

**15 February 2017**

**Homelessness in Walsall and the Impact on Children and Young People**

**Ward(s)** All

**Portfolios:** Cllr D Coughlan, Social Care  
Cllr A Nawaz, Children's Services and Education

**Executive Summary:**

The purpose of this report is to raise awareness of the scale and impact of homelessness on children and vulnerable young people living in Walsall. It draws comparisons between local, regional and national indicators. It also provides a brief summary of the current statutory framework that supports homeless households requesting assistance with housing, and outlines the significant legislative changes contained in the Homeless Reduction Act 2017 (which comes into force in April 2018). It considers recent research published by Shelter on the links between homelessness and poor educational attainment in school. It also outlines relevant findings from a recent homeless review which evaluated local service provision in anticipation of the legislative changes coming in. The homelessness review has been used to help inform the development of a new Walsall Homelessness Strategy 2018 -2022 which is due to be considered by Cabinet on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2018. The committee is asked to note the information contained in this report and consider whether to submit a response to the consultation on the draft Walsall Homelessness Strategy.

**Reason for scrutiny:**

The local authority has a number of statutory responsibilities with regard to providing advice and assistance to homeless families with children and vulnerable young people (such as those aged 16 or 17 or care leavers). The legislation is set to change in April 2018 when the new the Homeless Reduction Act 2017 is implemented. The Council's Money Home Job Service is currently consulting on a draft Walsall Homelessness Strategy (in anticipation of this new legislation coming into force). Shelter published new research in December 2017 which identifies a link between homelessness and poor educational attainment in children.

**Recommendations:**

**That:**

1. The information contained in the report is noted.
2. The Committee considers whether to submit a formal response to the consultation on the draft Walsall Homelessness Strategy 2018 - 2022.

## **Background papers:**

Digby, A. (2017) 'Impacts of Homelessness on Children – research with teachers'  
Available from:

[http://england.shelter.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0011/1474652/2017\\_12\\_20\\_Homelessness\\_and\\_School\\_Children.pdf](http://england.shelter.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/1474652/2017_12_20_Homelessness_and_School_Children.pdf)

Moreland, N. (2018) 'A Review of Homelessness in Walsall', January

Moreland, N. (2018) 'Draft Walsall Homelessness Strategy 2018 – 2022', January

## **Resource and legal considerations:**

The Homelessness Act 2002 requires local authorities to produce a Homelessness Strategy, which must then be reviewed and republished every 5 years. The development of the strategy must be underpinned by a comprehensive Homelessness Review. The Review must clearly identify current services, any gaps in provision, and provide clear recommendations about any changes required to help reduce homelessness in the future. These recommendations must then be translated into a new Homelessness Strategy and associated action plan.

The Homeless Reduction Act 2017 will come into force in April 2018 and it is likely that this will significantly increase the burden on the Council. Additional investment is likely to be required to meet increased demand for services.

## **Citizen impact:**

In the region of 2,500 households approach the Council per year requesting assistance as a result of becoming homeless or being threatened with homelessness. The vast majority of households are prevented from becoming homeless in the very early stages through negotiation with landlords and the use of discretionary housing payments (in 2016-17 366 households progressed to making a homeless application). Of this number, just over 60% consist of households with dependent children in full time education. The impact of experiencing homelessness can be significant, with children developing emotional or behavioural problems from the trauma associated with losing their home.

## **Environmental impact:**

None identified

## **Performance management:**

In response to the Homeless Reduction Act 2017, the government is currently designing new national performance indicators to help monitor levels of homelessness and the outcomes for future homeless applicants. To ensure the Council is able to successfully monitor, and report information about homelessness in Walsall, the Council has recently invested in a new homelessness prevention database which is scheduled to be implemented in March 2018.

**Equality Implications:**


Equality impact assessments have been developed, and will be continually reviewed during the development of the Homeless Strategy and the lifetime of the action plan.

**Consultation:**

Key stakeholders were consulted in the development of the Homeless Review, published in 2018. Consultation is now underway on the draft Walsall Homelessness Strategy 2018 – 2022.

