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Homeless Strategy

2020-21 review

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In April 2019, together with Mansfield District Council and Newark & Sherwood District Council, we launched the Ashfield Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Prevention Strategy 2019-24.

This document provides an update on the progress that has been made in achieving the aims and objectives of this strategy in 2020-21.

Details of the progress made in delivering this strategy in 2019-20 can be found here:
www.ashfield.gov.uk/media/0v2f1jgk/ashfield-homelessness-and-rough-sleeping-prevention-strategy-2019-24-12-month-update.pdf

As a reminder, the aims of the strategy are to:

- **Prevent as many residents as possible**
- **Ensure options are available to ensure no one has to sleep rough other than through personal choice**
- **Help as many residents as possible to move seamlessly from one home to another without the need for emergency or temporary accommodation**
- **Provide a high quality service that customers indicate satisfaction with.**

The objectives of the strategy are:



To improve the financial resilience amongst the population at risk of homelessness through a proactive and integrated local welfare benefits system



To increase the amount of social housing available to households at risk of, or experiencing homelessness and increase the sustainability of social housing tenancies by these households



To deliver the additional required supported housing and housing related support



To increase the amount of PRS housing available to households at risk of, or experiencing homelessness and increase the sustainability of PRS tenancies by these households



To ensure the support needs of households at risk of, or experiencing homelessness are appropriately met in order to reduce their risk of homelessness and the risk of homelessness increasing their support needs



To minimise rough sleeping and street activity and encourage the community to do their bit to end homelessness



To achieve high customer satisfaction with the outcome and experience of the support provided by ADC Housing Options



To ensure services are designed based on robust evidence and effectively monitored and evaluated.

Our progress in meeting these objectives since the launch of the strategy are summarised below:

Theme 1

The independent research we commissioned last year made a number of recommendations to tackle homelessness at the earliest possible stage, including through financial resilience. A summary of this research is included at Appendix 1.

In 2020-21 ADC's Housing Benefit Team approved 376 applications for Discretionary Housing Payment.

The ADC Housing Options team continue to work closely with local DWP advisors who attend multi agency case conferences regarding individuals and families with complex needs or those who are rough sleeping.

During 2020-21, a number of changes were made to the welfare benefits system by central Government that have improved the financial resilience of households, including uprating Local Housing Allowance Rates, increasing Universal Credit allowances and the furlough scheme.

The Housing Options Team have completed basic money advice training and can advise customers on maximising their incomes. In 2020-21, around 9% of households supported by the Housing Options Team had a debt related support need.

Theme 1	Good progress
Theme 2	Good progress
Theme 3	Good progress
Theme 4	Good progress
Theme 5	Good progress
Theme 6	Excellent progress
Theme 7	Some progress
Theme 8	Some progress

Theme 2

See the Affordable Housing Delivery Strategy 2019-21 Review for a summary of the new social housing that has been built in the district.

The ADC Tenancy Sustainment Team continue to offer support as required to ADC tenants, including new tenants who were previously homeless and existing tenants who may be at risk of homelessness.

The independent research we commissioned last year made a number of recommendations to minimise tenancy failure in social housing. A summary of this research is included at Appendix 1.

In 2020-21, the Housing Options Team assisted 5 households who were homeless due to loss of a social housing tenancy and 59 households who had lost a PRS tenancy (462 households were supported in total).

The Housing Options Team supported 61 households to secure a tenancy in social housing and 32 households to secure a tenancy in the PRS.

A snapshot report at the end of 2020/21 showed there were 108 Homefinder applicants who needed to move because they were homeless or threatened with homelessness.

In 2020-21, both evictions and lettings have been significantly affected by the Covid pandemic.

Theme 3

A range of supported housing and housing related support services continue to be delivered across Nottinghamshire using funding from the MHCLG Rough Sleeping Initiative. We await confirmation of the 2021/22 funding allocation for Nottinghamshire which may further increase the support and housing available.

20 additional supported housing spaces became available in February 2020 and in 2020/21, 31 individuals with medium to high complex needs have been accommodated. A further 5 spaces are anticipated in early 2021/22.

ADC officers continue to attend the Nottinghamshire Youth Homelessness Forum and work in partnership to strengthen the local Care Leaver Offer.

The Serenity Scheme continued throughout 2020-21 with funding secured from MHCLG, providing accommodation and specialist support for up to 37 women and children fleeing domestic abuse at any one time. In 2020-21, 16 families and 2 single person households were supported by this service.

