

THE VALE OF GLAMORGAN COUNCIL

CABINET: 4TH FEBRUARY, 2019

REFERENCE FROM HOMES AND SAFE COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE: 9TH JANUARY, 2019

“ VALE OF GLAMORGAN COUNCIL HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION
STRATEGY 2018-2022 (REF) -

Following apologies received from the Cabinet Member for Housing and Building Services, the Head of Housing and Building Services advised that the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 statutorily required Local Authorities to undertake a homelessness review and to produce a Homelessness Strategy setting out how the Vale of Glamorgan Council, in partnership with other stakeholders, would identify and develop the services required to help and support those persons in housing need. Therefore, a draft Homelessness Prevention Strategy had now been developed in consultation with partners setting out the steps and activities that would be undertaken by the Council and partners to deliver the required strategic outcomes for clients who were homeless or threatened with homelessness.

On 17th December, 2018, Cabinet endorsed the draft Homelessness Prevention Strategy and relevant Action Plan for consultation purposes and that the commencement of a formal consultation exercise be approved. Cabinet also resolved that following consideration by the Homes and Safe Communities Scrutiny Committee any comments be referred back to Cabinet for final determination.

The Head of Housing and Building Services introduced Mr. Mark Lawrence (Homelessness Consultant) who was seconded to the Local Authority from Shelter Cymru and had made an invaluable contribution to the development of the draft Strategy. The officer also introduced Ms. Joanne Rowe (Private Rented Sector Co-Ordinator) who had significant day to day experience of dealing with individuals likely to be or already homeless.

The Homelessness Consultant advised that the draft Strategy document itself was set out over two parts with the first containing the results of the Local Authority's review on the issue of homelessness and the second an Action Plan on how to tackle any points identified over the next four years. To gain a more open response from service users, a basic questionnaire was put to service users by independent individuals employed on behalf of the Local Authority and the feedback received from the 35 clients who engaged over a six week period was generally good.

It was found that the main focus of the positive comments received were based around that of soft skills i.e. empathy and therefore the positivity of feedback around this area was very rewarding for the Housing Solutions Team who were trying to provide a personal service under strict legislation.

Following the first stage of review which was to contact the service users direct, 120 invitations were sent out to local partners who had a connection to the Housing Solutions Team. Approximately 50 organisations attended the Homelessness Consultation event which followed with all of the information collated during the event being used to form the basis of the Action Plan. Therefore, the Strategy was not just the Council's vision for the future but also that of its partners and service users.

The officer advised that Section 66 of the new Housing Wales Act 2014 set out the requirement to prevent individuals becoming homeless in the first instance and the Vale of Glamorgan Council was sixth out of 22 Welsh Authorities. Section 73 of the Act set out the Local Authority's duty to resolve an individual's issues when they were already homeless and the officer was proud to report that the work of the Housing Team had resulted in the Local Authority being second out of 22 Local Authorities in meeting the statutory duty.

The Action Plan contained 46 actions that would direct the future work of the Council over the next four years; however, homelessness was an increasing issue within society and would always be an issue due to the multitude of possible issues resulting in an individual becoming homeless. Often the individuals that the Housing Solutions Team worked with presented with some sort of mental health issue and therefore the Housing Solutions Team now had a mental health professional as part of the team.

Looking forward to the future, the Officer advised that the Housing Solutions Team looked to increase on the number of households having their needs satisfied within the private sector and improve on the 240 figure since 2015. It was also hoped that within the next two to three months, two new support workers would be employed to help individuals maintain properties and their tenancies and therefore prevent repeated cases of homelessness. An online portal that could be accessed by individuals starting to worry about their home security was also being designed.

In conclusion, the Homelessness Consultant added that there was currently no quick fix for homelessness and that it was a national issue gaining more and more daily coverage within the media. Universal Credit would have a definite impact on homelessness and could have a significant impact over a short period of time following the Bedroom Tax which had already impacted on homelessness statistics. Brexit would also bring about possible job losses and interest rate increases on unsecured loans which would put households under significant strain. However, despite all of the aforementioned factors, the Housing Solutions Team was doing a fantastic job and was fully qualified to deal with any future challenges.