**Contact Officer:**

Elise Hopkins, System Leader (Head of Service), Money Home Job

 01922 659868

[elise.hopkins@walsall.gov.uk](mailto:elise.hopkins@walsall.gov.uk)

## Report

### 1. Homelessness Reduction Act 2017

1.1 The Walsall Homelessness Review specifically considered the appropriateness of services in light of the new duties placed upon the Council by the Homelessness Reduction Act (2017), which will be implemented from April 2018.

1.2 The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 contains a number of clauses that expand the existing legislation (Housing Act 1996 (as amended)) and also introduces new duties on Councils. These changes and new duties have been summarised below:

- Councils are now required to undertake a homeless assessment for all applicants who are threatened with homelessness within 56 days (that period has increased from 28 days);
- The existing duty to provide support and assistance has been substantially extended through a new duty, which means councils must now assess all eligible applicants, and provide them with an action plan addressing their personal housing and support needs;
- The existing duty to prevent homelessness in cases threatened with homelessness has also been expanded (to include all eligible applicants whether or not a person is vulnerable or has deliberately caused or contributed to their homelessness);
- A new duty has been introduced to 'relieve' homelessness for those who become homeless;
- A new duty has been introduced which requires councils to help to secure accommodation for all those who are threatened homelessness or who are homeless;
- A new responsibility will now be placed on applicants to 'co-operate' with the help being offered by councils;
- Local connection for care leavers has been revised (to reduce the need for referrals between local authorities);
- New rights for applicants to seek 'reviews' of how councils execute the new duties have been introduced;
- A new duty for public authorities to refer cases to the local housing authority has been introduced;
- The requirement to ensure 'suitability' of private rented sector accommodation by carrying out inspections has been expanded, to include properties procured for the purpose of preventing or relieving homelessness.

### 2 Homelessness Review and Strategy

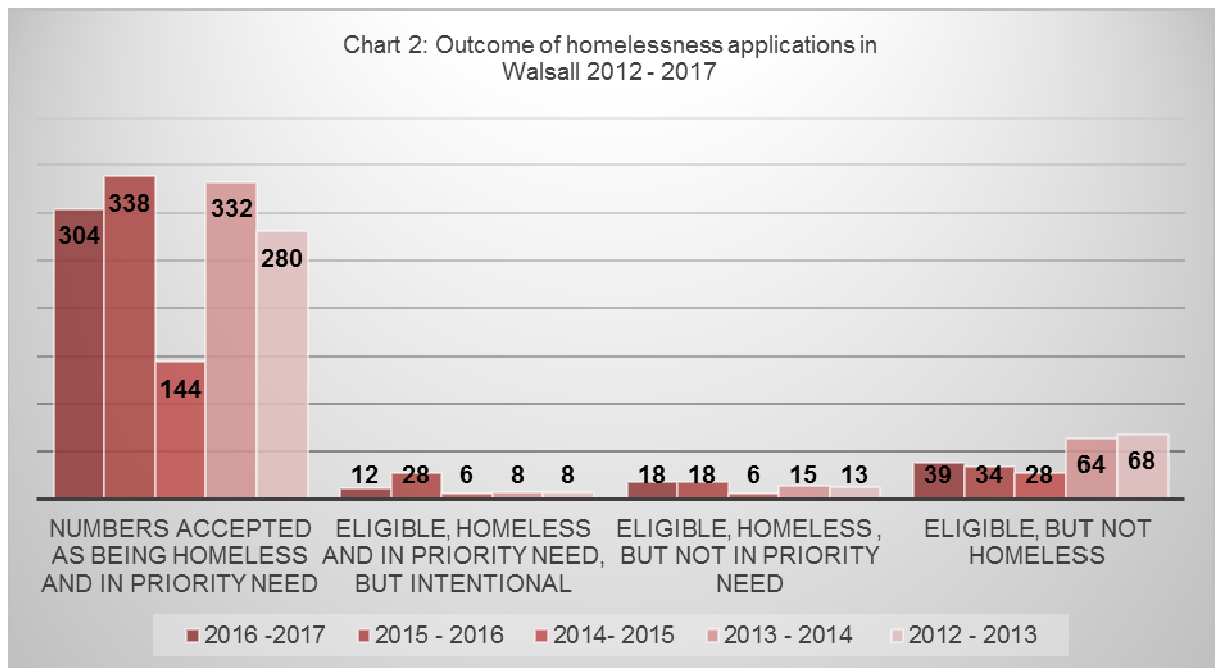
2.1 The Homelessness Review details the national picture which shows an increase in homelessness (and in particular street homelessness), an increase in the use of temporary accommodation, and a reduction in the number of homelessness preventions. Nationally between 2009/10 to 2016/17, there was a:

