

Meeting: Cabinet Meeting **Date:** 9 January 2024

Wards affected: All Wards

Report Title: Report of the Adult Social Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Sub Board - Homelessness Spotlight Review

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Adult Social Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Sub Board undertook a spotlight review of Homelessness in Torbay which had been a topic highlighted by Overview and Scrutiny Members as a priority for investigation for the Municipal Year.
- 1.2 The scope and Agenda were very focussed with a view to identifying practical and achievable recommendations. The key aims and objectives of the Scope were to:
 - better understand how homelessness could be prevented in Torbay;
 - how people could be helped;
 - how people were assisted into accommodation and how people were supported when in accommodation;
 - to identify whether existing pathways and systems in place to prevent homelessness could be improved in Torbay and how; and
 - to identify and target specific areas for more detailed scrutiny investigation.
- 1.3 Prior to the Spotlight Review, Members of the Sub Board visited the Leonard Stocks Hostel and the temporary accommodation facility at Morgan Avenue. Members found the visits extremely helpful and informative and had gained much more knowledge and understanding of the valuable work that was undertaken at both facilities.
- 1.4 The Sub Board welcomed guest speakers from the Torbay Drug and Alcohol Service; Devon Partnership NHS Trust and the Citizens Advice Bureau together with the Council's Divisional Director of Community and Customer Services, the Head of Housing Needs and the Anti-Social Behaviour and Noise Lead Officer. Aspects covered by speakers included how Housing Options and Outreach Teams worked in partnership with other organisations in responding to Homelessness; the impact of homelessness on mental health and details of people's experiences from a voluntary sector perspective.
- 1.5 The Agenda for the Spotlight Review concentrated upon:
 - The Council's Response to Homelessness;
 - Rough Sleeping;
 - Homelessness and Substance Abuse;

- Mental Health and Homelessness;
- Cost of Living and affordability impact on homelessness

2. The Council's Response to Homelessness

- 2.1 The Head of Housing Needs spoke to Members about the Council's current response to Homelessness with a specific focus on why people become homeless; prevention challenges and what temporary accommodation looked like in Torbay. It was recognised that rough sleeping was the most obvious visual element but that homelessness touched other individuals and families in the community. The aim was to try and help people stay in their homes and communities but that was becoming increasingly challenging because of the cost of living and affordability of rental properties.
- 2.2 There were different elements in the Council's response to homelessness and there were different stages to homelessness applications with different considerations. For applications where the criteria for a main housing duty was not satisfied, the Local Authority could still have a duty to provide temporary accommodation whilst assessments were undertaken. There was now an embedded Housing Officer in Children's Services within Early Help who could provide wrap around support to families and that had proven to be a very successful approach in preventing homelessness.
- 2.3 Members heard that in Torbay the cause of homelessness was significantly due to loss of rented accommodation and this was even more pronounced in Torbay when compared with other areas nationally. It was recognised that people often needed behavioural support in order to maintain tenancies and that brought its own challenges. There were different levels of complexity in the support required and examples ranged from mental health issues to domestic abuse situations which represented two of the most significant challenges in Torbay.
- 2.4 The demand on services had increased by 68% since 2019. The introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act in 2017 and subsequently the Covid pandemic had acted as catalysts in people losing their homes as when coming out of the Covid pandemic, the temporary protection for tenants against eviction was lifted.
- 2.5 The current work was very much around prevention and at present numbers in temporary accommodation were relatively static although this was subject to seasonal fluctuations. In 2022/23, 1100 households were assessed as at risk of homelessness and would need assistance from the Council. 21% went on to establish a main housing duty.
- 2.6 At any one time there were 160 households in accommodation which tended to represent approximately 70 families and the rest either single individuals or couples. Recently the Council had purchased a number of units for family accommodation and the feedback had been very positive. Spot purchase of accommodation at significant cost to the Council was unavoidable in the current climate and to ensure those who need assistance receive it. Alternatively, to meet temporary accommodation demand, mainly single individuals were placed in hotel or bed and breakfast accommodation and re-settlement officers were on hand to assist people in finding alternative accommodation. The average length of stay in temporary accommodation was still very high ranging from 6 to 12 months for families and the Council was working hard to try and drive down that timeframe.
- 2.7 Members were informed that there was not enough social housing to meet demand; there was a lack of 4 bedroom properties available through Devon Home Choice and these factors coupled with high rents were significant factors as to why people were finding