A survey of support need of residents of temporary accommodation and supported housing was carried out in July 2020 – the findings of this survey are summarised in Appendix 2.

54% of households supported by the ADC Housing Options Team in 2020-21 had one or more support needs, the most prevalent support needs were related to: domestic abuse, mental health, physical health, debt issues and alcohol or drug dependency.

Theme 4

59 households were supported by the ADC Housing Options team who were homeless due to the loss of an Assured Shorthold Tenancy.

32 households were supported by the team to move into the private rented sector to either prevent or relieve their homelessness; 14 households were supported financially through the ADC Homelessness Prevention Fund.

The Call Before You Serve scheme continued in 2020-21. This scheme has worked with 44 households in Ashfield and prevented homelessness in 16 cases. In 14 cases, homelessness could not be prevented and the service continues to support the remaining 14.

The Landlord Liaison Officers also continued in 2020-21 and the Ashfield officer received 86 referrals and secured accommodation for 16 households.

The independent research we commissioned last year made a number of recommendations to increase access to the PRS and to minimise the loss of a PRS tenancy. A summary of this research is included at Appendix 1.

In 2020-21, both evictions and lettings have been significantly affected by the Covid pandemic.

Theme 5

The support needs of homeless households in Ashfield has been highlighted above and also in the summary of the findings from the survey of support needs at Appendix 1.

ADC officers have attended a significant number of partnership meetings during 2020-21 to improve the prevention of homeless upon discharge from an institution and to improve access to specialist support and treatment. The meetings focus on matters such as: prison release, hospital discharge, mental health support, domestic abuse, leaving care, substance misuse treatment, social care support. Meetings have also focused on supporting individuals and families to have a safe home during the Covid pandemic and to access the medical and humanitarian support they need. In some cases, national policies and practices have been implemented (such as a new hospital discharge protocol) and in others local policies and practices have been agreed (such as additional domestic abuse refuge spaces).

In partnership with Broxtowe Youth Homelessness, an online resource for Ashfield schools has been developed regarding housing options for young people – this will be available in early 2021/22.

Theme 6

Significant funding was again secured from MHCLG in 2020-21 to provide services to rough sleepers and those at risk of rough sleeping in Nottinghamshire, including: a street outreach service, nursing outreach, specialist navigators, landlord liaison officers, mental health support, additional supported housing spaces, additional winter emergency accommodation spaces, tenancy sustainment support, substance misuse support.

In 2020-21, these services supported the following number of individuals in Ashfield

- Landlord Liaison Officer (0.5 FTE) received 86 referrals and secured accommodation 16
- Wound care service has worked with an average of 2 patients per month
- Change Grow Live outreach worked with 275 individuals
- Framework Street Outreach worked with 32 individuals
- Framework mental health navigator received 5 referrals and supported 3 individuals
- Community Psychiatric Nurse received 12 referrals
- Framework prevention and resettlement navigator team supported 11 individuals
- YMCA accommodated 31 individuals
- Call Before You Serve received 44 referrals and prevented homelessness in 16 cases

In November 2020, ADC reported that the typical number of individuals rough sleeping on a given night is 4.

In order to protect those rough sleeping from the Covid pandemic, accommodation has been offered to all rough sleepers.

Theme 7

The independent research we commissioned last year made a number of recommendations to improve customer satisfaction and to prevent homelessness at the earliest opportunity. A summary of this research is included at Appendix 1.

Theme 8

During 2020-21, ADC officers have attended a significant number of newly formed partnership meetings that were put in place to manage the response to the Covid pandemic. Data and outcomes have been reported regularly to these meetings, as well as to MHCLG.

Due to the Covid pandemic, comparison of 2020-21 data to previous trends is difficult and as such data has mostly been used this year to identify where additional short-term capacity and services are required.

2021-22 priorities

Work with partners to identify sustainable housing solutions for individuals continuing to rough sleep following accommodation offers made during Covid

Work with the PRS and relevant partners to minimise homelessness from the PRS following the end of Covid policies to suspend possession action

Increase the capacity and skills of the ADC Housing Options Team to meet the emerging challenges

Provide proactive advice and support Homefinder applicants who may be at risk of homelessness

Increase the use of digital solutions to provide advice and support, particularly for those at early risk of homelessness outside (i.e. prevention stage or earlier)

Increase the use of data and customer insight to understand the performance of the team and opportunities for improvement

Supporting early intervention to prevent homelessness across Ashfield District – summary of key findings and recommendations

Key findings

Ashfield District Council (ADC) commissioned Alden Social Research to complete a research project to explore homelessness prevention activities across the district and ways in which the authority can improve its support offer moving forward. Views were gathered from statutory and third sector informants and people who had used housing option services. The findings that emerged highlighted the interdependence of different sectors in supporting homeless prevention, and the need to cultivate relationships to build and strengthen the assets that are already present.

