

# **HOMELESSNESS TASK AND FINISH GROUP**

**REPORT – NOVEMBER 2018**

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Portfolio Holder, Housing Services  
and  
Chairman of Task & Finish Group**



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Homelessness is on the increase, both nationally and locally. Despite being in one of the most beautiful parts of the country, the District has a significant and increasing number of homeless households. It is fundamentally important for us, as a Council, to do all that we can to improve the housing circumstances of homeless households.



Homelessness isn't just about people sleeping on the streets. There are many people in our District, whilst not rough sleeping, who do not have a home of their own or who have lost their home through no fault of their own.

Homelessness isn't just a housing problem. Not having a decent home adversely affects all areas of life, from your health, to your achievement at school if you are a child, and your ability to find work if you are an adult.

People end up homeless for a wide variety of reasons:-

- When family relationships break down, often one person is forced to move out without anywhere to go.
- Private tenancies frequently last for only 6 months or a year, and can come to an end because they become unaffordable through loss of employment.
- Domestic violence victims can find themselves homeless when having to flee from danger.
- Vulnerability through health issues can result in a person not being able to keep a roof over their heads.

Every homeless person's situation is unique and is usually complex. The District Council is determined to do what it can to help improve the lives of homeless households in our District. In my role as Housing Services Portfolio Holder, I have observed at first hand the distress and suffering that is so often brought about by someone finding themselves homeless. I have made it my mission to improve the lives of those in this situation and by seeing what more the Council can do to help. In order to do this, we, as a Council, need to understand the issues and problems associated with being homeless and therefore I called for a Task and Finish Group to be set up to lay the foundation for this very important work and to come up with recommendations to help improve the lives of those who find themselves without a home.

**Jill Cleary**  
**Portfolio Holder for Housing Services**

## **2. TASK AND FINISH GROUP MEMBERSHIP**

The Task and Finish Group's members are:

**Cllr Mrs J Cleary (Chairman)**  
**Cllr Mrs S Bennison**  
**Cllr S Clarke**  
**Cllr Ms K Crisell**  
**Cllr D Harrison**  
**Cllr D Poole**  
**Cllr Miss A Sevier**  
**Cllr M Steele**  
**Cllr S Davies**  
**Cllr S Rippon-Swaine**

The Group is supported by the following officers:-

**Grainne O'Rourke, Executive Head for Housing**  
**Richard Knott, Service Manager – Housing Options**  
**Brian Byrne, Service Manager – Housing Estates, Management and Support**  
**Kevin Green, Principal Accountant**  
**Dambu Tenner, Solicitor**  
**Karen Wardle, Committee Administrator**

**The Terms of Reference for the Task and Finish Group are as follows:-**

- To gain an appreciation of the reasons for homelessness within the District, the support services available and the effectiveness of these.
- To identify and develop measures to address the current increasing levels of homelessness within the District.
- To make recommendations to the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Panel and the Cabinet as required.

### 3. THE WORK OF THE TASK AND FINISH GROUP

The Group met on a regular basis between March and September 2018, as set out in the table below. The topics discussed at each meeting are shown.

Date	Subject
23 March 2018	Terms of Reference agreed, context setting (through officer presentations on facts and figures of homelessness) and establishment of a work programme.
5 April 2018	Site visit to 6 emergency temporary accommodation premises in the District (B&Bs and hostels).
1 May 2018	Feedback on site visits, consider how Council allocates its Council properties and feedback from the first Multi-Agency Forum for Homelessness.
8 June 2018	Review of Allocation Policy involving case studies showing practical examples of how properties are allocated, waiting list and facts and figures of temporary accommodation. Also discussed scope for the Council to source more of its own emergency temporary accommodation and current cost of provision of B&B accommodation.
10 July 2018	Consultation from HCC on reducing budget for Homelessness support across Hampshire and implications for NFDC. Discussion about the emerging Housing Strategy and Homelessness Strategy.
7 September 2018	Statistical update on Homelessness. Case study on a Day in the Life of the Homelessness Team, emerging draft Allocation Policy, Housing Strategy and Homelessness Strategy.