themselves homeless or unable to move on from temporary accommodation. The Housing Teams were seeing more people presenting to services who are on average incomes, working and would normally be able to resolve their situation but were struggling to even obtain a viewing on a rental property because of the high level of demand. Currently there was a Private Rented Officer who was actively engaging with landlords but ultimately landlords' mortgages were increasing and so rents were increasing. The statistics across the South West and across England demonstrated that the loss of a tenancy from rented accommodation was the main reason for homelessness.

- 2.8 It was acknowledged that the Council had only taken over the support contract for the Leonard Stocks Hostel in February 2023 and at that point the average length of stay for individuals was 500 days. This meant that people were at risk of becoming "institutionalised" and dependent upon their place at the Hostel. As a result of that the focus of work had centred around changing the culture of that provision and since February that had resulted in a reduction to just over 200 days which reflected positive 'move on' to long term accommodation.

3. Rough Sleeping

- 3.1 The Anti-Social Behaviour and Noise Lead Officer provided an outline of the response to rough sleeping in Torbay including partnership working and how the service is currently funded.
- 3.2 Members were informed that the Housing Needs Team dealt with the statutory homelessness element which was less visible as opposed to rough sleeping. Most of the activity around assisting rough sleepers had been funded by the Government's Rough Sleeping Initiative and over the last six years the Council had benefited from funding in that respect. However, the funding ran in a three year cycle and would finish in March 2024. This meant that some of the staffing roles within the current funding agreement would cease at the end of this financial year and essentially three posts would be lost if alternative funding/monies were not found to cover those posts. It was recognised and of concern that losing staff would not assist in bringing down the numbers rough sleeping in the longer term.
- 3.3 In 2010 Torbay was averaging 5 to 6 rough sleepers per evening compared with Summer 2023 when the average number of people sleeping out in August was 35. However, it was appreciated that this was a snapshot of one evening and by way of comparison the figure for September 2023 was 28 and currently, at the time of the Review, 25 for October 2023. There was a slow downward trend already and seasonally from April onwards an increase would be expected through the warmer months into the summer which naturally decreased going through to the winter months. As a general rule, most people rough sleeping were from Torbay although from a seasonal trend perspective some people from out of the area came to Torbay in the summer but would pass through rather than settling in Torbay and this was the same sort of situation for other local authority areas. The aim was to reconnect people back to a place where they may have a housing duty owed by another local authority but it was stressed that the Council cannot determine where people need to go or should go.
- 3.4 Multiple complex needs were fairly common for those rough sleeping and these could relate to mental health, substance misuse, homelessness, those within the criminal justice system and victims of domestic violence. There was a tendency for these issues to be exacerbated by rough sleeping which also distanced people from support services.

- 3.5 It was explained that the Resettlement Team checked in on rough sleepers and tried to connect them with some form of accommodation and any other services that individuals may require. There was also a tenancy sustaining service which provided support to people to help them sustain accommodation. The biggest challenge faced was people successfully keeping accommodation and there were individuals who had passed through the service multiple times. There were also officers who were dedicated to assisting people with substance misuse who were available to help individuals directly at the Leonard Stocks Hostel together with a mental health nurse who had recently been located there. The prison navigator officer ensured that individuals had a link between leaving prison and securing accommodation.
- 3.6 Currently ten beds of leased accommodation were available and there were some discretionary funds which could be spent on an 'ad hoc' basis to help individuals meet the cost of deposits and rent in advance on accommodation.
- 3.7 The importance of having proactive services which met people on their terms were seen as particularly important to assist those with mental health issues or substance misuse issues.
- 3.8 A multi complex needs alliance commenced in February 2023. This provided a commitment between the Leonard Stocks Hostel domestic abuse services and drug and alcohol services under one alliance contract, to better provide for people with complex support needs.
- 3.9 From a rough sleeping perspective it was essential to have more emergency accommodation available as it would allow a swift offer of 'off the street' accommodation then backed by a move on to the private rented sector. However, with the decrease in access to private sector rental properties and bed and breakfast accommodation significantly reduced there was no guarantee of long term accommodation. The result at present was that the Council could not make an immediate 'off the street' offer of accommodation and so the reality was that people were more likely to experience longer periods of time on the street.