1, Some households affected by homelessness do not identify themselves as such

Some households at risk of homelessness are unlikely to seek support from the local authority. The term homelessness itself tended to be associated with being literally homeless (i.e. having nowhere to go) and there was a view that those with a job or no health-related issues were expected to sort themselves out. This perception was generally formed through “word of mouth” but also likely influenced by the way in which homelessness is presented in the media. This suggests that in some cases people do not seek housing advice until their housing situation (and related to this, health and wellbeing) had reached crisis point. Some providers viewed that community mobilisations efforts in response to COVID-19 provides an opportunity to support people at earlier stages of housing need, through increasing awareness of available services and support (provided through the third sector, as well as ADC).

2, Lack of perceived distinction between statutory housing-based services

Prior to seeking housing advice from the council most interviewees applied to go on the housing register (via Homefinder). Though a few believed they would have been ineligible for help if they had approached the homelessness team at an earlier stage of housing need, some conflated the services, a view that was also shared by some external stakeholders. This highlights the need to ensure maximum integration between the homelessness and Homefinder teams to ensure that an every contact counts approach is taken to homeless prevention, such as creating a trigger for housing advice to be offered to housing register applicants, where assessed as appropriate.

3, Providing a personalised service is what can make the biggest difference

Feedback from interviewees with lived experienced showed that it was not necessarily the specific options offered which led to the greatest perceived impact, but rather, the way in which the service is delivered (i.e. the perceived qualities of staff members). Interviewees valued a service that felt more personalised, where staff took the time to make them feel comfortable and safe and where they felt their story was heard. One person who had presented as an emergency said though they had waited all day to see someone, the kindness shown to them, such as being provided with supplies, meant the wait was worthwhile. Though statutory services face a number of pressures, this support did not have to be particularly in-depth, and a few referred to the value of light touch, informal contact, preferably from the same staff member.

4, Third sector supporting homeless families but overlook the housing issues they are experiencing

Similar to interviewees with lived experience, some third sector providers did not distinguish between more acute forms of homelessness, and those who may struggle in a tenancy. Others were unaware that people who were not at imminent threat of homelessness could approach ADC for assistance, and therefore did not signpost to the homelessness team if a housing related issue emerged. As all interviewees with lived experience had visited third sector services prior to the homelessness team, this indicates that opportunities to prevent an issue escalating are being missed. Another issue was that while there were lots of examples of holistic support being offered which had prevented homelessness, it was not generally badged in that way without further prompting. This will no doubt hinder the identification of preventative work that is already taking place and increase the risk of duplicating services.

5, Cross-sector networks are viewed as talking shops and not enough focus on action

The relationship between providers across the district were assessed as strong, with good formal and informal links. Yet it was acknowledged that while valuable, current networks were not necessarily set up to actively support people with early stage housing need. Informant's viewed that networks need to go beyond information sharing and signposting, or as one put it: "what can we do as a group... how can we

work together". There was also a suggestion that smaller, more grassroot organisations may be less inclined to get involved if networks did not operate with a solution focus. In most cases, when the preventative focus of the homelessness team was discussed, stakeholders were very receptive to the idea of supporting more targeted action, or at least looking at ways to link together and make referrals, suggesting that this can be supported.

6, Internal collaboration between departments to pool resources and build a private landlord portfolio

Private rented accommodation is the only realistic housing option for many households, yet there are a number of assessed financial and attitudinal barriers to obtaining it and termination of an assured shorthold tenancy is the main recorded reason for presenting as homeless. This project identified a number of different teams within ADC who are working to positively engage with and build relationships with private landlords using different, but complementary skills. Yet at times some teams are required to enforce regulations or make decisions that are perceived as negative by landlords, which can hamper the building of positive relationships. As a result, in some cases effort is being duplicated, and in others efforts are hindered by actions that other teams are required to take. Some cross departmental efforts were identified, which have had a measure of success, and staff teams expressed an appetite to work more closely together to widen the private landlord offer.

Recommendations: rethinking internal strategies and processes

If homelessness is to be 'everyone's business', it is crucial to start within ADC itself, and ensure internal structures support teams to work together to achieve this aim. Housing need is complex and the underlying causes and factors that may lead to homelessness ideally requires a strategically led cross-departmental approach.

