

## ROUGH SLEEPERS - COVID-19 RESPONSE UPDATE REPORT

Housing and Health Advisory Committee - 29 September 2020

Report of Chief Officer People and Places

Status For Consideration

Also considered by Cabinet - 15 October 2020

Key Decision No

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**Executive Summary:** This report provides Members with an update on the homelessness work to place rough sleepers into accommodation as part of this Council's response to COVID19.

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**This report supports the Key Aim of the District Council's Housing Strategy and related housing and support elements of the Community Plan.**

**Portfolio Holder** Cllr. Kevin Maskell

**Contact Officer** Hayley Brooks Ext. 7272

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**Recommendation to Housing and Health Advisory Committee:** For Members to note this report on the Councils work to place rough sleepers and those displaced by the pandemic into hotel accommodation as part of this Council's COVID-19 response; and

**Recommendation to Cabinet:** That, subject to comments from Housing and Health Advisory Committee, Members note the Council's work to place rough sleepers and those displaced by the pandemic into hotel accommodation as part of this Council's COVID-19 response;

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**Reason for recommendation:** To inform Members of the work undertaken by this Council, as part of the national COVID-19 pandemic response, to support and protect vulnerable homeless people including rough sleepers, by providing hotel accommodation to enable them to self-isolate and reduce the spread of the virus.

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### Introduction and Background

- 1 As a Local Housing Authority, this Council has a duty to provide a housing and homelessness advice service to people at risk of homelessness. A household is assessed whether they have a priority need, in line with

homelessness legislation, determining if this Council has an additional Relief Duty to provide them with temporary accommodation (TA).

- 2 On 26 March 2020, the Council was informed that the Government asked Dame Louise Casey to lead the Government's response to COVID-19 and rough sleeping, to help make sure that everyone was provided with accommodation. This Strategy aimed to safeguard as many homeless people as possible from COVID-19, to protect their health and stop wider transmission amongst those on the streets.
- 3 The Government issued guidance to local housing authorities for delivering this work including the basic principles to:
  - focus on people who are, or are at risk of, sleeping rough;
  - make sure that these people have access to the facilities that enable them to adhere to public health guidance on hygiene or isolation, ideally single room facilities;
  - utilise alternative powers and funding to assist those with no recourse to public funds who require shelter and other forms of support due to the COVID-19 pandemic;
  - Urgently procuring accommodation for people on the streets;
  - Provide them with social care basics such as food, and clinician care to people who need it in the accommodation. Work with commissioned homeless services to provide support to people in this accommodation to provide adequate levels of support;
  - If possible, separating people who have significant drug and alcohol needs from those who do not;
  - In the longer term, identify move-on housing options and support.

### **This Council's COVID-19 Response**

- 4 As a result of the Prime Minister's announcement on 23 March, for the public to stay in their homes wherever possible, the Government announced that it was now imperative that all rough sleepers and other vulnerable homeless are supported into appropriate accommodation by the end of the week.
- 5 Officers across the Council's Housing Advice Service commenced the following actions to progress with work urgently:
  - Based on Government guidance, developed an emergency triage and assessment process for the housing advice team to identify and engage with rough sleepers and those at risk of homelessness (including those being released from prison or discharged from hospital). This process including assessing whether customers were either: symptomatic; asymptomatic but in a high clinical risk group and; asymptomatic and at low risk.
  - Worked with the Police, Community Wardens and CCTV to help us to identify and engage with all known rough sleepers across the District. The Police identified four and the KCC Wardens a further three.