A Member referred to page 9 of the draft Strategy and queried whether the statement made that there had been no rough sleepers recorded over the same period (with regards to achievements made since the introduction of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 on 27th April, 2015) was accurate when the Council was aware that there were more rough sleepers within the Vale of Glamorgan.

The Homelessness Consultant advised that the main issue with the Local Authority conducting rough sleeper counts was that the count was only a snapshot of the

number of people sleeping rough at one particular time and that homeless individuals tended to pick multiple locations as a base through the night. The Private Rented Sector Co-ordinator also wished to apprise Committee of a Homelessness helpline called 'Street Link' which allowed any individual to call in a sighting of a person who seemed to be homeless and then the relevant Local Authority would be contacted with the information. This allowed the Local Authority to respond much quicker to offer support to any homeless individual. It was also important to note that due to the more rural setting of the Vale of Glamorgan, it was more difficult to measure the amount of individuals sleeping rough and to build working relationships with them in comparison to places such as Cardiff City centre where the night time economy resulted in homeless individuals being more visible and known to support staff.

The Chairman congratulated officers on the fact that the Local Authority was picking up on any instances of homelessness much quicker than it had previously and seconded the points raised by the Operational Manager for Public Housing Services in that sometimes homeless individuals were not always willing to accept the help offered by the Local Authority.

The Head of Housing and Building Services advised that many homeless individuals wished to stay within their local area to ensure that they remained close to their support network and there were often very complex reasons for the individual being homeless in the first instance. With regards to the number of individuals classed as 'sofa surfing' it was impossible for the Local Authority to confirm the number of individuals however, the Local Authority had seen a visible increase on the number of individuals sleeping on the streets of the Vale of Glamorgan. The vast majority of homeless individuals referred to the Housing Solutions Team by Elected Members, were already known to the team.

The Member thanked officers for their responses to her query and stated that it was extremely useful to know about the Street Link helpline and a comfort that the helpline was an out of hours service.

A Member congratulated officers on a very good Strategy and noted the huge progress made with regards to homelessness support since her time in office as a Cabinet Member and shared her continuing belief in a collaboration of support services to tackle homelessness. However, the Member expressed her concern over the continued use of bed and breakfast establishments being used for emergency accommodation as it had huge financial implications for the Local Authority. The Member also wished to highlight that the list of individuals as set out in the reasons for homelessness under Section 66 Housing (Wales) Act 2014 on page 11 of the Strategy were indeed the exact individuals who would most likely end up in bed and breakfast emergency accommodation.

In response, the Head of Housing and Building Services advised that the Local Authority was already putting long term plans in place to address the increasing need for one bedroom accommodation across the Vale of Glamorgan and added that an effective Strategy was essential to help support such planning. The Operational Manager for Public Housing Services also wished to add that the bed and breakfast emergency accommodation was not suitable for families, however,

with all Local Authority accommodation being full but more individuals presenting as homeless, bed and breakfast accommodation was sometimes unavoidable. The Vale of Glamorgan Council currently operated on 10 emergency placements however, a severe lack of one bedroom accommodation was a huge concern and a priority factor in long term planning. The Homelessness Consultant apprised the Committee of the legislation currently in place around using bed and breakfast accommodation for emergency placements and that bed and breakfast accommodation was only meant to be used for a maximum of six weeks. However, homelessness was a crisis that the Local Authority must respond to and therefore any new build projects would act as a small relief to the crisis. For context purposes the Private Rented Sector Co-Ordinator advised that 10 individuals were already accommodated in the one bedroom emergency accommodation available to the Local Authority, however, 5 of those 10 individuals already had a 'move on' plan. Due to the unexpected nature of individuals declaring themselves as homeless, for example individuals suddenly fleeing domestic violence, the Local Authority was only able to plan its provision as a responsive service.

The Operational Manager for Housing and Building Services added that the Local Authority did not currently have any direct emergency access accommodation in the Vale of Glamorgan as was currently operated within neighbouring Local Authorities. However, the increase in homeless individuals within the Vale of Glamorgan meant that the Local Authority would need to consider whether other types of resources were required within the Vale. A second possible solution to offer support to homeless individuals was a Local Authority lettings agency. To build resilience into the Housing Solutions Team, some of the staff who were currently on a temporary contract would be offered permanent positions and if the borrowing cap was removed by Welsh Government it would allow the Local Authority to accelerate its housing development programme. The Local Authority did not wish to rely on emergency bed and breakfast accommodation and would be doing all it could to avoid it in the future.