4. Homelessness and Substance Abuse

- 4.1 The Service Manager, Torbay Recovery Initiatives (Torbay Drug and Alcohol Service) explained to Members that the Torbay Drug and Alcohol Service had joined other partners in the Multi Complex Needs Alliance, formed in February 2023, which aimed to provide a more holistic approach. This provided individuals with access to treatment services; 1 to 1 recovery work including prescribing, access to residential rehabilitation and detox as part of the offer with some physical healthcare and immunisation services. There had been a cultural change in a willingness to prescribe to people in higher risk scenarios.
- 4.2 It was recognised that it could be really challenging to work with homeless individuals who often suffered from complex needs, particularly in terms of mental and physical health. Provision of treatment for individuals was often the key to engaging with them so that they could move into a better position generally.
- 4.3 It was very important to offer a service that remained accessible to people who were high risk and may struggle to engage as was often the case with rough sleepers who may find attending appointments difficult.

- 4.4 Members were informed that there was now a co-located nurse at the Leonard Stocks Hostel and the role was key in providing access to support for those who might also be in the vicinity of the Hostel as well as those residents of the Hostel, in assessing physical healthcare needs.
- 4.5 The service also had a presence within the Hostel around supporting the breakfast club and engaging with people so that they could talk about their wider issues and this had been very successful. The service also worked closely with the Criminal Justice Team on a same day referral basis which allowed some stability over drug use.
- 4.6 The Jatis programme provided local residential rehabilitation and had a ten bedroom unit with a five bedroom move on facility and was currently looking to secure individual flats as well. The programme gave support around those individuals who have had a drug or alcohol issue and there was sometimes scope to bring in people who might be in a precarious housing situation.
- 4.7 Jatis provided excellent value for money compared to sending someone to residential rehabilitation (about 25% of the cost) and provided good local support for people. Currently the programme assists around 20 people per year.
- 4.8 There was also now a psycho-social lead across the service who supports the Hostel with a more clinical input and there was a specialist clinical practitioner (a new role) to work alongside the doctor.
- 4.9 From a housing perspective, it was a real asset to have services linking together to help the individual providing wrap around support, particularly in helping those with high level needs.
- 4.10 There was a desire to expand the service offer in future by providing more access to clinics with two operating alongside Leonard Stocks Hostel and ideally to extend into other areas on an outreach basis.

5. Mental Health and Homelessness

- 5.1 The Locality Practice Lead (South) of the Adult Services Directorate, Devon Partnership NHS Trust spoke with Members about the link between homelessness and the impact on mental health.
- 5.2 Members were informed that there was a link between emotional and psychological wellbeing and were invited to think about how they might understand mental illness as this could sometimes be viewed as an abstract term, divorced from human experience.
- 5.3 It was important to think about the experience of thoughts and perceptions and how these could cause difficulties in not helping people to get to a place in their life where they would wish to be. Feelings were supposed to be useful and a component of being mentally ill was when there was a transgression from those feelings being useful. If someone felt anxious and depressed about the possibility of becoming homeless their ability to step inside a place where those feelings do not exist becomes difficult.
- 5.4 Predictability was also a component of acceptable life, without which the future becomes hard to project oneself into and location was really important as people identify with living in houses and homes.