- Housing Advice Officers compiled a list of 11 rough sleepers they had had previous contact with, but the customer had either stopped engaging or we had provided housing advice only, as we were unable to provide TA as they had no priority need.
- Sourcing additional suitable accommodation including self-contained units and hotels willing to house homeless customers. No hotels in this District would remain open or re-open to support council with homelessness, two larger hotels across Kent re-opened for key workers only.
- Worked with neighbouring councils to consider block bookings of larger hotels, and then later working with MHCLG's central hotel booking system. It became apparent that all hotels had already closed and re-opening of local hotels was co-ordinated by their national head office.
- The Council already had 24 households in existing TA who were currently in accommodation with some shared facilities, making it difficult to comply with social distancing and lockdown. We worked with housing providers and West Kent Housing to map the health and vulnerabilities of each household to assess whether they were in a high-risk group and therefore needed to move into a self-contained unit urgently.
- Worked in partnership with key support services to ensure that outreach and other support was available. Such as KCC commissioned addiction services, social care, local food banks and linking in with the Council's Community Hub for emergency supplies.
- The HERO Team developed TA Emergency Packs including personal and household cleaning products, sanitizers and basic food and hygiene essentials and delivered them to each person as they were placed. The Packs were also delivered regularly to everyone in existing TA with shared facilities and to customers as they went into hotel accommodation.

### COVID-19 Rough Sleeper response - Key Data

- 6 Between the 20 March and 9 August 2020, the team worked hard to identify and support 62 customers, who were either at risk of homelessness, already homeless or being displaced due to COVID-19. This included:

Sleeping in car/van	17
Asked to leave existing home (sofa surfing, accomm. was with job, considered risk to shielding/high risk in household)	16
Sleeping in tent/caravan/empty building	11
Rough sleeping	7
Released from prison	4
Discharged from hospital	4
In existing TA (extended for COVID19)	2
Asked to leave caravan park	1

- 7 Of these, we placed 42 into hotels or other temporary accommodation and supported them with food supplies, accessing support services for mental

health, health conditions, long term addiction issues and accessing prescriptions locally (including urgent methadone scripts). HERO Officers have also supported them all with ongoing help and support including applying for the correct benefits, registering them with a GP, Housing Register applications where appropriate and helping them into employment.

- 8 We identified six of these customers would have been in the NHS Shielding List if they had been in settled accommodation and registered with a GP, all with major respiratory and high-risk health conditions.
- 9 Of the remaining 20 that did not go into accommodation, many of them were offered support and advice, some did not want to go into TA and made their alternative arrangements. The team supported others to remain at their current property, negotiating with family/friends and landlords, or we helped them straight into other forms of accommodation.
- 10 A total of 26 customers currently remain in TA and hotel accommodation. The other 16 who have now left accommodation, nine continue to receive ongoing support for complex needs. They have left for the following reasons:

Re-housed in private sector (continue to receive support for complex needs)	3
Left and have made their own arrangements	2
Returned to sleep in vehicle, continue to be supported	2
Abandoned TA, no contact	2
Priority Need identified, taken a full homelessness duty and being supported by homelessness team	2
Moved to institution, continue to support on release	2
Left District to reconnect to friends/family	1
Asked to leave TA due to behaviour/crime	1
Re-housed in social housing (continue to receive support for complex needs)	1

### Move On Arrangements

- 11 The Council's Housing related officers continue to engage and support all customers to achieve move-on housing solutions. A working group of officers meets weekly to update on these arrangements and a move-on plan is in place for each person. This includes:
  - A total of 13 have been supported onto the Sevenoaks District Housing Register, with three close to being made an offer of a property;
  - Three who have no recall to public funds are being supported to either apply for Settled Status, supported to return to their country or being supported into employment.

- Three have already moved into affordable private rental properties, with a further five working with the private sector lettings team to find them suitable properties.
- 12 The Government has contacted all councils to work with them on the move-on arrangements for the customers in TA displaced by COVID-19. We have completed weekly data collection forms detailing housing and support needs of all customers. We are working with them to identify any local gaps in services, support and housing needs to work with commissioners and providers to develop housing options locally.
- 13 MHCLG have released a new funding stream called 'Next Steps Accommodation Programme (NSAP)', Council officers are working on a funding bid and a bid deadline of 20 August. This funding provides councils with additional capital and revenue funding for shorter-term/interim accommodation, longer-term move-on accommodation and immediate support to help clients with addictions, complex needs, health, tenancy sustainment and employment.