Creating internal working groups

As resourcing additional posts may not be realistic, especially in the existing climate, it is worth exploring how existing internal staff across teams can work together to provide a more responsive homelessness prevention service. For this to work there would need to be a few clear, achievable goals agreed at the outset and someone would need to take overall responsibility to ensure it stays on track. With the right planning, this option can be relatively inexpensive and, in some cases, may involve re-jigging communication, so that current efforts to achieve particular goals already are pooled together. An area that lends itself well to setting up an internal working group is private rented accommodation, as interviews uncovered various efforts to engage landlords across departments who have different, but complementary skills to offer.

Information sharing between HOT and the Allocations team

Both these teams work to support people with some level of housing need. The Allocations Team receive Homefinder applications from people who have issues that may impact on their housing, be that through health-related needs, problems

with a landlord, or living in unsuitable accommodation. Linked to this, most people who approach HOT are already registered on Homefinder. It was identified there is some confusion externally between the two services. Improving information sharing arrangements would increase the likelihood that those who present to ADC at earlier junctures with a housing need are potentially picked up before the issue escalates.

This could, for example, be a system which triggers a response if a Homefinder applicant indicates a housing related need, who can then be contacted and either offered the option of an advice session or signposting to relevant information.

Other ways to promote homelessness prevention through aligning internal systems would be to review ways of linking relevant services currently being delivered across departments. The Housing Benefit service, for example, prevents homelessness through the provision of Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP). When a DHP is agreed a letter is sent out explaining that the payment is short term and the recipient needs to act to increase income or find an alternative property. However, it does not contain detailed signposting information, which would potentially be invaluable to those who self-refer, or have been referred through ADC housing or a third sector organisation.

Creation of external facing posts

Some stakeholders, internally and externally, identified that early prevention approaches require a dedicated worker. Some suggestions (explored in more detail in the main report), include: an outward facing

'Housing Options Link Worker' whose main focus would be connecting to, and building on, existing assets; an 'Early Intervention Worker' whose main role would be to work with people prior to the 56-day prevention threshold being reached (such as those identified by Allocations as having a potential housing related need); a 'Private Sector Floating Support Worker', which would support individuals who are in private rented accommodation but flagged as potentially at-risk of experiencing housing related need. Elements of all these suggested roles can be picked up by existing staff, but without sufficient resource, progress is likely to be patchy, and new initiatives and services missed, especially if initial momentum is lost due to frontline service pressures.

Recommendations: working with external agencies

Explore ways to promote resident engagement

This research highlighted the importance of ensuring service change is informed from the ground up. The latest prevention strategy for ADS suggests working with partners to identify how those with lived experience of homelessness can be included in the design and delivery of services. To increase inclusion, the ways in which forums/meetings are run will need some thought, offering opportunities to participate beyond more traditional approaches. The drive toward digital and flexible ways of working may contribute to this discussion. This also links to building trust, where residents become more invested in making homelessness their business, as they appreciate their voice is needed and valued. There are various free 'toolkits' that can support coproduction efforts online, such as through Homeless

Link, and it may be worth checking out established networks, such as the 'experts by experience', run in Newcastle and Gateshead. But as with good practice transfer more generally, it is important to think about how this can work in the ADC local context.

Bring together existing local services

For early intervention to be effective, especially targeting areas where there is an increased risk, such as those on a low income, it makes sense to link local services running similar initiatives together. The BRE review recommended that ADC should consider running initiatives that target household income through job creation and benefit entitlement checks. The latest Homelessness Prevention Strategy for ADC suggests integration of local welfare benefits services with HOT. A challenge is keeping on top of what is likely to be an ever evolving and shifting landscape. Traditionally, grassroots services tend to be invisible, frequently changing and/or disappearing. One third sector provider is looking to redesign a local community network they run so it is more inclusive to grassroots organisations through running the group digitally, which is certainly a step in the right direction and potentially something ADC can link in with.

Set up health-based links

The relationship between homelessness and poor health has come into sharper focus in recent years, such as through the NHS Long-term Plan, which makes a strong case for meaningful partnerships across primary health services in particular. Based on suggestions provided, it is worth looking at ways to more explicitly tackle this, such as piggy backing meetings in local surgeries, promoting HOT in reception areas, and setting up an initial meeting with the newly form Social Prescribing Link Worker Team

(who are due to expand and are keen to work with ADC). It is also worth the HOT exploring how to 'piggyback' the contacts built through other internal departments, such as the Complex Case Team, who are taking effective action to build stronger connections with local GPs. Other departments with links to specific health-based services (normally where a relationship has been built with a specific staff member) includes the Tenancy Sustainment Team and Private Sector Enforcement. It may also be worth running ideas past third sector providers, such as AVA and the CAB, who are currently funded to work with health-based services.

