

10 MARCH 2020

Homelessness

Ward(s): All

Portfolios: Regeneration – Councillor Andrew

1. Aim

In accordance with Walsall Homelessness Strategy 2018 – 2022, officers from Money Home Job (MHJ), are required to provide the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with an annual update on the progress made in assisting residents who are homeless or threatened with homelessness.

2. Recommendations

The Committee is asked to review the information contained in the report, and if appropriate, make recommendations about future initiatives or policy changes.

3. Report detail

3.1 The Housing Reduction Act 2107 (HRA) came into force in 3rd April 2018. The focus of this new legislation was to place extra duties on the local authority to assess all applicant's needs and prevent or relieve their homelessness. The main thrust of the legislation includes:

- A requirement to try to prevent or relieve homelessness for all eligible applicants (regardless of priority need);
- An extension of the 'threatened with homelessness' period from 28 to 56 days;
- A new Duty to Refer – which means other public services now need to notify a local authority if they come into contact with someone who they think may be homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

A factsheet about the HRA is available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/homelessness-reduction-bill-policy-factsheets> .

3.2 As part of the preparation for the implementation of the HRA the Council appointed an independent specialist Neil Morland to undertake a review of all homelessness services in Walsall and work with partners to develop a new Walsall Homelessness Strategy. The Council has a statutory duty to update our Homelessness Strategy every 5 years and a significant range of Housing Associations, voluntary sector and other public service partners were involved in the consultation process.

Walsall's current Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan will run from 2018 to 2022. Some of the achievements so far include:

- Working closely with partners to set up a new duty to refer mechanism;
- Setting up a quarterly multi-agency Steering Group chaired by an independent voluntary sector partner (this built on our previous successful partnership which resulted in Walsall's innovative Housing First programme).
- Hosting a successful multi-agency homelessness forum in 2019, which will now become an annual event;
- Being a member of the West Midlands Combined Authority Mayor's Homelessness Taskforce, including leading the 'families with children' work strand;
- Providing training for all partners on the implications of the HRA Act 2017 and duty to refer (encompassing housing providers, probation, health, social care, voluntary sector).

3.3 The Housing and Welfare Team in Money Home Job restructured our frontline homelessness services in May 2019 to save money, but also to enable us to have a greater focus on homelessness prevention. We were already in a positive position, having voluntarily operated a homelessness prevention service for some years. The restructured frontline services, combined our homelessness, debt and welfare and crisis support functions. We now operate a triage service to ensure everyone who comes in to see us gets the right help at the right time, and we continually review these arrangements to ensure they are fit for purpose now and in the future.

3.4 To enable us to meet the requirements of the new HRA, we procured a new case recording system, called 'Abritas'. This has been configured to help improve the quality of data we collect about homeless people and also enables us to report performance statistics to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) as part of national reporting required by all local authorities. The National Statistics are available on the public MHCLG website: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-homelessness>. The published data has a lag, hence the data contained in the tables below is between April 2019 to June 2019. The system also supports us to understand individual officer caseloads and manage individual officer performance more effectively. As the new data-base is held in the cloud and accessible via the web it also means that officers are able to work remotely where appropriate.

3.5 In Walsall, the number of homeless households who are accepted as having the main housing duty is higher than the number accepted in both the West Midlands and England (Table 1).

Table 1 – Number of Homelessness Acceptances (April 2019 to June 2019)

	Total Assessed	Total Accepted	Acceptance Rate %
Walsall	274	273	99.63%
West Midlands	6710	6400	95.38%
England	72190	68170	94.43%

The data shows that the main causes of homelessness in Walsall broadly mirror both the national picture and that of the West Midlands. Family and friends unwilling to accommodate, followed by End of Private Tenancy are the highest causes. Worryingly, Domestic Abuse and Non Violent Breakdown are higher in Walsall than in England (as detailed in table 2).

Table 2 – Primary Reason for Homelessness (April 2019 to June 2019)

Reason for loss of home	Walsall		West Midlands		England	
Family friends unwilling to accommodate	74	27.1%	1720	26.87%	17140	25.14%
End of Private Tenancy	44	16.1%	1280	20%	14350	21.05%
Domestic Abuse	26	9.52%	660	10.31%	6070	8.9%
Non-violent relationship breakdown	25	9.15%	500	7.81%	5250	7.7%