- 25% increase in the overall number of people assisted by local authorities;
- 30% reduction in the number of people who had their homelessness prevented;
- 42% reduction in the number of people whose homelessness was relieved;

- 33% increase in the number of people owed the main housing (homelessness) duty of assistance (s.193(2), part 7, Housing Act 1996);
- 34% increase in the number of households living in local authority temporary accommodation;
- 58% increase in the number of people sleeping rough;

2.2 In Walsall, the review found that:

- The number of Walsall homelessness applications have fluctuated in individual years; however, the overall number have remained relatively constant at the start and end of the 5 year review period, with 366 applications in 16/17;
- Walsall Homelessness acceptances in 2016/17 increased slightly to 327 compared with levels in 2012/13;
- When compared with England, and the rest of the Black Country, the levels of homelessness acceptances in Walsall are more than 50% higher, i.e. a much higher proportion of our decisions are to accept a full homelessness duty and offer secure housing compared to others;
- Acceptances for single person households have almost doubled over the 5 year period;

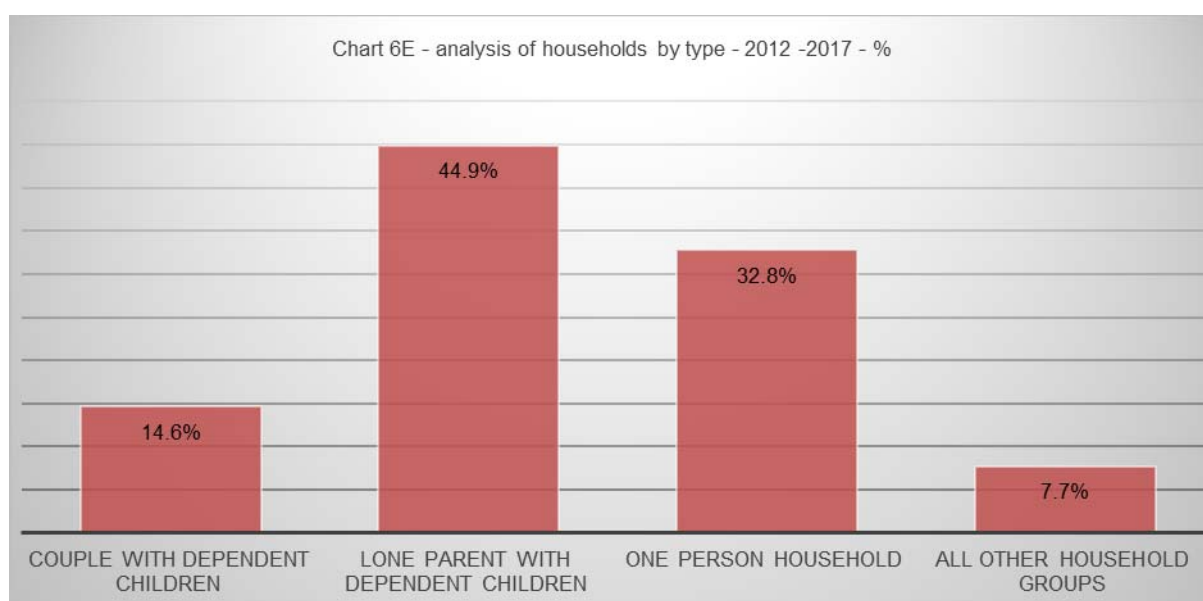


2.3 Shelter (2016) attributes the rise in national homelessness to a number of factors including:

- Insufficient supply of affordable housing;
- Increased Termination of Assured Short-hold Tenancies in the private rented sector;
- Numerous Housing Benefit restrictions (which have been introduced since 2010 and make it increasingly difficult for claimants to find housing that is affordable for them).

