



Scrutiny

14 March 2023

Report of: Councillor Ronan Browne -
Portfolio Holder for Housing and
Landlord Services

Homelessness

Corporate Priority:	Excellent services positively impacting on our communities
Relevant Ward Member(s):	All
Date of consultation with Ward Member(s):	N/A
Exempt Information:	No

1 Summary

- 1.1 Preventing homelessness and assisting those who find themselves homeless are statutory duties. This report provides an update on the work undertaken by the council to prevent and relieve homelessness, and to assist households who experience homelessness across Melton.
- 1.2 An update on this area of the council's work was requested by the Scrutiny Committee and has been added to the committee work programme.

2 Recommendation(s)

That Council/Committee:

1. Notes the report and provide comments for consideration by Cabinet.

3 Reason for Recommendations

- 3.1 Preventing homelessness and assisting those who find themselves homeless are statutory duties. Comments to Cabinet from the Scrutiny Committee in relation to the way in which the council manages this service area will support continuous service improvement.

4 Background

4.1 Housing Options Team

- 4.1.1 The Housing Options Team manage several functions and statutory duties for Melton Borough Council. This includes housing options, housing register (choice based letting), homelessness prevention and relief, homelessness applications, provision of temporary accommodation and seeking to reduce the risk of rough sleeping, whilst also taking steps to safeguard and support those who do find themselves sleeping rough.
- 4.1.2 The Council's homelessness strategy 2018-2023 had been subject to Member approval and an Internal Audit review confirmed that the strategy is clear, concise, and consistent with the requirements of the relevant legislation and statutory guidance. A review of the strategy will be undertaken this year.

5 Main Considerations

5.1 Legal Context

- 5.1.1 Two key pieces of legislation have changed the way in which homelessness is managed by local authorities: The Homelessness Reduction Act (2017) and more recently, Domestic Abuse Act (2021).
- 5.1.2 In April 2018 the **Homeless Reduction Act 2017** came into force. This marked one of the most significant changes to homelessness legislation for many years and gave local authorities new powers and requirements to deal with homelessness in addition to the main statutory duty. It included an enhanced focus on trying to prevent households from becoming homeless in the first instance and enhanced entitled to appropriate advice and assistance for any households in relation to their housing needs.
- 5.1.3 The new legislation means that councils have a:
- a) **Duty to prevent homelessness:** An enhanced prevention duty extending the period a household is threatened with homelessness from 28 days to 56 days, meaning that housing authorities are required to work with people to prevent homelessness at an earlier stage.
 - b) **Duty to relieve homelessness:** A new duty for those who are already homeless so that housing authorities will support households for 56 days to relieve their homelessness by helping them to secure accommodation.
- 5.1.4 The introduction of the Homeless Reduction Act requires local authorities to:
- a) Provide a more thorough assessment of every customer's situation and document actions (a Personal Housing Plan/ PHP). This is a record of all activity and can be appealed by the customer at any stage if they disagree with its contents.
 - b) Improve the reporting methods which for most authorities meant the purchase of a new IT system. This meant capturing more information and reporting more than had ever been done previously. This was a change from a reporting form called P1e to H-Clic.

It meant recording of all cases whether priority or not and reporting on activity for each case and not just outcomes.

- c) Establish resource and skill set within housing options teams to increase the options to resolve homelessness.
- d) Provide temporary accommodation for households under a relief duty which means households can be longer in temporary accommodation as the duty to provide accommodation has 56 days under a relief duty instead of the previous homeless within 28 days.

5.1.5 In April 2022, **The Domestic Abuse Act 2021** came into force. This created additional safeguards for victims of domestic abuse, through additional duties for local authorities. This means that anyone approaching a local authority for homelessness assistance as a risk of domestic abuse is automatically in priority need (triggering statutory duties). Previously, there was greater discretion for councils in assessing vulnerability relating to domestic abuse. The new legislation is a welcome change and safeguard for victims.

5.1.6 Legislative requirements introduced a lot of changes into the way Homelessness is dealt with by a local authority. Funding was given in the form of “new burdens” money which is detailed in the budget section of this report.

5.1.7 The introduction of The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 requires Tier 2 local authorities to:

- a) Understand that domestic abuse is not just physical, violent or threatening. The statutory definition of domestic abuse now includes controlling and coercive behaviour
- b) Embed multi agency working in responding to domestic abuse
- c) Ensure anyone approaching as a result of domestic abuse is treated as a priority need

5.1.8 Melton Borough Council has received extra funding to enact the new responsibilities. This funding was used to enhance resource staffing and ensure specialism and focus within the team. This time limited funding expires in March 2025. It is not yet clear whether further funding will be received from Government, but the expectation is that Local Authorities absorb domestic abuse responsibilities as part of their mainstream offer.