- 3.6 All of our frontline staff receive ongoing training on the implications of the new legislation to ensure compliance with the new HRA Act 2017. We also provide them with training on Complex Mental Health and delivering a Psychologically Informed Environment for clients. We continue to maximise the use of our Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP's) to prevent homelessness, and have recently updated our website with an online DHP form, self-help and further information in relation to our services (as detailed in the Money Home Job newsletter attached as Background Papers). Since the introduction of the HRA in April 2018, to date, MHJ has prevented 556 people from becoming homeless. Where prevention has not been possible, we have also relieved homelessness in 676 cases.
- 3.7 We have recently collaborated with our Housing Association (HA) partners to streamline our nominations process to match homeless households to suitable properties as quickly as possible. We have also developed a revised Housing Allocations Policy and Nominations Agreement which will soon be considered by Cabinet. We have also worked with whg to jointly submit a bid to gain additional funding to employ an Eviction Prevention Officer. The Eviction Prevention Officer will review the eviction process and help our organisations to develop, and trial, a new joint way of working, with the aim of eradicating evictions in the future. The whg board have also recently adopted an ambition that no one will be evicted into homelessness i.e. if eviction is unavoidable, every effort will be made to ensure there is another housing option in place for that household before an eviction takes place.
- 3.8 Our Temporary accommodation (TA) is currently provided in four blocks of flats (Rivers House, Sandwell House, and two blocks at Green Lane). Consultation with our customers during the development of the Homelessness Strategy highlighted that many of our residents did not like this arrangement. Placing lots of homeless people together in this way can increase the stigma to families and the

possibility of children suffering negative childhood experiences. We are now piloting dispersed TA units for families, to enable a more modern and flexible service. If the pilot is successful we intend to purchase or lease more dispersed TA units in the future.

- 3.9 We currently commission Accord to provide a refuge service for Victims of Domestic Abuse. We have extended the existing refuge provision to run until 2021, whilst we consider the most appropriate service to commission post 2021 (if funds are available). We also provide a Housing Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA) officer, who works with victims and survivors of domestic abuse, primarily dealing with their housing options and providing support. We will extend this post until at least 2021. We have also recently secured funding from the MCLG for a Children's Worker to be based at the refuge in 2020/21 who will deliver a range of interventions and activities to support children and their parents.

We currently commission a range of options for homeless young people, including care leavers who need help to secure housing and / or support to sustain their existing housing tenancies. Housing options for this group need to include access to affordable and good quality single person accommodation. Since the new strategy was been adopted the Council's Housing and Children's services are working closer together and have established a single housing pathway for young people, and have jointly commissioned a number of services. We have projects in place with YMCA Black Country Supported Lodgings and Night Stop, WHG dispersed accommodation (60 Units), and St Basils (9 Units) for complex young people. We also have Rivers House (14 units) which is part of our Temporary Accommodation for young people with complex needs (where on-site psychologically informed support is available 24/7). The Council's Young Persons Homeless team will continue to work with the Black Country Impact team to help get young people into education, training or employment.

- 3.10 In Walsall we are bucking the trend as a result of our focus on enhancing interventions to support Rough Sleepers (which included the provision of a Night Shelter for 6 months this winter). Since 2016, there has been a 45% decrease in the number of people sleeping rough on the streets in Walsall. In comparison, across the west Midlands rough sleeping has decreased by 24%, and nationally, it has decreased by 9%. Since 2010, the national figure for rough sleeping has increased by a startling 141% (yet in comparison, Walsall's rough sleeping count this year has shown a decrease of 25% compared to figures recorded in 2010).

Table 3 – Rough Sleeping Figures

Year	Walsall	West Mids	England
2010	8	182	1768
2011	13	207	2181
2012	9	230	2039
2013	8	233	2414
2014	5	186	2744
2015	7	249	3569
2016	26	289	4134
2018	20	295	4751
2019	11	420	4677
2020	6	319	4266

3.11 The team has been recognised nationally for its proactive work with entrenched rough sleepers. A full page article was published in the Sunday Times on 29th December 2019 and we also received visits from the Mayor Andy Street who was keen to see what we are doing in Walsall that is different. What was indicative is the great partnership work between the Housing First support workers and the Housing Team. Our direct link and unprecedented support from Public Health is also unique and has ensured that rough sleepers with complex needs are able to access essential services (such as a GP's and Mental Health Services). Public Health have also assisted by offering proactive assistance with controlling infectious diseases such as TB and Meningitis. Individuals in Housing First and the Night-shelter also have a fast-track route into alcohol and substance misuse services. This year since the Night Shelter opened in October 2019, we have actively supported 42 individuals to be re-housed. Under Housing First, we have already helped to rehouse and support 50 rough sleepers with complex needs (against an overall target of 88 by April 2021). These individuals have been placed across the borough. In addition to this, we have also housed (in partnership with Street Teams and Accord Housing) 10 women who are vulnerable street sex workers.

3.12 Key achievements since the introduction of the Walsall Homelessness Strategy include:

- A reduced case load from 656 in March 2019 to 299 in December 2019 (we are now cleansing our data more effectively, processing cases faster and getting people housed quicker);
- Bed and Breakfast usage has reduced from a high of 23 in March 2019 to a recent average of 3 families (in February 2020). This compares to 700 families in Bed and Breakfast in Coventry (which is a similar population size and demographic to Walsall);
- Our Housing First Scheme is successful (we are the LA that others are trying to emulate, with 50 already housed and 58 on the program). Our goal is to house 5 people per month through 2020;
- Our New Beginnings Project for vulnerable women (street sex workers), 10 housed (in what is the only specialist Housing First project of its kind in the UK);
- Average number of users in the Night Shelter is 8 per night (down from 35 in 2017);

- We gained significant external grant funding from MCHLG (£550,000 which is the 2nd Highest award in the West Midlands and based on population size is the biggest);
- MCHLG reported they are happy with our performance at their last inspection.
- We are one of the few LA's consistently reporting our homelessness figures onto the Delta system free of errors (this makes it difficult to see how well we are doing compared to others but the MHCLG report we are top performers).
- We have a fully integrated team across Money, Home Job (which supports us to keep our Housing Benefit subsidy loss low and maximise the use of DHP to prevent homelessness);
- We have a fantastic partnership Public Health, social care and the voluntary sector (Black Country YMCA help to recruit volunteers to run the Night-Shelter).

