

Homelessness Activity During 2020

Final Decision-Maker	COMMUNITIES, HOUSING & ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE
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Lead Officer and Report Author	John Littlemore Head of Housing & Community Services
Classification	Public
Wards affected	All

Executive Summary

Homelessness activity has changed in comparison to previous years during the period April 2020 and the end of December 2020. The increase in activity is mainly due to those affected by the lockdown and the Council's response to assisting single households during the pandemic and over the winter months. It is noted that the steps taken by government to protect tenants in the private rented housing has resulted in a temporary lull in approaches from households in that sector but this has been offset by an increase in applications from family evictions and those needing to leave their homes as a result of domestic abuse or relationship breakdown.

Purpose of Report

For noting.

This report makes the following recommendations to this Committee:

1. To note the contents of the report.

Timetable

Meeting	Date
COMMUNITIES, HOUSING & ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE	02-03-2021

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1. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

Issue	Implications	Sign-off
Impact on Corporate Priorities	<p><i>The four Strategic Plan objectives are:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Embracing Growth and Enabling Infrastructure</i> • <i>Safe, Clean and Green</i> • <i>Homes and Communities</i> • <i>A Thriving Place</i> 	Head of Housing & Community Services
Cross Cutting Objectives	<p><i>The four cross-cutting objectives are:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Heritage is Respected</i> • <i>Health Inequalities are Addressed and Reduced</i> • <i>Deprivation and Social Mobility is Improved</i> • <i>Biodiversity and Environmental Sustainability is respected</i> 	Head of Housing & Community Services
Risk Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Homelessness is identified as a high-level risk on the Council's strategic risk register.</i> 	Head of Housing & Community Services
Financial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The proposals set out in the recommendation are all within already approved budgetary headings and so need no new funding for implementation.</i> 	Head of Housing & Community Services
Staffing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>We will deliver the recommendations with our current staffing.</i> 	Head of Housing & Community Services
Legal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Report is for noting only.</i> 	Head of Housing & Community Services

Privacy and Data Protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Report is for noting only</i> 	Head of Housing & Community Services
Equalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The recommendations do not propose a change in service therefore will not require an equalities impact assessment</i> 	Head of Housing & Community Services
Public Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>In accepting the recommendations the Council would be fulfilling the requirements of the Health Inequalities Plan</i> 	Head of Housing & Community Services
Crime and Disorder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Report is for noting only</i> 	Head of Housing & Community Services
Procurement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Not applicable</i> 	Head of Housing & Community Services

2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Despite long periods of lockdown and the moratorium on possession proceedings, the Housing Service has experienced overall demand for our services that is fairly consistent with previous years.
- 2.2 Persons may present to the Housing Service at either Prevention or Relief stage. Prevention can be summarised as those who are threatened with homelessness and the thrust of the Homelessness Prevention Act is to assist people in being able to remain in their homes. The Relief stage is entered if the threat of homelessness cannot be prevented; or may occur when the person presents to the Council as not having any accommodation at the time.
- 2.3 Table 1 below sets out the number of new approaches to the Council over the past three years. The 2020/21 figure is for the first 3 quarters ending December 2020. The figure in brackets is an estimate for the whole year based on an average of the year to date.

Table 1.

Description	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020 - 2021
Number of new cases	2267	2288	1854 (2225)
Number closed as advice only	1049	922	805 (966)
Number of homeless applications	1200	1354	967 (1160)

- 2.4 Unsurprisingly, the number of people seeking housing advice has grown compared to the previous year, which is a reflection on the financial hardship that has been endured during the various lockdowns. However, through a combination of early advice and help together with the moratorium on possession proceedings, the number of people needing to go on to make a homelessness application has reduced from the previous year.
- 2.5 The above is also reflected in the those assisted under the Homelessness Reduction Act, which centres on our ability to prevent homelessness. Prevention can be achieved through a range of measures including negotiating with families and landlords, so that the person can remain in their current housing for at least 6 months. Table 2 below demonstrates the increasing success of the Housing Advice Team in preventing homelessness.
- 2.6 For those applicants who we are unable to prevent becoming homeless, they are more likely to need assistance through the traditional homelessness route, which has resulted in an increase in the number of main duty cases.