5.2 Budget

5.2.1 External funding directly supports the council’s housing options and homelessness service. This includes:

- **Homeless Prevention Grant** – to support to deliver services to prevent and tackle homelessness
- **Domestic Abuse New Burdens** - part of the homeless prevention grant but specifically to deliver any functions associated with the changes in legislation. This becomes part of the main homeless prevention grant from 2023.
- **Domestic Abuse Duty** – to ensure that victims of domestic abuse can access the right support in safe accommodation when they need it.

5.2.2 Up until 2022/23, Government funding for homelessness was provided on a year-by-year basis, which made it difficult to plan. It is positive that details of funding until March 2025

were released in December 2022. Allocations for Melton Borough Council are shown in the table below:

<i>Year</i>	<i>Homeless prevention Grant (HPG)</i>	<i>Domestic Abuse Duty</i>	<i>Domestic Abuse new burdens</i>
2021/22	£103,865	£32,364	£3,064
2022/23	£103,865 + £16,000 winter pressures*	£32,364	£3,064
2023/24	£107,430	£34,123	Part of HPG
2024/25	£109,031	£34,766	Part of HPG

5.2.3 Occasionally, a top up to the Homelessness Prevention Grant is provided to local authorities. An example of this was the additional winter pressures funding awarded in December, with specific criteria for spend within the financial year often forming requirements.

5.2.4 The table below provides details of the main ways in which Homelessness grant funding is spent by Melton Borough Council. The changes in spend in 22/23 reflect a much greater focus on preventing and relieving homelessness, which is a more effective way in which to spend this budget.

	2021/2022 (£)	2022/2023 (£) *
Utilities for Temp Accommodation properties	5,094	5,813
Temporary Accommodation	126,587	54,194
Rent in Advance and Deposits	4,913	13,910
Other Prevention costs i.e. Taxi, removals	0	2,581
Staff training	0	2,600
(top up) to DHP fund	0	8,000
Total Spend	£136,594	£87,098

*spend as at the end of Feb 2023

5.2.5 The Council also uses other funding sources to help prevent and relieve homelessness, for example charitable funds on a case-by-case basis and access to funds such as the Discretionary Housing Payment fund to alleviate housing cost pressures on a short-term basis. In 2022/23, the DHP has been under particular pressure through high levels of demand related to the cost-of-living crisis, and the fund was exhausted by December 2022. It is positive that the additional winter pressures funding (top up) provided an opportunity to top up the Council's Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) fund by £8,000.

5.3 Temporary Accommodation

The council must provide temporary accommodation to anyone who is believed to have a priority need and is owed a homeless relief duty or main homelessness duty. This can be in supported hostel type accommodation, bed and breakfast, within our own stock or other leased accommodation. Temporary accommodation suitability and usage is closely monitored and is also reported to Government. Temporary accommodation used by the Council is shown below:

- 10 properties from Melton Borough Council housing stock (reduced from 15)
- Flats within Westbourne House (specialist / supported accommodation operated by EMH Homes)
- Bed and Breakfast / Hotel accommodation (as a last resort / where required)

5.3.1 Challenges with Temporary Accommodation

5.3.2 Westbourne House is supported accommodation, used for people with low level support needs below Social Care Thresholds. Ideally, residents would stay here for a period of 6-12 months during which they are encouraged and supported into general needs accommodation. Move-on of residents from Westbourne House is not a Council responsibility and we often see residents staying up to 2 years. This reduces the availability of bedspaces for the council to refer homeless households to.

5.3.3 Bed and breakfast is the costliest form of temporary accommodation with costs up to £100 per night. Housing Benefit rules mean that the Council is only eligible to claim back approx. £13 per night through Housing Benefit.

5.3.4 Due to the high turnover and vulnerability of tenants, our own units of temporary accommodation need to be closely managed, more so than a general needs property. The intensity of support required is difficult to manage through existing resources. Even with onward referrals to case management and partner agencies such as drug and alcohol services, police, community safety etc. the pressure on services means that the level of support required outweighs the capacity available. Furthermore, void turnover times can be higher due to the works required to bring the accommodation back to standard.

5.3.5 Previously, the homelessness prevention grant was being used to subsidise utility costs in council owned temporary accommodation. This is no longer the case and we have successfully moved from being in a position of absorbing all customer utility costs to ensuring tenants take responsibility for their own utilities at the point of handover.