4. *Financial information*

- 4.1 The Council is responsible for funding the homelessness duties the law obliges it to discharge. MHJ's Housing and Welfare Support Team carry out the Council's statutory homelessness duties undertaking an array of activities, including providing housing advice homelessness prevention and advice, delivering the local homelessness strategy, commissioning and monitoring homelessness services and tackling homelessness, plus procuring and administering temporary accommodation.
- 4.2 In 2018, Neil Morland undertook an independent review of our homelessness services and described staffing levels as adequate, but identified that the additional burdens arising from the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 could increase workloads meaning more staff might be required. Since then a further £382,000 has been cut from homelessness staffing budgets (the equivalent of 11 posts). The service has responded by scaling back non-statutory welfare rights and income maximisation work, focusing on attracting additional government grant money, providing further staff training and introducing new technology to help improve service performance and efficiency.
- 4.3 For 2020/21 Walsall Metropolitan Council will receive the ring-fenced Flexible Homeless Support Grant of £345,592 and a Homelessness Reduction Grant of £286,490 (in total £632,082). This is less than the Council received in the previous three years. It is not yet certain whether these grants will be made available for 2021/22 and beyond. For 2020/21 MHJ also bid for, and successfully secured, £568,000 from the MCHLG's £30m Rough Sleepers Initiative. It will be used to fund outreach support for Rough Sleepers, Floating Support for Rough Sleepers in Temporary Accommodation or at risk of rough sleeping e.g. due for release from prison or hospital, ongoing funding for the Street Teams Housing First Scheme, an emergency crash pad, the Winter Night Shelter 2020/21 and Move-on properties from the Night Shelter. Walsall Metropolitan Council will also receive a total of £1,300,000 over three years as part of the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) grant for Housing First. The scheme will run between 2019 and 2021 and has a target of assisting 88 people.
- 4.4 Whilst MHJ is currently performing well, further cuts to staffing budgets, or failure to secure future external grants could significantly impede the Council's ability to meet its statutory obligations to homeless households. If the Council is unable to assess and house households quickly, due to reduced staffing levels, the costs

associated with housing people into Bed and Breakfast (and the subsequent Housing Benefit Subsidy loss) could increase the financial pressure on the Council. Coventry City Council (who are a similar size and demographic make up to Walsall) currently have around 700 families in Bed and Breakfast. According to DWP figures, the housing benefit subsidy loss on Bed and Breakfast for Coventry City Council was £5,750,058 compared to £125,814 for Walsall Metropolitan Council in 2018/19.

5. *Reducing Inequalities*

- 5.1 The Marmot Review (2010) identified a strong association between poverty and place and poor health. The Homelessness Strategy (2018 to 2022) and the Council's MHJ team, aim to provide households with adequate, safe, dry, warm and not overcrowded accommodation. Piloting dispersed Temporary Accommodation (as an alternative to large blocks of flats to house homeless households) takes account of the Marmot Reviews findings in regards to neighbourhoods with concentrated disadvantage, where services are overburdened, basic amenities in short supply and issues such as high crime, challenging schools and poor transport mar life chances for many. It is hoped that by providing homeless families with dispersed accommodation across Walsall, we can help them to become better integrated in the wider community, which will in turn build more resilient communities.
- 5.2 Eradicating homelessness is a huge challenge, but by working with all of our customers in a non-judgemental way, we can give them the support they need at the time they require it, to enable them to meet their aspirations and sustain suitable accommodation. Our priority is not to have people living on the streets. With the commitment of our staff, volunteers and partner organisations we can make a positive difference to each individual's health and well being

6. *Decide*

- 6.1 The Committee could decide to make recommendations to Cabinet about future initiatives, policy changes or funding levels.

7. *Respond*

- 7.1 MHJ officers will respond by exploring any initiatives or policy changes recommended and reporting their findings back to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (and / or Cabinet, where appropriate).

8. *Review*

- 8.1 Officers from Money Home Job (MHJ), are required to provide the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with an annual update on the progress made in assisting residents who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. In addition, the following mechanisms to review the service are in place:
- An annual audit of the service is undertaken by Internal Audit.
 - MHCLG undertake inspections of the service annually.
 - Senior officers undertake samples to assess the quality of homelessness files monthly.

- Overall operational performance indicators are monitored daily by Service Managers (and weekly by the overall management team including the Head of Service).

Background papers

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