

# Cherwell District Council

## Executive

4 January 2016

<b>Housing Strategy Priority 5: Homeless Prevention Action Plan Update</b>
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### Report of Head of Regeneration and Housing

This report is public

#### Purpose of report

To update the Executive on the progress of the Homeless Prevention Action Plan 2016/17.

#### 1.0 Recommendations

The meeting is recommended:

- 1.1 To approve the update on the Homelessness Prevention Action Plan (Appendix 1) which takes account of learning from the current year's plan, and reflects Cherwell District Council's application for the Gold Standard accreditation for homelessness services.
- 1.2 To note the contents of the report and the importance of the Homeless Action Plan, and the particular benefits the Council derives from financially supporting preventative homelessness services in partnership with other voluntary agency bodies.

#### 2.0 Introduction

- 2.1 The Housing Strategy 2012-17 explains the "journey" which Cherwell District Council has taken from high levels of homelessness acceptances and consequent high use of expensive, private sector temporary accommodation to today's position where despite austerity cuts to services, the number is much reduced and the type of accommodation improved. Staff are working to maintain the target of 41 households in purpose built, well managed accommodation, but homeless pressure is growing and we are now facing significant challenges including the new Housing and Planning Bill, increasing rent levels and effects of welfare reforms.
- 2.2 Since 2013 and in particular the substantial and challenging welfare reforms, a Homeless Prevention Action has been produced to focus on the detail needed to

carry out the actions in the Housing Strategy. The appended Homelessness Prevention Action Plan shows the measures delivered to maintain performance and updates the plan for 2016-17.

### **3.0 Report Details**

- 3.1 The Action Plan links into the requirements of the Government's Gold Standard Programme.
- 3.2 The Government has issued a challenge to Local Authorities to reach a Gold Standard for homelessness services. Working towards the Gold Standard for services in Homelessness is part of the Regeneration and Housing Services Plan. This is part of our homelessness prevention ethos, as the challenge is designed to help stem future increases in homelessness and rough sleeping by encouraging local authorities to deliver comprehensive preventative services for all clients – not just the families and very vulnerable individuals who would otherwise be owed a statutory duty.
- 3.3 One of the steps in achieving the Gold Standard is taking part in a process known as a Diagnostic Peer Review (DPR). Local authorities have been encouraged to form groups of 3 or more to carry out a “critical friend” assessment of each other's homelessness service to make sure the best outcomes are being achieved for customers. Cherwell completed their Diagnostic Peer Review achieving a score of 72% which was considered to be a high score by the National Practitioner Support Service (NPSS)
- 3.4 To achieve Gold Standard, we are required to complete 10 steps. We are working to progress to achieve Bronze at the present time and expect to have confirmation early in the New Year.

#### **Partnership Working**

- 3.5 The Homelessness Prevention Action Plan 2016-17 maintains a strong focus on partnership working. As services respond to the reduction in Council (District and County) funding, best value for money will be achieved by working together on our joint aims. The introduction of the full suite of welfare reforms is delayed but there will be effects on tenancy sustainment as the freeze on benefits is introduced, and local housing allowance fails to keep pace with local rent levels.
- 3.6 The plan is being, and will continue to be monitored by a steering group of statutory and voluntary sector partners, ensuring buy in from all parties and streamlining a joined up approach to holistic homelessness prevention.
- 3.7 We also work in significant partnership with Oxfordshire County Council to ensure pathways of care and support are available for vulnerable groups. These pathways have all received budget cuts to existing services and a further £1.5 million has been considered as part of the County Councils recent consultation to reduce budgets still further in the three years 2017 – 2020. This may have a negative impact on the housing support made available for rough sleepers, people subject to domestic abuse and floating support service to help sustain tenancies. This in turn

may lead to increased use of temporary accommodation and increased costs to the Council.

### **Challenges to Homelessness Prevention**

- 3.8 The national agenda of the last Government has resulted in a demand for local authorities to offer “more for less” by working more efficiently in a time of reduced funding. For homelessness services in Cherwell we are seeing an increase in demand due to changes to the welfare system and a failure of wages to keep pace with rents and local house prices.

### **A holistic approach to Homelessness Prevention**

- 3.9 Through the homelessness prevention action plan services are directed to a holistic approach which tackles the deep causes of homelessness, rather than a crisis response. Homelessness prevention is a more cost effective approach than crisis management (Research by Heriot-Watt University previously calculated the cost of preventing someone from becoming homeless was £1,700 compared with the £5,300 cost of helping someone after they become homeless). It is also a far better approach for the individuals and households concerned, many of whom are very vulnerable and also include families with children. It contributes significantly to the protection of vulnerable children as well as providing help to the wider community.
- 3.10 The homelessness prevention action plan is based on evidence about the households who present as homeless in Cherwell. This has resulted in developing a range of partnerships to provide a wide range of tools to prevent homelessness. They include work to improve budgeting, reduce debt and improve employment prospects which in turn reduces the risks of homelessness. See key findings within the Homeless Action Plan evidence of trends within Cherwell