5.3.6 There have been some challenges in accessing suitable hotel / bed and breakfast accommodation for some households, particularly out of hours. There are a range of reasons for this including availability, accessibility and working with hotel owners to manage complexities whilst also ensuring we safeguard other residents of the property.

5.4 An audit of the Council's policies, procedures, and IT systems in relation to the provision of temporary accommodation was completed in May 2022. This audit received satisfactory assurance. The recommendations made have either been addressed or are underway. Key examples are shown below:

- Enhanced approval arrangements to place into B&B / Hotel Accommodation (completed)
- Development of a temporary accommodation procurement strategy (in progress)

- Ensuring Personal Housing Plans for all households supported (complete: now embedded into the IT system)
- Improved data recording (complete: now part of a case management system, rather than excel based document management)

5.5 The Housing Options Team

5.5.1 To fulfil our legislative duties and enhance focus on homeless prevention, changes to the staffing structure have been implemented. The Housing Options Team is part of the Council's Housing and Communities Directorate. The structure of the team is shown below:

- Strategic Lead Supporting Communities (Housing Options Manager) x1. This post holder is also the corporate lead for Domestic Abuse and Care Leavers.
- Housing Options Officers x3 (note: one post is funded to March 2025)
- Housing support Officer x1 (this postholder is also the lead administrator for the case management system)

5.5.2 Cases, Service Demand and Collaboration

5.5.3 Approaches since 2021/21 to 2022/2023 have not increased. They remain fairly static but the team has been able to achieve more positive outcomes for more households. The main reasons for approaches are family and friends asking to leave and end of private rented sector. This is typical across the county and the increased demands due to cost of living will have a key role in this. 46% of approaches during 22/23 have been marked as "imminent risk of homeless" which means they need some level of immediate work conducting. The team is currently at a threshold of 64% successful prevention or relief outcomes.

5.5.4 Rough Sleeping – Melton Borough Council is a part of the county wide rough sleeping initiative (RSI) funded by DLUHC. We work closely with street outreach to identify and engage with people who are rough sleeping as early as possible. Early engagement can mean a better chance of reducing longer spells of rough sleeping and returning to rough sleeping.

5.5.5 Additional pressures from Ukrainian households have meant we have had to accommodate households in temporary accommodation in emergency situations. These have been where host relationships have broken down. We have provided accommodation, one to one support and facilitated moves into permanent accommodation. A specialist Ukraine team set up by Leicestershire County Council is currently being mobilised to assist.

5.5.6 Working with our partner agencies is a key part of our work. Specialist agencies such as FREEVA, LWA, Storehouse, GATE, Falcon Support, The Bridge mean we can access the right support for the right person at the right time. Continued communication and engagement with our partners will keep on improving to ensure we achieve more positive outcomes for more of our customers.

5.5.7 A Focus on Continuous Improvement

5.5.8 Significant changes and improvements have been made to ensure the Council can best support residents who are in housing need or are experiencing homelessness. Some of those changes are shown below:

- Implemented a new Housing Allocations Policy. This is transparent and is in line with current legislative requirements (The Homeless Reduction Act 2017 and Domestic Abuse Act 2021) as well as our responsibilities and commitments for care leavers and veterans via the armed forces covenant.
- Configured and implemented a new IT system (choice based letting system) to record homelessness approaches as well as manage housing register applications. This system can report key details such as reasons for approach, age, household types and leaves manual input to a minimum, enabling the council to populate Government data returns much more easily and accurately. Work is ongoing to further reduce manual data inputting.
- A more managed approach to case allocation to officers. Housing Options Officers deal with cases owed a homeless prevention or relief duty and have on average 30 cases at any time. This is a standard case volume and is considered manageable, however it should be noted that the complexities of each case vary.
- The Housing Support Officer now manages the housing register including registration, advertising of properties and nominations to registered providers. It is important to note that the housing register is just one of the homelessness prevention tools available to the council / residents.
- Responsibility for allocating council properties was moved across to the tenancy services team to assist with community cohesion and estate management. It was agreed that housing officers knew their areas better and any potential issues that may arise.
- Front line officers have now been trained on how to recognise domestic abuse and complete a risk assessment. This has resulted in a positive approach to people fleeing domestic abuse with key actions to support someone and make them feel safe.
- A more proactive and collaborative response to people rough sleeping. Contact is made on initial notification and options are discussed either with the council direct or with the countywide street outreach team. Proactive implementation of additional safeguards through the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP).
- We have improved our contact with customers through the establishment of a duty/on-call rota to deal with enquiries as they come in on the day. This is a significant area of improvement and has also reduced multiple contacts (reducing failure demand). Customer Services colleagues have noted the improvement as a result of this change. Previously, there had been no clear way to communicate to housing options without multiple calls and then emails. Contact for new customers could often take more than a week for an initial approach which led to an increase in emails, and phone calls. Expectations were often difficult to manage.
- Implementation of a Prison leaver Protocol across LLR to ensure that housing authorities are notified as early as possible of releases from prisons in the East Midlands. This will strengthen the response we can provide, and improve the provision of timely advice and housing options assistance.
- Close to finalising a new protocol for Care leavers and 16/17-year-olds who are facing homelessness. This will strengthen relationships with social care teams and should see better communication to achieve more positive outcomes for young people.

