

SPECIAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING SCRUTINY PANEL

THURSDAY 28 JANUARY 2021 AT 10.00AM

PRESENT: Councillor Finlayson (Vice Chair), Councillors Atkinson (as substitute for Councillor Ellis-Williams), Dr Davison, McKerrell, McNulty, Tarbitt, Whalen.

ALSO

PRESENT: Councillor Ellis, Finance, Governance and Resources Portfolio Holder
Councillor Mrs Mallinson – Communities, Health and Wellbeing Portfolio Holder
Councillor Nedved – Economy, Enterprise and Housing Portfolio Holder

OFFICERS: Homelessness Prevention and Accommodation Manager

HWSP.13/21 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Ms Ellis-Williams, Paton and Mallinson, Leader.

HWSP.14/21 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interested submitted.

HWSP.15/21 PUBLIC AND PRESS

RESOLVED - It was agreed that the items of business within Part A be dealt with in public and Part B be dealt with in private.

HWSP.16/21 HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION AND ROUGH SLEEPING STRATEGY 2021- 2026

The Homelessness Prevention and Accommodation Manager (HPA Manager) submitted report GD.11/21 which set out the strategic aims, priority objectives and actions identified as part of a statutory review and consultation process; targeting Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping in Carlisle from 2021 to 2026, as outlined within the Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy and Action Plan.

In considering the report, Members raised the following questions and comments:

- Which key findings from the consultation and service review were carried forward into the Strategy as priorities?

The HPA Manager responded that the data collated from the service review and public consultation had been assessed with a view to informing the priorities of the proposed Strategy. An aim of the Strategy was to provide support to those most in need which included those experiencing or at risk of multiple exclusion and domestic abuse. There were not a vast number of rough sleepers in the district, however, the Covid 19 pandemic had highlighted the number of people at risk of rough sleeping. Following the government's "Get Everyone In" instruction that all rough sleepers be provided with accommodation during the first national lockdown, the service was contacted by a number of individuals who were living transiently, for example staying with friends or family due to having no accommodation of their own. The restrictions imposed during the lockdown meant that those options were not available to all individuals, their coming forward to access services made the Homelessness team aware of the scale of the issue which had also informed the priorities of the new Strategy.

The Domestic Abuse Bill was likely to receive parliamentary assent in April 2021 and placed additional duties on local authority homelessness services. The HPA Manager outlined the work being undertaken with the county council in preparation to meet those new duties.

- Had consideration been given to the creation of a Prison Leavers Pathway, including a Service Level Agreement with other relevant organisations?

The HPA Manager welcomed the suggestion and drew Members attention to Objective 2 of the Action Plan within which the establishment of a prison release review was an action. It was a crucial area for the service to focus on as, due to the number of agencies involved in preparing prisoners for release, there could be disparity of information sharing that may end up in a prisoner being released without accommodation provision. Initial discussions on the matter had been undertaken with the local Probation Service with a view to potentially setting up a partnership group to work on the issues.

A Member asked whether prison leavers housed in the Council's homeless accommodation had to have been formerly resident in the district.

The HPA Manager advised that when looking at housing a prisoner at the end of their sentence a number of criteria were assessed which included whether there was a local connection to the place. In the main the offenders housed in Carlisle did have a local connection, however, as the city provided the Approved Premises for the county for housing released prisoners, it did provide accommodation to prisoners not formerly from the district. Additionally, individuals with no connection to the city may request to be housed in Carlisle upon release, the HPA Manager gave an overview of how that process was managed.

- A Member expressed concern regarding the use of the term "customers" to describe those using the Council's Homelessness services.

The HPA Manager undertook to reconsider the wording.

- Were pets allowed in the Council's homelessness accommodation sites?

The Council operated a number of accommodation sites some of which were shared/emergency occupancy, in that environment pets were not permitted, but they were allowed in sites where persons were accommodated individually. Were a person with a pet to be only able to be housed in shared/emergency accommodation initially, the Council had a number of options for including kennelling and fostering placement for their pet.

- Were the characteristics of those accepted as homeless within the district related to the demographics of the wider population?

The HPA Manager explained that the characteristics were used as reporting measures to regional and national bodies as required. Using characteristics helped to shape services for example through user profiling and identifying marginalised groups.

- A Member welcomed the Strategy's objective of continuing partnership working.

The Council was very committed to partnership working as it recognised that it was not able to address the issue of homelessness alone. It was important that partners embraced and supported the Strategy as that increased the likely success of its implementation.

