

# **Cherwell District Council**

## **Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**12 January 2021**

### **Draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2021-2026**

#### **Report of Assistant Director – Housing and Social Care Commissioning**

This report is public

#### **Purpose of report**

To present Cherwell's draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2021-2026 and associated Action Plan and seek comments and input from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee as part of the consultation process.

#### **1.0 Recommendations**

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is requested to:

- 1.1 Note and comment on the contents of the draft strategy and appendices in advance of the documents being finalised and submitted to the Executive at their 1 March 2021 meeting.

#### **2.0 Introduction**

- 2.1 Under the Homelessness Act 2002 all housing authorities must carry out a homelessness review for their district and develop and publish a homelessness strategy based on the results of that review. The social services authority must provide reasonable assistance. The strategy must be renewed at least every 5 years and must set out the authority's plans for the prevention of homelessness and for securing that sufficient accommodation and support is, or will be, available for people who become homeless or are at risk of becoming so.
- 2.2 The adopted Homelessness Strategy 2018-2020 and associated action plan were developed at a time of reorganisation, when Cherwell District Council (CDC) was in the process of dissolving its partnership with South Northamptonshire Council and developing a new partnership with Oxfordshire County Council. Many of the actions outlined in the strategy have been achieved and the term of the strategy has come to an end. To meet its statutory obligations, CDC must publish and consult on a new strategy. This report sets out the work undertaken to date and seeks input from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to inform any changes necessary before the final strategy documents are presented for approval by the Executive on 1 March 2021.

## 3.0 Reflecting on the Homelessness Strategy 2018-2020

3.1 The Homelessness Strategy 2018-2020 set out 4 priorities:

- Priority 1** Prevent and relieve homelessness in the district
- Priority 2** Prevent single homelessness
- Priority 3** Ensure vulnerable people can access appropriate help and support.
- Priority 4** Ensure homeless households can access suitable temporary and permanent accommodation.

3.2 65 of the actions set out in the strategy action plan have been achieved with only 5 outstanding which is a significant achievement given the impact of Covid-19 lockdown on the public and subsequently the increased demand for CDCs housing and homelessness services since March 2020. One of the priorities in the new strategy is to build resilience and be prepared for future pandemics should they happen. The key achievements from the 2018/20 strategy are:

### Helping Households to Remain

- Appointed a Tenancy Relations Officer who has made 425 successful interventions since May 2019 to tackle adverse landlord activity.
- In 2019/20 a total of 180 grants were issued with a total value of £1,079,000, to enable disabled people to remain independent at home.
- The Debt and Money Advice service was re-commissioned, making a 15% saving in the process. The new service will provide more face to face appointments via digital platforms but will also retain offices locally.
- We published an Enhanced Housing Options Assessment toolkit on the council's website to enable customers to investigate the most suitable housing choices for their circumstances and access advice and information.
- We established a "relief plus" programme for households working with Social Services, where no statutory duties are owed in order to assist the most vulnerable and "at risk" in society with ongoing emergency accommodation. This has evolved into the integration of Housing within the Family Solutions Plus model for supporting vulnerable children and families.
- Two additional officers have been appointed to the council's Tenancy Support Team to support 'at risk' tenants to remain in their home.

### Helping Households to Move

- CDC adjusted its Allocation Scheme in 2019. The changes included a priority for foster carers and adopters to ensure housing need is met whilst they support a young person(s) under a Guardianship Scheme or foster or adopt children supported by Oxfordshire County Council.
- Since April 2018, a total of 907 affordable housing units have been completed in Cherwell in partnership with registered providers, of which, 594 were affordable rent and the remaining 313 shared ownership tenure.
- CDC rebranded and improved its Cherwell Bond Scheme, expanding this to include a Key Worker Bond Scheme.

## **Working in Partnership to address the needs of rough sleepers**

- Provided grants to voluntary sector organisations to support their work with vulnerable people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.
- Recommissioned a service to provide psychologically informed support and accommodation for homeless people with complex needs to be delivered in Banbury.
- Worked with Registered Providers and support providers to increase the number of Housing First units from 6 to 16.
- Commissioned Shelter to undertake a 'health check' of our housing services. The recommendations from this have informed an action plan for implementation.
- Secured additional MHCLG Cold Weather funding to provide 5 additional winter bed spaces from December 2019 to March 2020 and extended this provision from in-house resources in response to Covid-19.
- Secured, through joint bids with other councils in Oxfordshire, Rough Sleeper Initiative (RSI) funding of £136,000 to deliver three projects within the district.
- A bid for Next Steps Accommodation Programme funding resulted in £120,000 award to CDC to enhance housing support services for single homeless people moving on from temporary accommodation.
- CDC is in an established partnership with Oxfordshire County Council and share leadership that covers housing and social care across the 2 organisations which provides a gateway for further collaboration, sharing expertise, resources and opportunities for joint commissioning of services to better meet future housing and support needs.

## **4.0 The Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2021-2026**

4.1 In accordance with legislative requirements, a Review of Homelessness Services has been undertaken in 2020. The review considers the:

- Council's achievements during the lifetime of the previous strategy.
- Actions outstanding from the previous strategy action plan (this has been done through the action plan monitoring process)
- Demand on homelessness services
- Council's current provision of homelessness services
- Unmet demand for the Council's homelessness services
- Future challenges facing the Councils' homelessness service.

4.2 A summary of the Review findings can be found in Section 4 of the draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2021-2026.

4.3 In addition to the Homelessness Service Review 2020, officers considered housing statistical data and the outcomes from the Shelter Health Check undertaken in August 2019. Shelter completed the health check with the Housing Options Team to map the customer experience and explore compliance with the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (HRA). The health check comprised of mystery shopping and a file audit by a Shelter legal expert. Shelter provided recommendations to the Council for implementation and an action plan was developed for implementation. Of the 18 actions, 10 had been completed by July 2020. Work continues to

implement the remaining actions, some of which have been incorporated into the new strategy.