As can be seen from the above table, the Group met 6 times between March and September 2018. The Group's work covered the following topics:-

- Definition of when a person is statutorily homeless; facts and figures of homeless households in the New Forest District Council area
- Duty of local authorities, including under the new Homelessness Reduction Act 2017
- Processes and procedures when dealing with homelessness
- The cost of homelessness
- Use of bed and breakfast and other accommodation
- The Council's responsibilities towards rough sleepers

- New ways of working
- Allocation Policy/How to allocate housing to those most in need
- Emerging Housing Strategy, Allocation Policy and Homelessness Strategy

## **4. KEY AREAS LOOKED AT BY THE TASK AND FINISH GROUP**

### **Key Area 1 - Statistical facts and figures of homeless households in the District**

A great deal of information was provided to the Task and Finish Group on the facts and figures of homeless households in our District.

Between April 2018, when the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 came into force, and the start of September 2018, 909 new 'homeless' cases had been opened by the Housing Options Team. Whilst not all of these cases will require full support and ultimately housing provided by the Council, the numbers of homeless households presenting to the Council are increasing year on year.

In the past the Council had a legal responsibility to rehouse approximately 100 or so homeless households per year. However, it was envisaged that this figure was likely to be nearer 200 per year as we go into the future. The figure of 909 mentioned in the paragraph above is significantly higher than our expectations. Homelessness, both nationally and locally, is on the increase.

Since new management arrangements were put in place in Housing, there is now accurate recording of all information. A new computer system was introduced in April 2018, which has been a significant benefit in ensuring that proper records are kept of numbers of homeless households and the Council's work with those households.

The Homelessness Reduction Act requires the Council to prepare a personal housing plan and to identify reasonable steps to help homeless households to resolve their housing situation. Under the Act, there is a real emphasis on prevention in the first instance to see what can be done to avoid a person from becoming homeless. If that is not possible, there are a series of steps to be taken by the Council before a 'full duty to rehouse' applies. Ultimately, the Council has a legal duty to secure housing for those local households who are homeless, in priority need and unintentionally homeless.

The Task and Finish Group was appraised of the implications of the Government's ongoing welfare reform and the 'go live' in the New Forest of "Full Service Universal Credit" in September, with migration of existing claimants due to begin in 2020. This could increase the numbers of households presenting to the Council as homeless due to problems with rent payments and affordability of accommodation.

The Group was pleased to see the positive and proactive approach of the Housing Options Team which has a newly appointed Service Manager. New systems, procedures and processes have been put in place to ensure the Council discharges its legal responsibilities to homeless households to a high standard. Staffing resources need to be kept under review and the Group is aware of the significant extra resources already provided to the existing Team to ensure they are able to cope with the rising demand for homelessness services.

### **Recommendation 1 from the Task and Finish Group**

**That the resources required by the Housing Options Team are kept under review to ensure that the Council is able to meet its obligations under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.**

## **Key Area 2 – The use of temporary and emergency temporary accommodation**

On 5 April the Group visited various locations both within and outside the District to view a number of hostels (owned by the Council) and bed & breakfast accommodation (provided by private external providers), used as temporary and emergency temporary accommodation..

The Council makes significant use of B&B accommodation to temporarily house homeless households (in priority need) when they have nowhere else to go. The Council's use and cost of B&B accommodation is rising every year. In 2017/18, the Council spent £800,000 on B&B accommodation for homeless households. Whilst some of this spend was recouped in benefit, the overall cost of emergency temporary accommodation is significant.

