

Housing and Inclusion – Homelessness Reduction Act

Final Decision Maker	Communities, Housing and Environment Committee
Lead Head of Service	John Littlemore, Head of Housing and Community Services
Lead Officer and Report Author	Hannah Gaston, Housing and Inclusion Manager
Classification	Public
Wards affected	All

Executive Summary

This report reviews the previous year's preparation for the Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) and our early adoption of new ways to work in the spirit of the Act.

This report makes the following recommendations to Committee:

1. That the Communities, Housing & Environment Committee notes the progress made towards implementing the Homelessness Reduction Act.

Timetable

Meeting	Date
Communities, Housing and Environment Committee	17 th April 2018

Housing and Inclusion – Homelessness Reduction Act

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Maidstone Borough Council for some time has been planning and preparing for the introduction of the new HRA from 3rd April 2018. We have been working to ensure we are ready both internally and with our partners across the district since April 2017, as the Homelessness Reduction Bill progressed through parliament.
- 1.2 This document aims to give a brief overview of our work since April 2017 including staffing, preventions specific work stream, protocols and challenges.

2. STAFFING

- 2.1 In order to be fully prepared for the act we have reviewed our team structure and created a number of new functions in the past 12 months; most notably the Triage and Preventions service which sits within the wider Housing Advice team. See Appendix 1 for the team structure. Posts were funded from both base budgets and the increase in grants received from government.
- 2.2 **Triage Service** offer the first contact for our customers and have been trained to provide a supportive approach to the customer's housing needs. We have created this team to ensure an effective front facing service which can be tailored to meet the needs of those approaching.
- 2.3 The staff work on a rota basis covering 9am-5pm, five days a week. Those who require assistance can approach on the day to be triaged and then assessed by a housing advisor for immediate support or booked in for a later appointment dependent on their immediate housing need.
- 2.4 **Preventions Service** was approved in April 2017 and this new service now forms part of our Housing Advice Team and complements the prevention work already carried out by the Housing Advisors.
- 2.5 Extensive work has been undertaken to widely promote the service externally, as well as applicants coming through via our triage system, we receive referrals direct from key partners and agencies including housing associations, Early Help, Community Vulnerability and Safety Group and Change, Grow, Live (CGL) Maidstone's main drug and alcohol support centre.
- 2.6 The Preventions Officers offer a wide range of holistic support outside of the core requirements of preventing homelessness, including benefit entitlement checks, maximising income through accessing reduced utility tariffs and referring on to support agencies e.g. Sanctuary Floating Support, CGL, Turn 2 Us and Step Change.

2.7 The Preventions Officers will assist clients with applying for 'stay of execution' hearings to prevent evictions for tenants and attend Court in person to support the applicant. There has been real success in this area and the service has a growing reputation including with the judiciary at our local County Court; highlighted by an email from Golding Homes received in January which states

'we have just returned from a Court hearing for this tenant and the judge has asked for us to get you involved asap'.

2.8 In essence the Judge was unwilling to grant a possession order until our Prevention Service had an opportunity to help the applicant. We cover all tenures and have had recent success in Court with stay hearings for a mortgage repossession cases also.

2.9 Each Preventions Officer and Housing Advisor has a specialist area of work, including hoarding, care leavers, domestic abuse, prison leavers, and applicants leaving hospital, mental health and family / friends evictions.

2.10 From April 2017 until February 2018 the Council prevented 544 households from homelessness this includes support from the Preventions and Housing Advice Service, discretionary housing payments and the Sanctuary Scheme.

2.11 **Staff Training** - We have implemented a wide range of training not just focussing on the HRA, but looking at enhancing other key areas including 'difficult conversations' training and comprehensive equality and diversity training specifically aimed at target groups named in the Act to ensure we are equipped to deal with all applicants sensitively and holistically.

2.12 We have ensured the Housing Advice team are fully equipped with local knowledge and regularly invite guest speakers to build relationships and expand knowledge; examples include, the Maidstone Mediation Service operating a reconnection project for people who have left prison or are street homeless, helping them to re-engage with family members and Centra, who run the domestic abuse advice and support service for Maidstone.

3. PARTNERSHIPS

3.1 The Kent Housing Group operates across the county to ensure that all districts are working to similar guidelines and protocol; more recently the Care Leavers protocol has been launched with the Offender Pathway process currently being drawn up.