- 5.5 Jobs and families were also important to people and location was a component of that as well, for example, the location of the children's school.
- 5.6 Security was also really important to people and for people to feel alright about the future.
- 5.7 Connection was important as individuals have an affiliation with the people they live amongst. When they feel threatened it becomes hard to perceive connecting with other people.
- 5.8 Meaning was really important. For example, things that really matter and making progress against a value structure which may involve your work and feeling that your work is meaningful, which means that you have a job, which puts you in a position to have a house.
- 5.9 Dignity was also a component – walking amongst peers where you do not feel threatened and your self-esteem was alright.

6. Cost of Living Crisis and affordability impact on Homelessness

- 6.1 The Chief Executive of Torbay Citizens Advice Bureau (“CAB”) provided an insight for Members into the voluntary and community sector perspective around the impact of the cost of living crisis and affordability of housing as a cause of homelessness in Torbay.
- 6.2 Members were informed that in terms of the cost of living crisis, the CAB were assisting more people nationally with crisis support and had helped more people who were homeless at this point than in any other year on record. There were growing levels of energy, rent and council tax debt among the people the CAB helped with debt advice and the rising cost of essentials were driving the rise in negative budgets.
- 6.3 The national picture reflected the current position that presented to CAB in Torbay meaning that:
 - the number of people the CAB had helped with a homelessness issue had kept rising since the Covid pandemic;
 - there was a significant increase in the number of individuals seeking advice because they had received a Section 21 (no fault) eviction notice;
 - the issue was even more severe for women, single parents and people who were racially minoritised;
 - there had been a freeze on the Local Housing Allowance for housing costs since April 2020 which meant that the gap between rents charged and benefits received to help pay the rent was growing;
 - there were not enough homes that people could afford, either in the private rented sector, in social housing or to buy; and
 - the cost of living crisis was causing more people to experience a rise in energy costs and increased costs for food.
- 6.4 Members were informed that individuals were presenting to the CAB with multiple complex problems and some key statistics which represented the local picture in Torbay were as follows:

- 70% of individuals who approached the CAB for advice and who were at risk of homelessness were from the private rented sector and had received Section 21 eviction notices;
- of those seeking advice about access to and provision of accommodation, 41% had issues with bidding/banding and 32% with finding and securing a private rented property;
- 63% of queries about private sector rented properties were about disrepairs and repairs and maintenance;
- benefits were the top issue with housing one of the top benefit issues; and
- mortgage and secure loan arrears were in the top end of debt issues, but they were not last year.

6.5 Members were informed that in so far as CAB was concerned, capacity was an issue and the reasons contributing towards this was lack of funding; the loss of volunteers over Covid; the loss of the 'drop in' facility which there had been before Covid, but had since not been reinstated; difficulty in filling paid posts because of the need to have someone with housing and benefits experience and because the CAB was affiliated to a national organisation and the advice given was regulated, with rigorous audits required on a national training level which meant that training for volunteers takes some time and is quite intensive.

7. Discussion and Investigation

7.1 Further information was drawn out through discussion and the following facts were established:

- previous enquiries had been made around 11 months ago as to whether there could be an increase in the Local Housing Allowance ("LHA") for Torbay but as yet no response had been forthcoming;
- in terms of the statistics around young people and mental health, the data was very dependent upon what individuals said and the field selected on the data system to reflect that;
- Torbay presents higher in respect of support needs than nationally in relation to mental health and domestic abuse;
- Hclick statistics were due to be published shortly and only quarterly information was available prior to this Review, allowing the national comparison;
- the new Homeless and Rough Sleeping Strategy would be co-designed and work was due to commence in November with a timetable for delivery. Upon production of the Strategy, there would be a consultation period;
- previously, attempts had been made to implement the housing first model locally but the challenge remained around access to accommodation and that situation had become worse. The concept was still alive and the principle was embedded;
- Local Housing Allowance was different for each Local Authority area and recent comparisons showed that Torbay LHA was significantly less than Exeter for single accommodation;
- currently there was great reliance on 'spot purchase' accommodation such as holiday type accommodation and Air B&B. This presented challenges as this type of accommodation would not be available during school holidays for instance and that would then result in having to move people;
- it was important to continue the programme to purchase units for temporary accommodation use which would help families settle and avoid children from missing

out on education. On average people overall were currently having to move around three times;