The prolonged use of B&B accommodation, for families in particular, is unsatisfactory. Significant efforts are being made to reduce the length of time families have to stay in such accommodation. Often, particular problems arise because the accommodation may not be close to schools (where children are involved), or may be far away from services required by a member of the homeless household, for example, Inclusion Services (for those affected by substance or alcohol misuse).

The Group also looked at some of the Council's hostels where households were placed following a stay in B&B accommodation pending a longer term housing solution. The hostels owned by the Council (21 units in total) were occupied by homeless households who had been there for many years, some approaching nearly 10 years. This in itself created a problem because once a hostel place was filled, it was unlikely to become free for a significant number of years, because of the long wait until more settled accommodation became available through the Council's waiting list.

In light of this, it was clear to the Group that it required a thorough understanding and consideration of how the Council allocates its Council stock. At the same time, the Group questioned whether the Council could provide its own emergency temporary accommodation throughout the District rather than relying solely on private B&B accommodation. This was an area under active consideration by officers.

## **Recommendation 2 from the Task and Finish Group**

**That the Council seeks to provide more of its own emergency temporary accommodation rather than relying solely on private B&B accommodation and that a thorough review of how the Council undertakes its allocation to Council housing is carried out.**



### **Key Area 3 – Allocation Policy – how the Council allocates its Council stock**

The Council's current Allocation Policy was last reviewed in 2011. The Task and Finish Group were in agreement that a review is required to ensure it is fit for purpose and recognises the duties the Council is under to rehouse a significant number of homeless families every year.

Across the District Council's area, 300 to 400 properties become available for allocation every year, whilst there are over 3,000 people on the waiting list for council housing.

At the present time, essentially all applicants wishing to apply for council housing enter the waiting list at Band 3 level, which is referred to as 'Priority' level. The Group considered that the description of 'Priority' was rather misleading, as many of those individuals could be waiting for up to 10 years for a council property.

The Group considered it was unsustainable for the current rules of allocation to remain for a number of reasons:-

1. There was a significant number of homeless households spending too long in temporary accommodation, whilst waiting for more settled accommodation. This meant that the temporary units they were in were not freed up for other homeless families who were presenting themselves to the Council.
2. With everyone being put into essentially one band – 'Priority', the factor which determined who is successful in obtaining a Council property is the time spent on the waiting list. The Group considered this needed to change and greater emphasis given to those most in housing need.
3. The term 'Priority' was confusing as it seemed to suggest a faster route to securing Council housing when, in reality, a significant wait, sometimes for up to 10 years, was likely to be involved.
4. The current banding, where essentially everyone was placed in Band 3 – Priority, does not address sufficiently the increasing numbers of homeless households to whom the Council owes a duty to secure suitable accommodation.

### **Recommendation 3 from the Task and Finish Group**

**To review the Council's Allocation Policy to ensure a banding system with clear criteria attached to each band recognising that priority should be given to those most in housing need in the District.**

## **Key Area 4 – Emerging Housing Strategy**

The Group was very interested in being appraised of the Council's emerging Housing Strategy. Whilst not directly concerned with the Group's specific Terms of Reference (which centred around homelessness), the Council's strategic approach was of real interest to the Group. The Group was pleased to see a desire to accelerate the Council's build and acquisition of additional Council properties. This would have positive implications for those households most in need as more houses would be available to meet that need.

The Group recognised that the loss of nearly 5000 Council homes since the 1980's through Right to Buy had created a huge reduction in the supply of rented homes in our District. Such rented homes were desperately needed for those families who could not afford to buy a home of their own on the open market.

The Group was also pleased to see that the Council would be working with partners, including developers, to maximise the number of affordable homes in the District. As Housing Authority, the Council has to look outwards and support the Local Plan ambition to build over 10,500 homes over the next 20 years. This was an objective strongly supported by the Task and Finish Group.