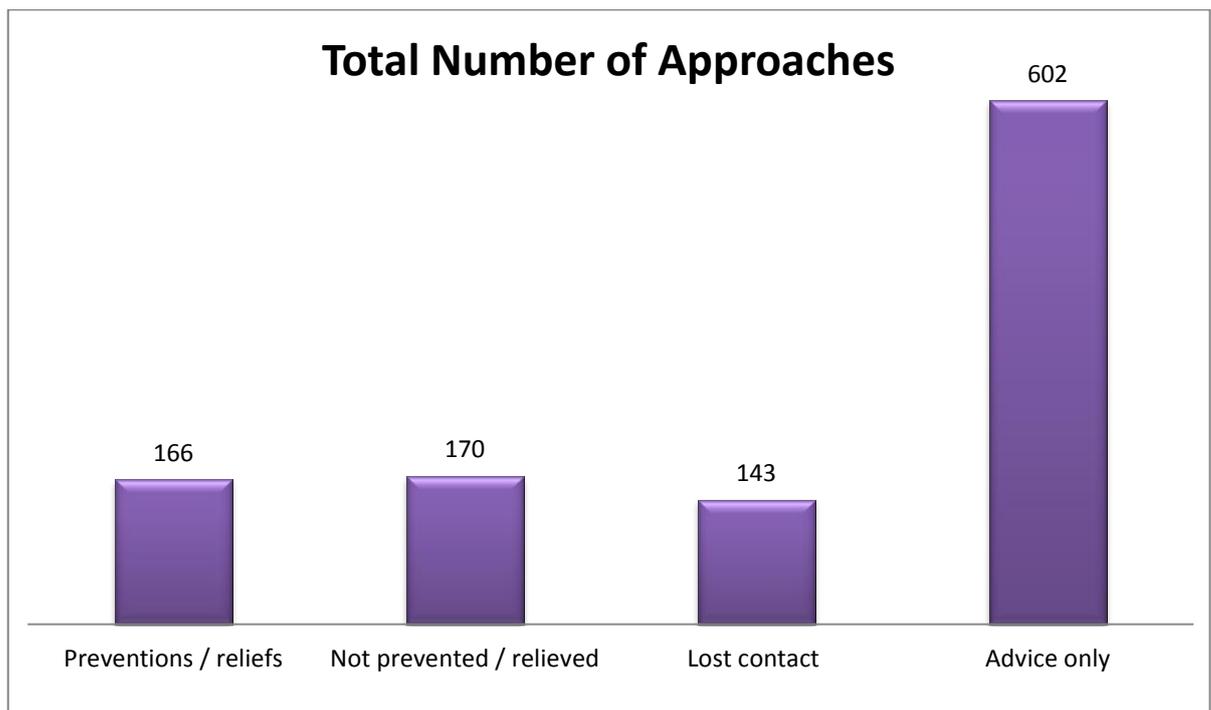
3.2 Another benefit of the system wide approach in Kent has enabled all the districts to start working together to produce advice notes and information which is consistent to all service users across the county.