- 'spot purchase' accommodation would always be required but ideally not at the current levels;
- the Housing Options Team are the first point of referral and individuals who approach Ward Councillors should be signposted to the Team who could help either by phone or responding to web-form enquiries. Initial assessment officers would then become involved and information issued on a self serve basis whilst the Team try to help;
- the Housing Options Team are available 9 am to 5 pm but there is also an out of hours provision that diverts calls to an emergency team who could deal with crisis cases;
- in relation to anti-social behaviour issues around the vicinity of the Hostel, the Council worked closely with the Police and had multi agency meetings, but it was noted that the anti-social behaviour was mostly not linked to residents of the Hostel;
- picking the right location for temporary accommodation in order for people to thrive was really important as was having tailored accommodation for different types of people who presented with different needs. Assessment and management of risk were also important considerations and making sure there was enough provision to respond suitably;
- there remains a constant drive towards exploring innovative ways of delivering temporary accommodation including considering land, properties and buildings which might be available and suit such use;
- it is more than likely that the forecast on increased homelessness and rough sleeping would remain as it is for the next two years, specifically when taking into account the level of mortgage repossessions;
- part of the wider solution would be to provide better jobs in Torbay with higher wages and cross service engagement remains important, i.e., to collaboratively work alongside economic development and planning colleagues; and
- it was acknowledged that wider public communication would be the best way of raising awareness as to access to benefits and early intervention to help prevent homelessness.

8. Recommendation(s) / Proposed Decision

That the Cabinet be recommended that:

1. the Director of Corporate Services and Director of Adults and Communities Services be requested to further publicise the Landlord Tenancy Matching Scheme and its benefits to unlock additional housing capacity within the private rented sector;
2. the Director of Corporate Services and Director of Adults and Communities Services be requested to publicise the work of the Leonard Stocks Hostel highlighting its positive support and outcomes for those individuals with housing support needs;
3. the Director of Adults and Community Services be requested to undertake service user engagement to understand what type of facilities those in need of housing support require;
4. the Director of Adults and Community Services be requested to explore whether security support and staffing levels at Leonard Stocks Hostel are currently sufficient and provide a

written update on this to the Adult Social Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Sub-Board;

5. the Director of Adults and Community Services be recommended that the temporary accommodation model provided at Morgan Avenue be recognised as an example of best practice for future Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO);
6. the Director of Adults and Community Services be requested to explore additional support contracts to assist those with mental health and housing support needs;
7. the Director of Adults and Community Services be requested to review the location of the temporary accommodation offer within Torbay to ensure that it meets people's needs particularly in accessing relevant services;
8. the Director of Adults and Community Services be requested to write to the Police and Crime Commissioner to request further assistance and engagement in tackling anti-social behaviour in the vicinity of the Leonard Stocks Hostel;
9. the Director of Adults and Community Services be requested to implement a focus group consisting of Council representation and external organisations with appropriate knowledge and expertise to share ideas and best practice on tackling homelessness and rough sleeping including provision of a web form on the Council's website for use in sharing ideas;
10. the Director of Corporate Services and Director of Adults and Community Services be requested to publicise benefits assistance available which could assist those threatened with homelessness;
11. the Director of Adults and Community Services be requested to explore expansion of the breakfast club at the Leonard Stocks Hostel incorporating lunch and dinner every day of the week to promote a healthy lifestyle and encourage engagement with services;
12. the Director of Adults and Community Services be requested to explore how the Council can work with the Voluntary Sector to signpost to those organisations and the Council in terms of available housing advice and assistance;
13. the Director of Pride of Place be requested to explore options to increase the number of social rented homes within Torbay;
14. the Director of Adults and Community Services and the Director of Pride in Place be requested to explore as part of the town centre regeneration whether the former Boots pharmacy could be used as a community hub and police liaison centre, and;
15. the draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy be brought to Adult Social Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Sub-Board for consultation prior to adoption.