affordable housing to meet need. However there is a current backlog in provision and delivery in the short term is likely to be constrained by viability and limited grant funding.
57. Access to private rented sector accommodation is therefore key to preventing homelessness and to achieving move-on from emergency accommodation. However it has become increasingly difficult for many Housing Options clients and people who are ready to leave supported housing to find suitable and affordable accommodation which the landlord will let to them.
58. The Council currently pays Housing Benefit to the landlords of vulnerable clients to incentivise them to accept the client, or in principle to accept a lower rent. Under Universal Credit the decision to pay landlords will presumably be taken by the DWP and it is not yet clear how available payment to landlords will be in practice. The number of landlords accepting tenants on benefits may therefore fall still further.
59. There is a particular need for shared accommodation to be available to single benefit claimants aged under 35. The Staffordshire & Shropshire Prevention Partnership is commissioning a pilot project to secure accommodation for 120 clients across southern Staffordshire, of which an equal share for East Staffordshire will be 20 clients. The partnership and the Council will need to decide on longer term arrangements thereafter.

60. A common feature of schemes which are successful in persuading private landlords to let accommodation to ex-homeless people is to guarantee short-term Floating Support for the tenant. For the time being the Council will negotiate with the main Floating Support provider to seek to achieve this. For the future the Council will seek to discuss with the County Council how Floating Support services could be differently commissioned to better ensure this is achieved.
61. Many households struggle to find suitable housing to rent because they cannot provide the Guarantor required by the landlord. Meanwhile there appears to be a market of landlords who are keen to lease their properties. By transferring the risk away from the landlord, a leasing scheme would overcome the Guarantor issue. The Council is therefore investigating commissioning a partner to lease and manage properties to make them available to Housing Options clients.
62. The underlying issue which makes access to the private rented sector difficult for so many people is the balance of supply and demand, enabling landlords to choose tenants whom they perceive to be lower risk. The Council will therefore continue efforts to increase supply.
63. The Council will explore whether a Local Lettings Agency approach would be viable in East Staffordshire and whether a voluntary sector organisation could secure Government funding to bring this into being.
64. Some of the accommodation available in the private rented sector and rented by people on housing benefit is poor quality. The Council is committed to active enforcement to ensure standards.
65. There is a particular need for access to supported housing for single people who are assessed to be high risk and/or who have high support and/or care needs. There is currently no such accommodation in Staffordshire. The Council will seek to discuss this need with the County Council.

Cross cutting themes

No Second Night Out

66. The Government's No Second Night Out (NSNO) model aims to ensure that no-one sleeps rough for more than one night.
67. The Council fully supports the aims of No Second Night Out. However it recognises that local services do not currently deliver all the components of No Second Night Out and that it does not have control of all the resources needed to achieve them.
68. The linchpin of No Second Night Out is access to accommodation since the reason people sleep rough in East Staffordshire is overwhelmingly that they lack accommodation rather than lifestyle choice. The Council is committed to securing better access to emergency accommodation as explained above.

69. To ensure that no-one has to return to rough sleeping, emergency accommodation has to be available until next stage accommodation can be secured in mainstream housing, supported accommodation or specialised services depending on the needs of the individual. The Council will continue to work the partners to address these needs.

Housing pathways

70. The Government's *10 Local Challenges* include having "housing pathways agreed or in development with each key partner and client group that includes appropriate accommodation and support".

71. Hence the keys to this objective are the availability of specialised accommodation and support. The County Council is therefore key to this challenge. The Council will be pleased to work with the County Council on developing housing pathways.

72. The Council will continue to work with the County Council on implementation and review of the Staffordshire Protocol for Young Homeless People.

A Private Rented Sector Offer

73. The Government's *10 Local Challenges* envisage a "suitable private rented sector offer for all client groups, including advice and support".

74. The main components of a private rented sector offer are:

- (a) Tenant finding; the Council is already willing to introduce tenants to landlords and landlords to tenants but few landlords currently offer properties to the Council.
- (b) Deposit Guarantee; the Council's New-tenancy Finance Scheme already goes above and beyond this, but many landlords have as yet been unwilling to accept a bond.
- (c) Housing Benefit paid to the landlord; the Council currently does this for vulnerable clients as allowed by the legislation but under the current legislation the tenant has a right to receive payment. The Council will no longer be able to offer this option under Universal Credit and will therefore consider other potential strategies.
- (d) Housing support; discussed at paragraph 60 above and identified as an issue in paragraph 75 following.

Housing Support

75. As already mentioned, housing support makes an important contribution to the prevention of homelessness. Bringing these references together the Council has identified the following priority needs and opportunities:

- (1) The future of rough sleeper outreach once the pilot project has ended.
- (2) The need for access to emergency accommodation.
- (3) The local need for guaranteed Floating Support as part of a Private Sector Offer.
- (4) A particular example being the need for guaranteed Floating Support to enable people to move-on from supported accommodation.
- (5) The availability of accommodation and support to provide housing pathways.
- (6) A particular need for access to supported accommodation for people deemed high risk and/or who have high support/care needs.
- (7) The suggestion that housing support for families be provided by Families First rather than by a separate Floating Support service.
- (8) The benefit of delivering the main Floating Support service in conjunction with the Council's Housing Options service.

76. These areas of need have already been identified in the Enhanced Joint Strategic Needs Assessment for East Staffordshire.

77. The Council will seek to work with Staffordshire County Council to secure the prioritisation of these needs within housing support services serving East Staffordshire.

Implementation

78. The Council will produce and monitor an annual action plan to secure delivery of this strategy.