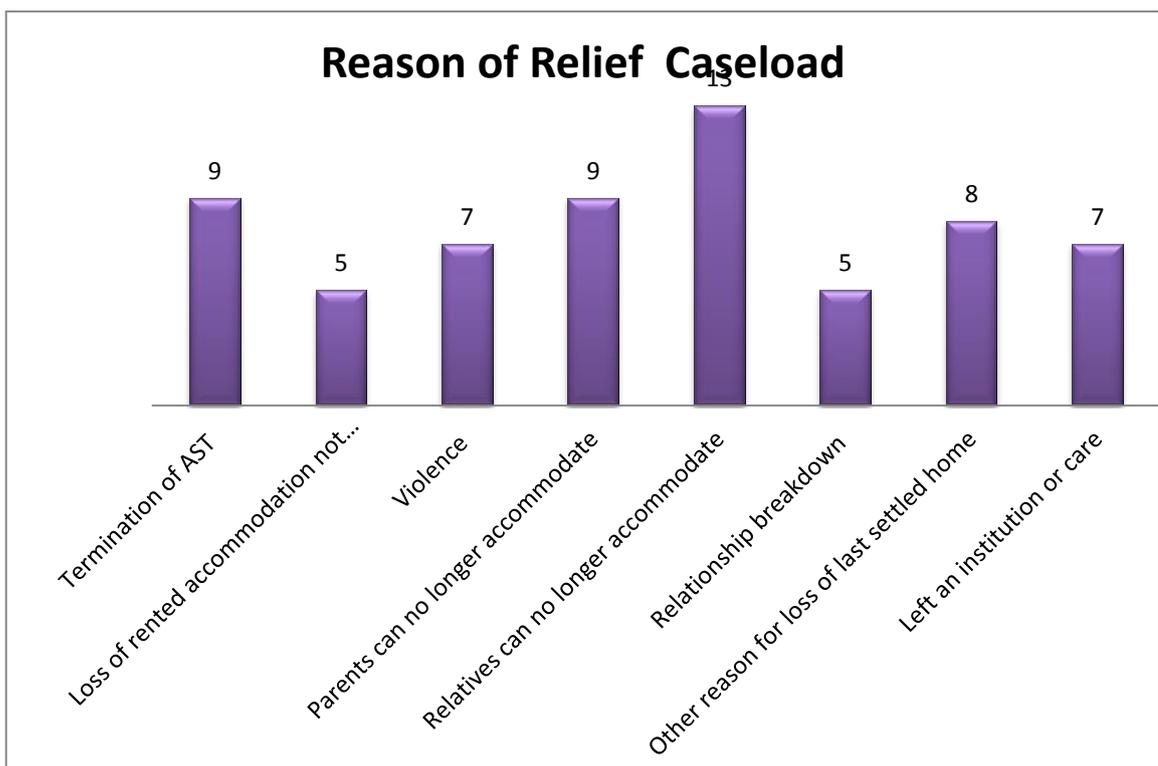
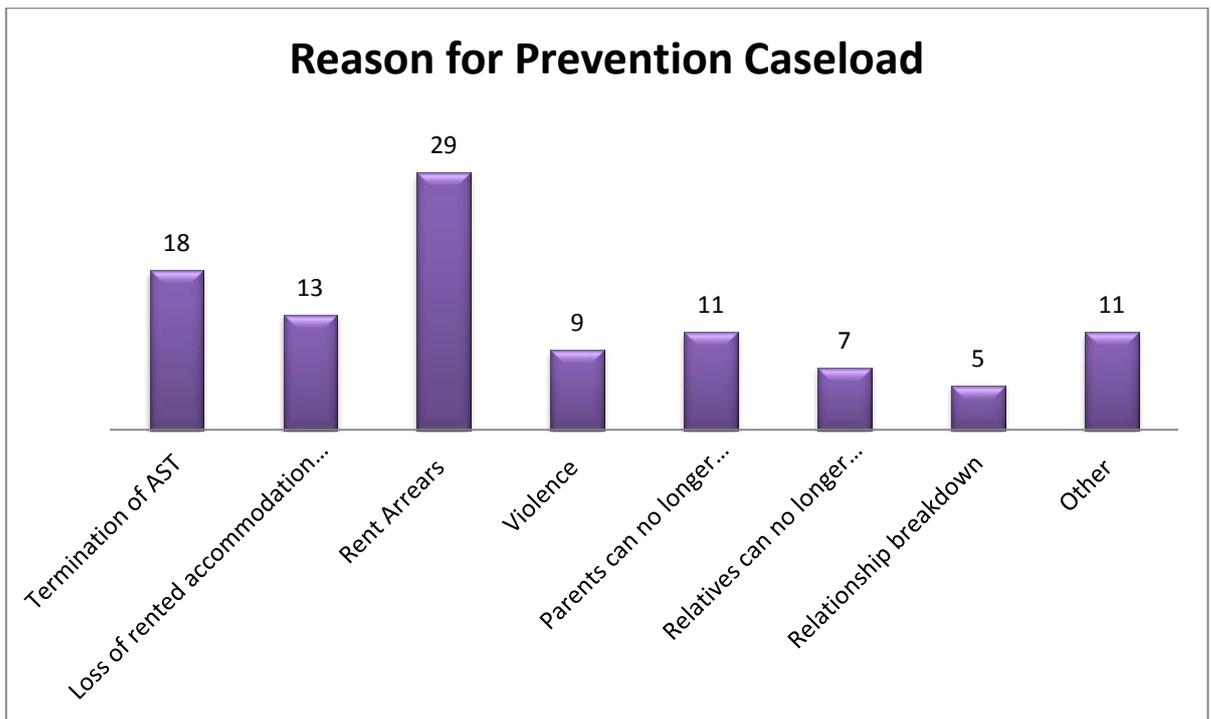
3.3 As a two tier authority some of the preparation has taken a little longer than anticipated and we are working on overcoming this with our county colleagues in social care for children and families and mental health. We are hoping to meet key people in the coming months and work towards a more cohesive approach to supporting vulnerable households at risk.