Set up a more strategically designed private landlord service

Some interviewees felt a managed service was needed. It is worth taking inspiration from services set up by other local authorities, such as Norwich City Council who worked with Eastern Landlords Association to set up a Private Sector Leasing Scheme. Benefits for landlords include leasing for up to four years, with guaranteed rents, property condition and landlords can decide on either a full repairing agreement or do their own repairs. Closer to home, the Nottingham Private Rented Assistance Scheme (NPRAS) offers a package of support offered by Nottingham City Council with "Bronze, Silver and Gold" packages. There are currently valuable local assets that can offer a source of advice and support, such as the Call B4 You Serve landlord service.

Link in with the private sector

Tapping into the private sector can be challenging, and it may be a case of working across sectors to see what appetite or resources are out there already. The HOT team provided a good suggestion of

working with the private sector as part of offering a 'through' service for people who approach, including liaising with the DWP or to develop a communication channel with local employers in the area. An example was provided of B&M stores, who could potentially inform the HOT if there are any vacancies, which can then be passed on to customers who may be struggling with accommodation due to losing, or struggling to find, employment (consideration would, of course, need to be given around who would take overall responsibility for setting up and maintaining this service). ADC would benefit from promoting services around the language of 'supporting people to live well in the local community', rather than 'preventing homelessness'.

With more specific regard to linking with private landlords, some suggestions include the HOT piggy backing landlord forums to promote what they offer; running an event across local estate agents; designing leaflets promoting the Landlord Liaison service in a popular trade catalogue and local hardware or DIY stores. To support engagement, it was suggested that relationships would ideally be reciprocal.

Promoting homelessness prevention and housing option services

A relatively accessible way of reaching out is to develop promotional materials, this can be both to endorse the preventative element of HOT and provide information so people are enabled to help themselves, where this is preferred. There are some national examples and resources which use written materials to good effect, providing accessible factsheets, email bulletins, flyers and posters around topics such as how to spot early signs of homelessness or raise awareness of

what local support/grants etc are available. With regard to promoting any materials developed, it could be worth exploring local neighbourhood networks, neighbourhood watch schemes, Facebook groups and the websites of other organisations, such as AVA, which are more likely to capture people who may not access ADC services directly. It is necessary to give regard to differences within groups; for example, while young people may respond well to promotion through social media, digital based methods may be less suited to older people.

Give regard to phrasing around homelessness in publications

One way of changing existing perception around homelessness prevention is to explore the language used to describe it at both the strategic and operational level. It is recommended that the wording of documents produced is given some thought, to ensure that external organisations and the community are able to relate to the discussion. Newcastle City Council has designed a Pathways to Homelessness guide, aimed at local organisations, which offers a useful signposting tool which distinguishes between 'at risk', 'threatened with' and multiply excluded homelessness.

Employing digital to support early intervention

When asked specifically about how HOT might utilise digital to support services, people with lived experience iterated that it should be offered as part of a suite of options, and not serve to further distance people from services. This is especially important for people who may be digitally excluded. A few third sector providers discussed the potential to use digital to transform advice and support, such as

offering the option (alongside face to face) of receiving either one off or ongoing sessions via Skype, Zoom or similar. There was not much appetite for this kind of option for HOT services, but it is certainly worth exploring, especially for younger people, or those who do not wish to visit the building. This can also support remote working, which was viewed positively as it provided more time to work on individual cases. However, there needs to be a balance between supporting remote working, where it is feasible, and retaining the face to face interactions which can sometimes lead to effective 'on the spot' solutions to housing related issues.

Look at ways to evidence early prevention activities

Resources will be needed to support many of the above recommendations, some interviewees felt that to secure this, initiatives need to demonstrate how and where money can be saved. Some ideas, as suggested by previous local strategies, include monitoring signposting and referrals through various agencies and/or the proportion of early prevention numbers that come through HOT, as well as capturing case studies of customer experiences (though the latter will not pick up where approaches to HOT have been avoided altogether). The JSNA report recommends that local councils identify opportunities to align funding to evidence based primary prevention of homelessness. Though the potential future funding landscape may change due to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, it is worth taking the time to explore what options are out there, both within ADC, but also at the county level or in partnership with local authorities that share similar ambitions.