- Did the Winter-readiness plan require all rough sleepers to be accommodated through the winter season?

The Winter-readiness plan was part of the Homelessness Team's annual work and it was an achievable objective to ensure that all rough sleepers were accommodated through the winter season. The team also applied Severe Weather Emergency Protocols (SWEPs) under which they had a duty to house rough sleepers when temperatures dropped below 0°C in order to safeguard life.

In addition to the placement of rough sleepers in accommodation under the Winter-readiness plan and SWEPs, the HPA Manager also worked with accommodation providers to encourage them not to evict tenants during periods of bad weather. Currently there was a national freeze on evictions taking place.

- Would the Action Plan have defined performance measures and could they be reported to the Panel on a 6 monthly basis for scrutiny?

The HPA Manager confirmed that were the Strategy and Action Plan to be approved timescales for completing actions and other appropriate metrics would be developed and would form the basis of performance reporting to the Panel.

- Lone females were an especially vulnerable group in terms of rough sleeping, what key actions were proposed to support them?

Safeguarding and Harm Minimisation were key objectives of the Strategy and included lone/young females. In the preparation of the existing Strategy, a piece of work had been carried out with a cohort of females to better understand their experience of using homelessness services and the factors which had contributed to that need. The data gleaned from that work was used to formulate priorities within the existing Strategy which had been carried over to the currently proposed one. A significant finding from that work was the length of time lone/young females accessing services had been victims of abuse or living in a transient way, this had led to a focus on preventative work being undertaken by the team to try and provide support to those individuals earlier on.

- What work was the Council doing with private sector landlords to prevent people becoming homeless as a result of tenancies ending?

The HPA Manager responded that the Council employed a Private Rented Sector Officer who worked with landlords in relation to evictions, but also proactively by working to bring empty properties back into use, to increase the level of available housing. The team were also able to provide ongoing tenancy support and skills to tenants as well as providing rent safeguards. Moreover, the impact of the Covid pandemic restrictions increased the likelihood of some tenants accumulating rent arrears, Officers were working with housing associations to identify those who were at risk of arrears for the first time with a view to preventing possession action being taken.

- How was the lack of specialist accommodation provision for the under 35s being addressed?

The HPA Manager explained that young people were a priority group for the service. There were a number of factors that made provision challenging including additional needs and rent caps for those in receipt of benefits, the service was working with a range of partners to address the issue. The Private Rented Sector Officer worked with landlords to promote higher

standards in accommodation, and support may be provided to individuals including furniture pack and tenancy support.

- Was any further work planned to get feedback from service users on the Council's homelessness service?

The HPA Manager noted a number had responded to the public consultation, but for some it was harder to reach groups accessing and contributing to the consultation was challenging. Officers carried out ongoing engagement with service users to find out their views on the service in order to ensure that it was relevant and meaningful support was given.

- Did the service work with third sector organisations, for example, Churches Together?

The HPA Manager confirmed that Officers did work with Churches Together along with other faith groups and third sector organisations. That work comprised working together to identify rough sleepers and those at risk of it, but also providing support to individuals when they had taken on permanent accommodation. Integration into a community, having support were important factors in enabling individuals to become settled in accommodation, the Council's Homelessness Service was not able to provide unending support to individuals it had found permanent accommodation for, however, third sector organisations were well placed to carry out that function.

A number of Members felt it would be useful if an executive summary of the Strategy be produced to give an easily accessible document, they suggested that it include: a short summary of the aim of the Strategy, and how key findings from research work had formed objectives and priorities within the Strategy.

The Economy, Enterprise and Housing Portfolio Holder thanked the Officer and her team for producing the Strategy and their own ongoing work directly supporting those experiencing homelessness as well as the team's success in drawing down external funding to assist with the work. He hoped the Panel felt able to support the Strategy.

The Communities, Health and Wellbeing Portfolio Holder reiterated thanks to the HPA Manager and her team. She noted that as part of the development of the Strategy she had raised issues in relation to Care Leavers, Armed Forces personnel and domestic abuse and was pleased to see that they had been incorporated in the Strategy.

The Panel thanked the Officer for the detailed report and the efforts of her and her team in developing the Strategy

RESOLVED 1) That the Panel supported the Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2021 - 2026.

2) That a Prisoner Leavers Pathway be developed.

3) That a series of performance measures and timescales relating to the Action Plan be devised and form the basis of future performance reports on the Strategy to the Panel.

4) That an Executive Summary document be produced.

[The meeting ended at 11:43am]