- 3.4 We are having further meetings with Kent Savers in relation to expanding our already established loans systems for households who need some support from a credit union.
- 3.5 We have also been further developing our partnerships with Maidstone Mediation to offer more targeted mediation between families and landlords and with Involve to offer a more holistic and inclusive support service such as accessing community events, clearance of hoarding cases and handyman interventions.
- 3.6 As a non-stock holding authority our main housing association partner is Golding Homes and over the previous few years we have ensured our partnership is effective and robust and are working on specific and distinct pieces of work including:
- Direct Lets for homeless households from temporary accommodation
 - Eviction protocol – including an early notification process
 - Housing First Pilot

4. STATISTICS

- 4.1 Please see below for our statistical breakdown of our workloads from April 2017 to January 2018.





4.2 The prevention service have particularly excelled in the following areas:

- Negotiations with family and friends for individual or households to remain in residence until another property is found or whilst bidding is underway.
- Negotiations with landlords over rent arrears payments including processing match funding or a discretionary housing payment.

- 4.3 We have found our success lies in our ability to negotiate on behalf of the housing applicant to try and maintain accommodation for an interim period. Being able to have conversations with family, friends or landlords enables a positive dialogue to occur normally leading to a successful outcome.
- 4.4 Our major challenges come in form of the financial constraint on households these include:
- Increased issues around affordability if circumstances change for household and they can no longer afford rent.
 - Indemnity insurance of landlords – which means a benefit claimants cannot be accommodated.
 - Local Housing Allowance within the local districts are not representative of market rents.
 - Out of London placements which have the potential to force the cost of accommodation up.

5. INNOVATIONS

- 5.1 **Pelican Court** is an eleven bed former care home – which we have leased from MOAT since August 2017 and it accommodates individuals with low level support needs and complexities. We fund support to be on site for 37 hours per week to provide interventions to those living with the project. The project has been funded from government grant.
- 5.2 The project was created to stop the flow of newly homeless people onto the streets and gives individuals a respite from the threat of immediate homelessness and rough sleeping in order to try and find longer stable accommodation.
- 5.3 We are funding a **Housing Pathways Worker** in partnership with Tunbridge Wells Borough Council to commission an assertive outreach worker to provide support for those at risk of becoming homeless or those newly homeless who have substance misuse issues. Again, this project has been financed from bids to central government that we have been successful in applying for.
- 5.4 We have been awarded two tranches of funding from the **Business Rate Retention fund** firstly to create a more targeted approach to rough sleepers across Maidstone and will include:
- Deep dive into the reasons people are living on the streets in Maidstone and the barriers to people moving inside
 - Housing First Pilot within Maidstone
 - Creation of the Challenge Group – using support and enforcement to move people from the streets.
- 5.5 Secondly to create a predictive analytical model which works by taking different local and national data sets held by the Council and other organisation's and uses statistical algorithms to identify key features which are present in applicants presenting as homeless to the Council.
- 5.6 By being able to identify these key features it will enable us to target those persons who are most likely risk of facing future homelessness and to provide early intervention. The use of predictive analysts would enable

strategies, campaigns and resources to be focused on highlighting to other organisations the key features to look out for with their clients who are at greatest risk of future homelessness and enable us to work in partnership to tackle the identified key risk factors of homelessness at the earliest possible stage.

- 5.7 Our Homefinder scheme has been refreshed with more varied incentive offers for landlords including guaranteed rent for 12 months, a one off balloon payment and free inventory and support services. This is being relaunched with new literature and information worked on by our internal communications team.

6. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

- 6.1 During March we had a visit from Richard Williams, Government Homeless Advisor who is monitoring the implementation of the new act for the above department. He was delighted by our progress and sent the feedback below:

"I would just like to reiterate that I found this to be a particularly positive meeting. You have clearly worked hard to prepare for the new legislation. It was apparent that you, your colleagues and Elected Members are committed supporting households at risk of homelessness as well as those who are already homeless."

7. REPORT APPENDICES

The following documents are to be published with this report and form part of the report:

- Appendix 1: Current team structure

Appendix 1

