

Cllr Kevin Maskell
Housing and Health
Report to Scrutiny Committee
23 March 2021

Since March 2020, the Council we has been responding to the challenges of COVID-19, and planning for recovery in the months ahead. We have worked closely with our partners across the district to respond to significant changes, especially working on how we can protect and maintain critical housing services to support and keep residents safe.

Service pressure points

- Increase in housing register applications compared to same period last year. Waiting times exacerbated by customer reluctance to accept offers in the private rented and few social housing properties available on Kent Homechoice and ongoing demands for more affordable housing in the district.
- Increase in number of homeless applicants in Emergency and Temporary Accommodation (EA/TA) due to impact of Covid-19 (loss of private rented tenancy, asked to leave by family, fleeing domestic abuse, unemployment).
- Lack of Temporary Accommodation provision in the district.

Rough sleeping – Covid-19

- One of the most significant steps taken in response to Covid-19 has been the ‘Everyone In’ initiative in England, and parallel efforts by Scottish and Welsh governments and their partners. This resulted in national governments instructing all local authorities to accommodate people sleeping rough, in night shelters, and in hostels with shared facilities, into self-contained emergency accommodation. Critically, access to emergency accommodation now at this time is based on need alone, regardless of the tests that have been normally required within the homelessness legislation for each nation. In England, people who previously would not qualify for homelessness assistance because they are not considered to have a priority need, or do not have a local connection have prior to the present crisis been considered to be intentionally homeless, or as a result of their immigration status, have now to be supported into safe accommodation.
- Sevenoaks District Council’s response to rough sleeping during the Covid-19 pandemic has been viewed positively by key partner agencies, voluntary and community sector organisations and central Government.
- As at 28 February 2021, the Council is continuing to accommodate 15 street homeless in self-contained hotel rooms or self-contained nightly paid temporary accommodation. A further 10 people are being accommodated in similar accommodation due to Covid-19. All have a personal housing support and needs assessment alongside a medical assessment. 60 Covid-19 related Temporary Accommodation placements made to date.
- Liaising with Sevenoaks Primary Care Network to organise Covid-19 vaccinations for those rough sleepers we have currently housed in temporary accommodation.

Housing Register

- Housing Register became operational at Sevenoaks District Council on the 2nd January 2020. Focus on improving operational processes to reduce the processing time of new applications.
- Pressures on staffing resilience due to staff sickness during January and February this year, which has impacted the service. Customer Solutions is providing interim support up to end March 2021.
- Numbers on the Register: 832 (as at 02/03/2021). Between 1 April 2020 and 02 March 2021 866 (684) applications have been removed as they have failed to supply documents within 28 days. On request, applicants have been given longer to submit docs during COVID19 if needed.

Homelessness prevention funding

- MHCLG Next Steps Accommodation Programme (NSAP) funding of £168,120 revenue funding secured for Covid-19 rough sleeper costs in 2020/21.
- MHCLG has awarded the Council the following grants to support the Winter period and the current lockdown, including the Cold Weather Fund and Protect Plus Fund (approximately £30,000) to deal with the most recent lockdown, specifically for the single homeless population, which will be used for accessing private sector housing for this cohort.
- KCC funding (Emergency COVID support and Winter Grants Scheme) allocated over £90,000 funding to the district. This has supported vulnerable customers with their rent arrears to prevent homelessness, helped customers with fuel bills and provided customers with emergency food vouchers. Additional funding has been awarded to every foodbank in the district.
- The Rough Sleeper initiative (RSi4) funding allocations application will be submitted to by SDC by 26 February 2021. SDC will be advised in April 2021 on the outcome of the application.
- MHCLG's Homelessness Prevention Grant combines and replaces two existing funding streams: the Flexible Homelessness Support Grant & the Homelessness Reduction Grant. This grant is ring-fenced to ensure local authorities are resourced to take action to prevent homelessness from occurring and provides funding to continue to implement the Homelessness Reduction Act. Sevenoaks District's allocation for 2021/22 (from April 2021) is £434,897 (approx. additional £70K allocation from 2020/21 previous grant allocation).
- Government spending review confirmed 2021/22 funding for Rough Sleeping Accommodation Program (RSAP). MHCLG will be working with local authorities to ensure these funding streams align in a way that supports local plans to end rough sleeping as effectively as possible.

Actions

- Development of a Temporary Accommodation Action Plan to address increasing numbers in EA/TA in place.
- Recruitment ongoing. Head of Housing, Accommodation Team Leader and Housing Accommodation Officer, HERO (Covid-19) Officer commence in post on 8 April. Tenancy Sustainment Officer and Housing Triage Officer being recruited to, starting in April 2021.
- Underway with Vine Court Road refurbishment project with WKHA, which will bring forward 7 supported accommodation units for rough sleepers in the district.

- Working with West Kent Housing Association and other providers to address affordable housing provision (including temporary accommodation and social rent).
- We are exploring options with new supported housing providers, and are working towards being able to refer some of our more vulnerable customers into their services to enable them to obtain the support they need before securing their own accommodation.
- HERO team increased focus on homelessness prevention to meet the requirements of the Homelessness Reduction Act, using rent incentives, accommodation options and addressing issues such as rent arrears, debt management, maximising benefits etc.
- Online Landlord Incentives event being held in May 2021 to attract more landlords to work with the Council to offer properties in the private rented sector.
- Government has agreed to restart the refugee resettlement scheme, this had been cancelled due to COVID-19. The Council has committed to taking one household on the proviso the family is from Syria (3 bed need) in line with our policy.

Housing Strategy

- Secured Green Homes funding of £688k towards phase 1a of a low-carbon retrofit project on mobile home park sites. Phase 1b funding of £784k confirmed. Will see nearly 150 mobile homes installed with energy efficient improvements and contribute toward reducing fuel poverty and Net Zero ambitions.
- Affordable housing completions: The anticipated number of affordable homes expected to be delivered by 31 March 2021, has reduced to 22. Only 2 genuinely affordable homes (for use with Housing Register applicants) will be delivered this year. Work is progressing with the housing associations to determine anticipated delivery for 2021/22 and this will be shared once finalised.
- Quercus Housing progressing 11-13 High Street, Swanley project with the developer, which will bring forward genuinely affordable rent.
- Parish needs surveys underway. This is a good news story (for the Council and West Kent Housing Association) appearing in Spring edition of In Shape to showcase the good outcome achieved in Sevenoaks Weald. Sets a positive tone for ongoing programme of surveys.

Health

- First Health Liaison Board of 2021 held last month with Cllr Maskell chairing. A work plan for 2021 has been developed.
- Working with KCC regarding the Universal Wellbeing contract awarded to Involve from 1 April and the transition arrangements with Age UK.
- The One You Service have been delivering their services remotely and there is a new Why Weight zoom class starting in February.