Table 2.

Description	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020 - 2021
Number of successful preventions	191	249	335 (402)
Number of successful relief duties	130	299	176 (211)
Number of main duty cases	89	78	79 (95)

- 2.7 To provide an indication of the reasons why a household may be threatened with homelessness the following table is a breakdown of the main causes of homelessness amongst Prevention cases over the last three years:

Table 3.

Description	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020 - 2021
Loss of private rented	151	163	41 (55)
Family/friends no longer accommodating	117	133	146 (195)
Non-violent relationship breakdown	32	27	39 (52)
Domestic abuse	17	35	66 (88)
Loss of social rented	68	53	18 (36)

- 2.8 The moratorium on possession proceedings has had a dramatic impact on the number of cases whose homelessness is due to their tenancy ending in both the private and social housing sectors. Since the end of March 2020 there have been various regulatory edicts that have extended the notice period that landlords must give their tenants; stays on possession hearings in the Courts; and a halt to eviction warrants being executed by bailiffs.
- 2.9 However, this pause in possession proceedings is only temporary and at some point in the future landlords will once again be able to exercise their ability to regain possession of their properties, which is likely to greatly increase the number of persons approaching the Council for help with their housing. Although the County Courts have resumed hearing cases, these are being prioritised to the most serious e.g. arrears of more than 6 months, significant anti-social behaviour. We anticipate it will take some months for the Courts to work through the current backlog of listings and for the impact to be seen in homelessness applications.
- 2.10 Unfortunately, the reduction in rented homeless cases has been offset by a significant increase in persons becoming homeless as a result of family and friends no longer willing to accommodate them; and relationship breakdowns – both non-violent and as a result of domestic abuse.
- 2.11 In normal circumstances, if the Council cannot prevent a household from becoming homeless the Council may be under a duty to secure temporary accommodation whilst it makes further enquiries. A local housing authority would normally owe this duty to households that meet the statutory definition of 'priority need'. This might be due the households having a dependent child or a household member who is pregnant. These are referred to as Part 7 cases in Table 4 below.
- 2.12 The Housing Service has been able to assist a large number of people, so that in spite of the increase in approaches the number of Part 7 cases in temporary accommodation remains lower than in 2018/19. Table 4 below sets out a snapshot at the end of January in each year.

Table 4.

Temporary accommodation snapshot	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020 - 2021
Number of Part 7 cases	118	97	105
Number of RSI cases	-	28	55
Total number accommodated	118	125	160

- 2.13 During the pandemic the government urged local housing authorities to accommodate all persons who were homeless. Maidstone Council was in a positive position at the time, largely due to the excellent impact of the street homeless Outreach Service. Very few people were street homeless in Maidstone at that time, as most were already being assisted through the Rough Sleeper Initiative (RSI).
- 2.14 The number of people being accommodated through the RSI project has grown over the last year and the figure in Table 4 includes those who have been assisted through the Winter Provision and Severe Weather Emergency

Protocol (SWEP). Due to the reduction in the number of street homeless in Maidstone and the resources available through the purchase of our own accommodation, it was not necessary to operate a Winter Shelter this year. In addition, Covid19 restrictions in the use of shared bedding areas, normally a feature of Winter Shelters, would have made such an approach undesirable.

2.15 The increase in approaches came not from those who were actually street homeless but people who were in precarious housing situations e.g. mainly sofa-surfing. The nervousness of hosting families caused by the pandemic has resulted in an increased number of sofa-surfers losing their ability to move from one accommodation to another and ending up in making an approach to the Council. An exit strategy is being developed to help this cohort move from temporary accommodation into more settled housing.

2.16 The cost of providing temporary accommodation has largely been mitigated by the Council's temporary accommodation strategy, including the investment in its own accommodation. The Council has also been successful in applying for housing grants that will be able to offset the additional costs of providing accommodation to single households as part of the Winter Provision and SWEP.

3. AVAILABLE OPTIONS

3.1 To note the report.

4. RISK

4.1 The report is for noting. Homelessness remains a high-risk area on the corporate risk register.

5. REPORT APPENDICES

- None

6. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy 2019-2024