- Currently working towards DAHA (Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance) accreditation. This accreditation is recognition of the Council's commitment towards embedding a set of principles to support survivors of Domestic Abuse.
- Planning is underway for a private sector landlord forum in May 2023, which will help to establish relationships with landlords and seek to prevent homelessness from the private rented sector.
- During 22/23 the team have seen a positive increase in prevention and relief outcomes to 64%. In 21/22 this was at 21%.
- Spend on bed and breakfast accommodation has reduced from over £126,000 to approx. £57,000 enabling monies to be better spent on prevention activities.

5.6 General Service Challenges:

- 5.6.1 The budget allocated to Melton Borough Council by Government leaves little room for unforeseen events. Budgets need to be managed carefully and maximised to support households in need.
- 5.6.2 Lack of affordable housing options: families approaching as homeless often must wait several months for properties to come available whilst in temporary accommodation.
- 5.6.3 The cost of private rented sector housing is high, making it an unaffordable housing option for lower income households, and increasing the need / demand for social housing and can build up the need for temporary accommodation.
- 5.6.4 The Renters Reform Bill and potential regulatory changes will bring changes to the management of the private rented sector. This will improve quality of the housing offer in the sector, but elements could make it more difficult to access the private rented sector. For example, abolishing no fault evictions (a common reason for homelessness approaches) may mean landlords may be reluctant to enter the market.
- 5.6.5 Often, households referred for properties by the council are required to be able to pay rent in advance. The demand for private rented properties outstrips supply and the council needs to be proactive to reduce the risk of customers missing out on available properties.
- 5.6.6 Limited supported accommodation options. Whilst hostel type accommodation is not needed or recommended, there are limited options for people needing a higher level of support whilst trying to gain their own independence.
- 5.6.7 Additional housing demand created through national refugee resettlement schemes such as Homes for Ukraine.
- 5.6.8 The ability to prevent and relieve homelessness effectively is also vulnerable to changes to external funding for support services such as floating support or supported housing services. The absence of key funding streams such as DHP or Household Support Fund would also create additional risks and challenges. Any such changes will need to be monitored closely.

6 Options Considered

- 6.1 This report provides an update on the way in which the council manages a range of statutory functions. It has been developed to provide an update to the scrutiny committee in line with the Committee work programme. Therefore, no other options have been

considered. The report will be supported by a presentation to committee members, and opportunity to ask questions of lead officers.

7 Consultation

7.1 None. However, it is important to note that the Homelessness Strategy is due to be reviewed and consultation will form part of that review and strategy development. It is proposed that the Homelessness Strategy is discussed with the Scrutiny Committee as part of its development. It is a legal requirement to have a homelessness strategy, and it is important that it is evidence led and reflects local need.

8 Next Steps – Implementation and Communication

8.1 With a focus on continuous improvement, there are a number of key service developments to be progressed over the coming months. These are set out below:

- Develop a clear Temporary Accommodation Procurement Plan - looking at how we get value for money from temporary accommodation, we minimise costs and ensure the level of support needed by more vulnerable customers.
- Further development of our ICT software. Changes in the team personnel have meant it has taken some time to understand what was “system error” and what was “user error”. We are now able to examine data integrity and are now in conversations with our IT supplier to resolve system anomalies.
- Private rented sector housing: Developing relationships with private landlords through consultation such as landlord forums and a clear package of support for landlords who are able to assist in accommodating households referred by the council. Support to landlords would also include working together to reduce the risks of rent arrears and ASB, assisting with understanding and fulfilling tenancy management requirements and working closer with our partners.
- Rough Sleeping: To enhance efforts to prevent anyone from having to sleep more than 1 night on the street. This will be through quicker identification and proactive liaison with our partner agencies (Street Outreach team, Storehouse)
- Further strengthen and support our networks and partner organisations: To have more cases approaching under a prevention duty rather than a relief duty which allows us more time to work with a case. This means we need closer working with agencies such as Storehouse, MADMAC, CAB, LWA, Police, Turning Point to be aware of cases earlier.
- Supporting team resilience and performance. This will include quarterly case reviews to discuss any learnings and improvements that can be made across the entire service area.