2.4 In Walsall, the main trends in homelessness were as follows:

- Parents, other relatives, or friends, no longer willing or able to accommodate is the main reason for why people become homeless in Walsall;
- Homelessness occurring due to non-violent as well as violent breakdown of a relationship with a partner is the second main cause of homelessness;
- People from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds are more likely to experience domestic abuse;
- Women are more likely to experience homelessness than men;
- Youth homelessness has risen by 47% over the period, at the same time (the review acknowledged that there are excellent services in place to house and work with young people to maintain their tenancy and seek employment);
- The number of people experiencing street homeless in the Walsall area has increased by two-thirds during the past five years, standing at 26 in 2016/17;
- Single parent families with dependent children represent the largest cohort of homeless applications as evidenced in the graph below:



## 2.5 Other relevant conclusions from the author of the Homelessness Review were:

- a. That there are excellent services in place to support victims of domestic abuse;
- b. Walsall's current temporary accommodation is not fit for purpose (as it concentrates deprivation and increases the potential of children experiencing negative life experiences);
- c. Street homeless services need to be re-commissioned to follow a Housing First model (which would help us to assist any vulnerable care leavers who have particularly complex needs);
- d. Consideration should be given to the development of a common housing waiting list, to avoid applicants having to register with multiple social landlords;
- e. Consideration should be given to discharging homeless duty into the private rented sector;
- f. Existing staffing resource levels should be maintained, and may need to be increased, in order to meet the additional burdens of the Homelessness Reduction Act (2017).

- 2.6 The information obtained during the review has been used to develop a draft **Walsall Homelessness Strategy 2018 – 2022 and action plan** which is available on the Council's website. The strategy is currently out for consultation and stakeholders are being invited to comment and / or take part in a number of events before the final draft strategy is considered by Cabinet on 21 March 2018.

### 3. Educational Attainment and Homelessness

- 3.1 Shelter recently published the results of a study which consisted of in-depth interviews with primary and secondary teachers and education professionals from ten different schools across the country. Findings revealed that children who are homeless fall behind academically, fall asleep in class, and become socially isolated, anxious and withdrawn. Teaching professionals also revealed that they are struggling to cope with the growing levels of homelessness in their classrooms. Key findings from the research included:
- a) **Children's mental health, attitudes and behaviours are negatively impacted.** Participants reported that homeless children frequently felt an overwhelming sense of displacement having 'lost a place that felt like home'. They also reported that homelessness could cause severe emotional trauma leading to emotional stress, anxiety and problematic behaviours.
  - b) **Homeless children's educational attainment suffers as a result of homelessness.** Undertaking homework or independent study was challenging or impossible for some students as they did not have access to computers, or a quiet place to work. For children at crucial stages of their education teachers reported that it was very difficult to catch them up.
  - c) **Being moved from place to place, and the lack of facilities in emergency accommodation impacts children's health and hygiene.** Teachers reported that homeless children's behaviour often changes, with younger children becoming withdrawn or upset, and older children lashing out, becoming angry, truanting or refusing to do any work.
  - d) **Children's relationships with their peers suffer greatly.** Teachers reported that homeless children consistently missed out on extra-curricular or social activities like parties and that children frequently felt that they were unable to fit in with their peers.
  - e) **Children placed 'out of area' suffered the most.** Teachers reported that children who were placed in an area away from their pre-existing support networks were the most severely impacted by homelessness and fell behind when compared to their peers in terms of educational attainment.
- 3.2 The homeless review did not directly focus on the impact of homelessness on local children and their educational attainment. Semi-structured interviews with parents of children currently living in temporary accommodation did confirm however that local children experience similar challenges to those described in the Shelter research. The Homelessness Review recommends that the Council should move away from the current model of providing temporary accommodation in four concentrated locations. Instead, households should be offered self-contained housing within their own locality area, to enable children to retain their existing support networks i.e. stay in the same school. Taking this approach might help to improve their chances of keeping up with their peers in terms of educational attainment.