### Key Achievements

- 14 Building trust with people who have been entrenched rough sleepers is not easy. We believe the main achievement is that we are engaging in a meaningful way with a large number of people who were socially excluded and in some cases were completely unknown to us. Officers have stated that there is a sense of optimism about the future for many of them, which was just absent before we started this work.
- 15 There are many examples of Housing and HERO officers going above and beyond for customers. Sarah Mirianashvili, in her role of Housing Pathway Co-ordinator, has supported most of the rough sleepers into accommodation and support services. Key achievements have included:
- Six are now engaging well with local commissioned addiction and other support services, with a further three continuing to be helped with complex addictions and mental health.
  - One has been accepted into supported accommodation, with a further two being assessed for supported accommodation.
  - One has been accepted into residential rehabilitation services.
  - Five are being supported into employment or training.
  - We now have an outreach nurse who is visiting them to provide essential health and medical care services at the hotels. This post is a West Kent funded post from previous MHCLG Rough Sleeping Initiative (RSI) funding.
- 16 In addition, HERO Officers have received additional 174 referrals for advice and support on COVID-19 related issues. They have supported the majority with debt, rent arrears and employment support and supported 13 people to claim the mortgage holiday break. They have also collected and delivered

donated toys and books to many vulnerable families across the District and delivered and delivered 91 emergency packs, of household and hygiene items to vulnerable families, families in TA and people placed in hotels.

## Key Challenges

- 17 Initially identifying hotel accommodation was extremely difficult, as most hotels had already closed. We managed to work with four hotel owners who agreed to accommodate these customers, one in the District with a further three outside the District. There is a need for the Council to increase affordable and temporary accommodation properties in this District and working with Quercus Housing and housing associations to achieve this.
- 18 Behaviour and substance misuse continues to be a challenge at hotels and ensuring that customers get access and continue to engage with essential support services whilst in isolation. Many of them struggled to self-isolate and continued to gather in groups outside hotels.
- 19 We have had very little engagement with primary care to support these customers to access GP and medical services whilst in hotels. I am working with Public Health England (PHE) and the CCG find a solution. There may also be a need in the near future for this client group to be tested for COVID-19 before moving into alternative accommodation. PHE may expect councils to lead on this and I am working with them to address the logistical and safety issues to achieve this (i.e. no clinical trained staff, no PPE, breaking of the 2m rule to do tests, no outreach staff carry out testing, no transport for these customers to access test sites).
- 20 The cost of nightly paid TA and hotels continues to be a considerable strain on the Council's budget with no end in sight for lockdown ending, this cost will continue to increase. We are working hard to move people on as soon as possible however, some new cases continue to come into the service. As mentioned in paragraph 13 above, the Council is working to access new NSAP funding from MHCLG.

## Key Implications

### Financial

To date, the total additional cost to this Council for delivering this COVID-19 response accommodation is £122,019, with bookings continuing to be extended until move-on accommodation can be secured. This cost includes Housing Benefits re-claims of £45,719, where customers were in receipt of Housing Benefit and Universal Credit, the Council can re-claim the housing element of this funding towards the accommodation costs. The new NSAP funding bid will include ongoing accommodation costs until move-on can be achieved, but we are not able to claim for retrospective accommodation costs already paid out by this Council.

So far, this Council has submitted a MHCLG funding claim for the maximum amount allocated to this Council of £1,650 for this work. The additional MHCLG funding

received by this Council corporately (from the £1.6bn COVID-19 Emergency Funding) included to: 'Provide additional support for the homeless and rough sleepers, including where self-isolation is needed'.

### Legal Implications and Risk Assessment Statement

This Council has a legal duty to provide housing advice and homelessness services. This includes using its discretionary housing powers to place people in temporary accommodation during emergency or crisis situations (under Part VII of the Housing Act 1996 and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017).

### Equality Assessment

The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users.

### **Conclusion**

The Council continues to support homelessness people at risk of rough sleeping in temporary accommodation, as part of this Council's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim is to support everyone in hotels, who wants more permanent housing, to move-on and provide them with the required support to secure and succeed a tenancy moving forward.

### **Appendices**

None

### **Background**

Governments Homelessness and rough sleeping details - <https://www.gov.uk/housing-local-and-community/homelessness-rough-sleeping>

**Sarah Robson**

**Deputy Chief Executive & Chief Officer - People & Places**