9 Financial Implications

9.1 The Council receives external funding to support delivery of the Housing Options Service. As a demand led service, close and careful budget monitoring and risk management is required. This includes careful consideration of appropriate allocation of resources for temporary accommodation. As a higher risk budget area, budget monitoring between the service accountant and budget holder is completed on a monthly basis.

- 9.2 It is positive that the changes made within the service have demonstrated the cost benefit of improved homelessness prevention performance and reduced use of bed and breakfast accommodation. This can be seen in the reduced spend between financial years in the table at para 5.2.4 and whilst the spend for 2022/23 is only up to end of Feb 2023 the final outturn is expected to be lower than 2021/22.

Financial Implications reviewed by: Assistant Director for Resources

10 Legal and Governance Implications

- 10.1 There are no legal implications arising directly from this report which seeks Scrutiny comment/feedback.
- 10.2 The Housing Options Service fulfils a range of statutory duties on behalf of the Council. The Council must comply with the requirements of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and Domestic Abuse Act 2021 as detailed in the report. Failure to comply with these requirements would negatively impact customers and give rise to legal challenge. The Homelessness Reduction Act includes a number of opportunities at which households can request a review of decisions taken by the Council. Correspondence with customers should set out the right to request a review at every stage.
- 10.3 Performance in this area is monitored corporately and reported to the senior leadership team and members. Recent reports note improved performance in this service area.

Legal Implications reviewed by: Deputy Monitoring Officer 07.03.23

11 Equality and Safeguarding Implications

- 11.1 The Authority must comply with the public sector equality duty as set out in S149 of the Equality Act.
- 11.2 An Equality Impact Assessment will be completed as part of the review of homelessness strategy review, and this will be published to the council's website.

12 Community Safety Implications

- 12.1 Local authorities have a duty under Section 17 of the Crime & Disorder Act 1998 to pay due regard to the likely effect of its functions on crime and disorder and are required to do all that it reasonably can to prevent crime and disorder in its area, enhance public reassurance and confidence in the services that are in place to improve community environment and its safety.
- 12.2 The Council's Integrated People Offer established in October 2022 enables the Strategic Leads across the Communities sub-directorate to take a holistic approach to supporting residents with multiple needs. For example, addressing anti-social behaviour and mediation approaches between neighbours through our Safer Communities teams can contribute towards homelessness prevention activity.

13 Environmental and Climate Change Implications

13.1 None arising directly from this report.

14 Risk & Mitigation

Risk No	Risk Description	Likelihood	Impact	Risk
1	Future Government funding may affect the ability to retain core staff in post which will subsequently impact on the delivery of our statutory functions.	High	Critical	15
2	Temporary Accommodation – availability of and lack of resources to manage TA will impact on local communities and cost to service delivery	High	Critical	15
3	IT – Case management software not performing as expected and resulting in data integrity which can also affect future funding	Low	Critical	9
4	Increase in cost of private sector accommodation could mean less households assisted as funding will not increase	Low	Critical	9

		Impact / Consequences			
		Negligible	Marginal	Critical	Catastrophic
Likelihood	Score/ definition	1	2	3	4
	6 Very High				
	5 High			1, 2	
	4 Significant				
	3 Low			3, 4	
	2 Very Low				
	1 Almost impossible				

Risk No	Mitigation
1	Options to be considered by Senior Leadership Team to ensure continued sufficient staffing resource.

2.	Implemented procedures to check properties before a tenant moves out and raise concerns. This is aimed at reducing damages and void times. Notices served when offers of move on properties are moved so that the tenant moves on quickly.
3	Monitoring of reports to IT provider to resolve issues and raising with IT lead. Raised with DELTA system team for their advice and guidance on how to resolve. Reported issues to DLUHC advisor to raise awareness of presenting issues
4	Better communication and liaison with landlords to reduce risk issues to try and reduce higher cost deposits. Also looking into nationwide landlord insurance schemes.

15 Background Papers

15.1 None

16 Appendices

16.1 None

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