### **Resources for homelessness prevention**

- 3.11 In order to avoid expensive temporary accommodation it is essential the Council continues to invest in front line services at the Council and through our partners. We use funds to provide outreach services for victims of domestic violence to remain in their homes if it is safe for them to do so. We work in significant partnership in both Banbury and Bicester to provide services for vulnerable singles to prevent them sleeping rough as far as possible. We provide general family support to build family resilience to prevent family break up which is often a root cause of homelessness. We also support education and skills training to improve opportunities for those disadvantaged who need skills to access training and employment. The homelessness prevention action plan sets out a co-ordinated approach by the agencies working in this field in Cherwell, to avoid duplication and to produce synergy from our actions.
- 3.12 In Cherwell, we fund external partnerships who can deliver through grant agreements to provide homelessness prevention activities and services. Their performance is monitored regularly to ensure the outcomes are achieved or exceeded. These partners have made a major contribution to Cherwell’s ability to maintain performance and reduce the need for temporary accommodation which is also very costly. They also play a large part in our bid for the ‘Gold Standard’ award

for DCLG which focuses on partnership working. Examples of services funded through these agreements include the Banbury District Housing Coalition – who provide a drop in centre for those who are homeless, unsuitably housed or socially excluded to access advice and support also Connection who provide the outreach service required to verify rough sleepers to access the single homeless pathway/hostels in Oxfordshire.

- 3.13 The partnerships have been reviewed as directed by the Housing Strategy 2012-17, Chapter 5, and grant agreements have been modified to take account of the changing environment. Not only do the grants made by Cherwell District Council enhance our partners' ability to reduce homelessness, but can also assist partner organisations in leveraging in other funding, as they demonstrate the Council's existing support to them.
- 3.14 The Housing Needs Team continue to explore new initiatives to help discharge homelessness duties including the possibility of developing a Private Rented Sector leasing scheme and improving working relationships with Registered Providers. We will continue to use S106 requirements to request 1 & 2 bedroom properties from future development sites to help meet the current housing need identified from the Housing Register.

## **4.0 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations**

- 4.1 It is through adopting this Action Plan that the Council makes clear its commitment to the homelessness prevention agenda to both Central Government and its partners across the statutory and voluntary sectors.
- 4.2 The Homelessness Prevention Action Plan is a result of a review of the previous action plan as directed in Chapter 5 of the Housing Strategy, which requires a review of partnerships.
- 4.3 The adoption of the Homelessness Prevention Action Plan is an important step on the Council's journey to achieving Gold Standard for Homelessness Services, and all that lies behind that award.

## **5.0 Consultation**

Public consultation

The actions are derived from the Housing Strategy 2012 -17 which has been subject to full consultation.

Statutory and voluntary agencies providing services for vulnerable people

Consultation has taken place with partner organisations who work with people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in partnership with the Council. A specific meeting was held on 6 November to update partners.

## **6.0 Alternative Options and Reasons for Rejection**

- 6.1 The following alternative options have been identified and rejected for the reasons as set out below.

Option 1: Not to endorse the Homeless Action Plan 2016/17 which highlights the continued need to work in partnership and highlights the request to continue funding to support the prevention of Homelessness. This has been rejected as it will lead to an increase in statutory duties to homeless and an increase in spending on provision of expensive temporary accommodation and rough sleeping across the district.

## **7.0 Implications**

### **Financial and Resource Implications**

- 7.1 There are no direct finance implications from the report.

Comments checked by:

Head of Finance and Procurement, 0300 0030106  
paul.sutton@cherwellandsouthnorthants.gov.uk

### **Legal Implications**

- 7.2 The Council retains a statutory duty to provide homeless services including the statutory provision of temporary accommodation to qualifying households.

Comments checked by:

Kevin Lane, Head of Law and Governance, 0300 0030107  
kevin.lane@cherwellandsouthnorthants.gov.uk

### **Risk implications**

- 7.3 If the council does not continue to support homeless prevention it risks an increase in costs for provision of temporary accommodation.

Temporary Accommodation in an emergency is often Bed and Breakfast where costs can vary from night to night depending on availability. Sometimes they may be as high and in some cases may be as much as £100 per night per room.

Failure to continue to support a prevention approach may result in families being placed in B&B accommodation for longer than 6 weeks. This will affect the council performance and may lead to fines from central government due to breaching legal guidelines issued from DCLG.

This will be monitored through the teams operational risk register and escalated through the corporate risk register.

Comments checked by:

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## 8.0 Decision Information

### Key Decision

**Financial Threshold Met:** No

**Community Impact Threshold Met:** Yes

### Wards Affected

All

### Links to Corporate Plan and Policy Framework

District of opportunity  
Thriving Communities  
Sound budgets and customer-focused council

### Lead Councillor

Councillor John Donaldson, Lead Member for Housing.

### Document Information

Appendix No	Title
1	Homeless Action Plan 2016 - 2017
Background Papers	
None	
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