

## **Cherwell District Council Homelessness Review 2018: Executive Summary**

This Review provides key facts about homelessness and homelessness prevention in the district over the last four years. Our new Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan 2018-2020 are based on the findings of this review.

### **Households Seeking Help**

We have seen in the region of 700-1000 households each year seeking help as a result of homelessness. In 2014/15 870 presented, in 2015/16 1,011, in 2016/17 830 and in the last year 685. Between 16% and 21% of these households progressed to a full homelessness application with the actual number of homeless applications decreasing slightly each year over the four year period from 160 in 2014/15 to 128 in 2017/18. In 48-54% of these applications we accepted a full homelessness duty.

The main reasons for homelessness acceptances during the review period were:

- end of an assured shorthold tenancy
- family/friends no longer willing or able to accommodate
- relationship breakdown, including 'violent relationship breakdown'

Behind these sit secondary factors, such as affordability of accommodation and inability to find a home in the local market.

In each of the last three years over three-quarters of the households accepted as homeless have been families with children, with those headed by lone parent females being the largest proportion. The number of single person households accepted has increased from 5% in 2014/15 to 12% in 2017/18. Almost two-thirds of households accepted as homeless in each year were aged 25-44 years old. There was a small decrease in the number of 16-24 year olds.

Both black and mixed race households are over-represented in homelessness acceptances compared to the local population.

There are a significant number of households in Cherwell who present as homeless having had no prior contact with our service. Although this has decreased from 100 'on the day' applications in 2014/15 to 64 in 2017/18 there is more work to be done to ensure that people are aware of the advice and assistance available to prevent or relieve homelessness before they become roofless.

### **Homelessness Prevention**

Our main prevention tools are :

- negotiation with private landlords who have issued or threatened to issue a Section 21 notice and other interventions, such as addressing rent arrears, to save the tenancy. This includes developing pre- eviction protocols with registered provider landlords and negotiation with landlords on a wide range of issues.
- the housing register, via an offer of accommodation under Part 6 of the Housing Act 1996. In 2017/18, we assisted 44% of households facing homelessness to access social housing via the register. The number of new build affordable rented properties delivered in the district has increased significantly between 2014/15 and 2017/18, which has enabled the council to both prevent homelessness and keep the number of people living in temporary accommodation to a minimum.

Access to private rented sector housing is an important option but market rents are high making it a difficult sector for low income households and people on welfare benefits to access. We offer incentives such as Landlord Home Improvement Grants (LHIGs) to facilitate repairs if landlords then let to tenants from our register. We also offer the Cherwell Bond Scheme (CBS) to assist households who are at risk of homelessness to cover the cost of a deposit. The number of LHIGs granted and new tenancies let through the bond scheme fell considerably during 2016/17, before rising slightly during 2017/18.

In 2017/18, 33% of households facing homelessness in our district were assisted either through the bond scheme or by other landlord interventions. The review identifies that the current bond scheme may be too restrictive and reviewing the scheme to improve access to the private sector is an action in the new Strategy.

The effectiveness of debt advice as a prevention tool fell significantly during the period of the review. Affordability of accommodation is an increasing cause of homelessness, so refocussing access to debt and money advice services will be another key strategic task to prevent homelessness.

### **Temporary accommodation**

The number of households placed in Temporary Accommodation (TA) has remained fairly constant during the review period, at just over 100 households per year. Although the majority of all households are accommodated in self-contained accommodation there was an increase in the number of occasions when it was necessary to initially place households into B&B or motel accommodation. This is likely to be linked to emergency presentations where the applicant had had no prior contact with the service.

Over the period of the review we did not need to increase the number of units used for TA and on 31 March 2018 there were 30 households in TA. There was an increase in the length of stay during 2015/16 and 2016/17 but this trend reversed in 2017/18, due to a reduction in homeless applications and increased affordable housing delivery providing more re-housing options.

### **Single homelessness and rough sleeping**

Over the period of the review the number of single households accepted as homeless increased from 5% in 2014/15 to over 13% of all cases for 2017/18 and the total number of homeless decisions being made for this group has increased. This includes people who are considered to be 'vulnerable' under homelessness legislation, for example, as a result of physical or mental illness or disability; substance abuse issues; or because they have previously been in the Forces, in care or are ex-offenders, or a combination of factors. We aim to collect better data on complex needs of those requiring assistance, as a result of new duties and enhanced case recording systems following the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

During 2017/18 we identified 40 people as sleeping rough in our district. Our annual rough sleepers estimate provides a snapshot figure on one 'typical night'. We recorded 21 people sleeping rough on the 'typical night' in November 2015 but this reduced to nine people in November 2017.

The new Single Homeless Pathway and allocated beds for people from Cherwell has helped reduce the number of people having to sleep rough within the district. In conjunction with the other Oxfordshire District/City Councils we contributed to a pooled budget to retain supported accommodation for people sleeping rough and single homeless people. Our contribution ensures that until March 2020, people with a local connection to Cherwell have access to 11 complex needs beds, with 24 hour/day support, based in Oxford, at O'Hanlon House, and 13 beds within our district for people with lower support needs. We also share intelligence with partners about those who are sleeping rough, via the Vulnerable Adults Panel meeting. Monitoring the effectiveness of the Pathway will be an important action over the period of our new strategy.

### **Households experiencing domestic abuse**

There was a small increase in homeless acceptances as a result of domestic abuse, although the numbers remain low, increasing from 4% of acceptances (three cases) in 2014/15, to 14% of acceptances (10 cases) in 2016/17 and then 12% (eight cases) in 2017/18.

The level of overall enquiries in relation to domestic abuse is much higher. In 2017/18 we dealt with 116 enquiries about domestic abuse. 40% of these were dealt with through the housing register and 60% sought advice or assistance. Just over one-third (42 enquiries) received one off advice, for example, clarifying options, or being advised about safety and legal measures. 19 of these approaches recorded a 'positive outcome', such as an offer of accommodation via the housing register; via CBS or securing accommodation in the private rented sector. A further 16 households applied as homeless and we accepted a homelessness duty to eight of these.

### **Key threats and challenges**

In addition to the points above, the review identified the following threats and challenges:

- The ongoing impact of welfare reform, especially the full implementation of Universal Credit which has now been rolled out across our district
- Implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, with adherence to new duties and practices; guidance and case law as these develop
- Dealing with the limited funding available to partner organisations to prevent homelessness and the prevalence of fixed term posts in key organisations, which disrupts development of sustainable and effective services
- Ensuring provision of appropriate accommodation and support for people who sleep rough
- The affordability of accommodation for a range of people, not just those in receipt of welfare benefits
- Responding to the requirement for people to travel from rural parts of the district to main residential areas for employment and core services