## **Recommendation 4 from the Task and Finish Group**

**To support the emerging Housing Strategy and welcome, in particular, the Council's acceleration of its new build/acquisition programme to create greater numbers of affordable houses in the District**

## **Key Area 5 – Homelessness Strategy**

The Task and Finish Group was mindful that the last Homelessness Strategy was agreed in 2003. The homeless situation between 2003 and the current day was very different. It was vitally important that the Council had an up to date Homelessness Strategy to deal with all aspects of homelessness, including prevention strategies to prevent a person from becoming homeless in the first place and to deal with rough sleeping. The homelessness situation, both nationally and locally, was increasing and it is important that the Council looks at all aspects of homelessness, including finding innovative solutions to help some of the most vulnerable in our society.

The emerging Homelessness Strategy will build on the work of the Task and Finish Group and will form an important link with the new Housing Strategy to tackle wider housing issues.

The Group considered it important that the new Homelessness Strategy set out clearly what homeless applicants can expect from the Council and how the Council will improve outcomes for homeless households. It should also cover how the Council will prevent homelessness in the first place and, if that is not possible, how we will discharge our responsibilities to a high standard.

The Strategy should also cover how the Council aims to reduce its reliance on external B&B accommodation and how we will provide more of our own accommodation. It will also cover our ambition to increase our stock levels and achieve better access to the private sector.

The Group was also very keen to ensure that the emerging Homelessness Strategy set out the Council's approach to partnership working to include the newly set up Homelessness Multi-Agency Forum.

## **Recommendation 5 from the Task and Finish Group**

**That the Council develops a new 'fit for purpose' Homelessness Strategy which recognises that the homelessness situation today is very different to 2003 when the last Homelessness Strategy was approved.**

## **Key Area 6 – Partnership Working**

At the start of our work on homelessness, the Task and Finish Group was very mindful that partnership working was key to achieving positive outcomes for homeless households. Often homeless people had a number of issues and problems, and a multi-agency approach was required to enable them to get back on their feet.

Whilst there are many bodies that come together to help homeless households in the Forest, it was recognised that the support was not always joined up. Sometimes, one body was not aware of the help that the homeless household was receiving from another body, which could cause confusion and wasted resources. It was this desire to see a better 'joined up' approach to homelessness that promoted the establishment of the Homelessness Multi-Agency Forum.

The Group was very pleased that the new Homelessness Multi-Agency Forum had now met 3 times since its inception in March 2018. All meetings have been very well attended. The attendees were made up of public sector bodies, volunteers, church groups and other advisory services. For the first time, the right people have been brought together to collectively tackle the issues of homelessness in the Forest.

Some members of the Task and Finish Group had also attended the Homelessness Multi-Agency Forum and had found the various presentations extremely helpful. To date, there have been presentations from various volunteer groups and other bodies on the following:

- The use of foodbanks in the District
- The role of Two Saints in the District (as homeless support through Community care workers and drop in sessions)
- The role of Nightstop – a charity run voluntary scheme where homeless people were offered a bed for the night

The Group was also keen to see a Landlords' Forum established to forge better relations between the Council and private landlords. Private landlords are an important group which play a significant role in assisting the Council with its 'prevention' duties. Whilst relationships with a number of private landlords are good, the Group considered that a wider, more inclusive approach through a structured forum would be beneficial in building better relationships with landlords.

## **Recommendation 6 from the Task and Finish Group**

**To continue the work of the Homelessness Multi-Agency Forum and to set up a new Landlords' Forum**

## **5. SUMMARY**

I consider that the Task and Finish Group has gained an invaluable insight into the plight of the homeless and the difficulties they face when finding themselves without a home. The recommendations of this Task and Finish Group will, I believe, make a real difference and I hope they will be accepted.

I would like to finish my report by thanking Members of the Task and Finish Group who have dedicated a great deal of time over the last 6 months to this important work. My thanks also to the officers who have helped us understand the issues and who provide the necessary information to enable us to do our work.

**Jill Cleary**  
**Portfolio Holder for Housing Services**

**12 November 2018**