The Member thanked the officers for their informative responses and requested that Committee receive regular updates on the output information informing the Strategy Action Plan and the Member's recommendation was seconded.

A Member wished to raise a number of points regarding the draft Strategy document as follows:

- The Member congratulated officers on a very well written summary and noted that there were 3,882 housing applicants on the Vale of Glamorgan Housing Register seeking affordable rented accommodation and of those, approximately 70% of households had no earned income. The Member noted that this was evidence of a severe issue for the Council and that there was also a significant amount of hidden homelessness that the Local Authority was not yet able to measure and therefore the Strategy seemed to lack a definition on what being homeless was.
- There was a grammatical error on the second bullet point at the bottom of page 9.
- Within the Homelessness Prevention Strategy Action Plan, the action of 'explore needs to develop a direct access hostel' was currently rated as a low

priority. However, following discussion that had taken place during the meeting the action was obviously a high priority and should be changed to reflect this.

- Page 21 of the draft Strategy referred to a mental health link worker and the Member queried whether the individual would be placed in the Housing Solutions Team or at Barry Hospital.
- There were several references to the legislative sections of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 within the document, however, there were concerns that the terminology would not be easily understandable to lay persons and therefore, an explanation of the legislative sections (in particular Section 73) needed to be added to the document.
- The pie charts within the document were not clear to the reader as some colours used were very similar and therefore the reader could not be certain which percentage was relevant to which category. Therefore, the Member suggested that a different type of chart be used and that the total statistics also be added to the chart for the readers benefit.
- The challenge facing the Local Authority was enormous and therefore a more stronger point needed to be made within the background information of the Strategy over the gravitas of the challenge faced.
- A Member referred to the statement made on page 3 of the Strategy which said that the aim of the current legislation was to focus more intensely on prevention rather than cure and therefore the Member suggested that more emphasis be put into the document with regards to specific prevention methods.

The Head of Housing and Building Services thanked all Members for their comments regarding the draft Strategy and advised that that all points would be taken into consideration and reflected in the draft document as appropriate. During the collation of the document, considerable attention was given to the terminology used to make sure that the document was interesting to read and understandable for all. With regards to the Member's suggestion of adding more statistical information into the document, the Officer advised that the information would probably be more appropriate for the Committee's attention as Members would have expert knowledge to assess and evaluate the statistics. The Officer also confirmed that the mental health link worker would be based within the Housing Solutions Team. It was also important to note that the draft Strategy would also need to be formally adopted by Welsh Government prior to adoption by the Local Authority.

With full Committee agreement, the Chairman requested that the output information and relevant statistics informing the Action Plan be presented to the Committee on a quarterly basis and also wished to add that on page 17 of the document a note was currently included which stated '(Link to be added once draft approved)' which needed to be populated.

In conclusion, the Chairman thanked all parties for their contribution during the meeting and summarised that it was imperative that a focus on prevention as well as cure led the work of the Local Authority to tackle the homelessness crisis and that the fantastic work of the Housing Solutions Team and the Local Authority's position in comparison to other Local Authorities should be included within the draft Strategy.

The Committee also wished to pass on their sincere thanks and respect to the members of staff in the Housing Solutions Team for their excellent and unwavering work.

RECOMMENDED -

- (1) T H A T the Homelessness Prevention Strategy and Action Plan be noted.
- (2) T H A T the comments of the Scrutiny Committee as set out in the minutes above be referred to Cabinet along with the draft Strategy and Action Plan.
- (3) T H A T the Homes and Safe Communities Scrutiny Committee receive a quarterly update report on the output information and relevant statistics informing the Action Plan.

Reasons for recommendations

- (1) Members are aware of the Homelessness Prevention Strategy and Action Plan.
- (2) Cabinet is aware of the comments received from the Scrutiny Committee prior to final determination of the Strategy and Action Plan.
- (3) To ensure Members are kept regularly up to date on progress surrounding the strategy during the current homelessness crisis.”