- 4.4 Officers have also considered the findings of the research jointly commissioned by Crisis, the City and District councils to explore the feasibility of moving to a housing-led approach in Oxfordshire, to tackle single homelessness countywide. The focus of the study was on single households because more than half of the homelessness presentations across Oxfordshire in 2018/19 were from this group. Family homelessness is also of concern, but prevention rates are slightly higher for families.
- 4.5 The global findings have informed CDC's vision for the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy which is:

**To work in partnership, with customers at the heart of our approach, to understand, prevent and resolve homelessness so that no one has to sleep rough in Cherwell.**

- 4.6 To deliver the vision, there are 6 strategic priorities:

**Priority 1** Work with the County, City and District Councils and partner organisations across Oxfordshire to identify the causes of homelessness in our area, facilitate early interventions and responses to increase successful homelessness preventions, and make sure that no one has to sleep rough.

**Priority 2** Proactively identify, engage with and assist households who have difficulty accessing and receiving homelessness services.

**Priority 3** Proactively engage with and support households to develop housing resilience and when needed, to access suitable accommodation to meet their longer-term needs.

**Priority 4** Engage and work collaboratively with people with lived experience of homelessness and commission the right support to reduce, prevent and ultimately end homelessness and rough sleeping.

**Priority 5** Make sure that our service is flexible and equipped to deal with any future local Covid-19 outbreak or emergency.

**Priority 6** Work in partnership to increase supply of affordable housing and make sure that accommodation in the private sector is good quality, that tenants are treated lawfully and fairly, and there is improved access to affordable private sector accommodation for homeless households.

- 4.7 In order to deliver these priorities, a series of commitments has been set out in Section 3 of the draft strategy. These are translated into a draft Action Plan which is intended for the first 2 years of the strategy and will be refreshed.

## **5.0 Consultation**

- 5.1 Following senior management approval in November 2020, the draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2021-2026, Action Plan 2021-2023, Consultation Document (which provides a summary of the strategy key points), the equalities and

climate change impact assessment and the link to the consultation questionnaire were published for a 7-week consultation period starting on 30 November 2020. The documents can be found via the Council's Consultation pages here: [www.cherwell.gov.uk/have-your-say](http://www.cherwell.gov.uk/have-your-say) The consultation period ends on 17 January 2021.

- 5.2 Communications during this time include emails to stakeholders, news articles (initial article produced on launch of the consultation and another in December linked with the cold weather provision) and social media (managed by the communications team). A virtual workshop was held with Homeless Network stakeholders in December 2020 and further discussions with other stakeholders (internal and external) will take place in January before the consultation period ends. Tenancy Support Officers are liaising directly with service users. Service Providers are also supporting the consultation programme through discussions with their service users and distribution of strategy documents where access to internet is limited. Contact has also been made through the stakeholder network with representatives of community groups with protected characteristics.
- 5.3 At the end of the consultation period, the feedback received will be analysed, officer responses will be prepared, and the draft strategy will be amended to accommodate feedback. The final version of the strategy will be presented to senior management in February 2021 and subsequently to Members and Executive on 1 March 2021 to complete the process for adopting the strategy.

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

- 6.1 In developing the draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2021-2026 and Action Plan, the following alternative options were identified and rejected for the reasons as set out below:

**Option 1:** Not having a strategy at all

This would result in the Council not meeting its statutory obligations under the Homelessness Act 2002; therefore, this option was rejected.

**Option 2:** A single countywide strategy and no local strategy

This would also result in the Council not meeting its statutory obligations. A single countywide strategy is unlikely to meet local requirements. Each local authority area has different geographic, economic, social and political structures which require a more granular strategy aimed at meeting specific local needs. This option was also rejected although Cherwell is a partner within the draft county wide strategy that is being prepared for consultation in early 2021.

## **7.0 Implications**

### **Financial and Resource Implications**

- 7.1 The development of the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2021 to 2026 has been drafted within existing budgets and resources. Additional funding that may

result from the implementation of the strategy will be dealt with through the budget setting process

Comments checked by:

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### **Legal Implications**

- 7.2 The Strategy is a statutory requirement and takes account of the relevant legislation regarding housing. Where an outstanding or new project cannot be dealt with under delegated authority to the Officer, approval will need to be sought from the Executive in line with Cherwell District Council's legal and constitutional requirements.

Comments checked by:

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### **Equality, Diversity and Community Risk Implications**

- 7.3 A Social and Community Impact Assessment (which includes considerations of Equality and Climate Change) has been undertaken and is included as part of the suite of published consultation documents. All risks will be managed as part of the operational risk register associated with the Housing Service and escalated as and when necessary to the Leadership Risk Register. All projects undertaken to deliver the strategy action plan will be subject to individual risk impact assessments.

Comments checked by:

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## **8.0 Decision Information**

**Key Decision** N/A as not an Executive report

**Financial Threshold Met:** N/A

**Community Impact Threshold Met:** N/A

**Wards Affected**

All

**Links to Corporate Plan and Policy Framework**

**Housing that meets your needs**

Find new and innovative ways to Prevent homelessness

Support the most vulnerable people

Deliver affordable housing  
Raise standards in rented housing  
Promote innovative housing schemes

**Healthy resilient and engaged communities**

Working with partners to address the cause of health inequality and deprivation  
Promote health and well-being in the community

**Lead Councillor**

Cllr John Donaldson – Lead Member for Housing

**Document Information**

**Appendix number and title**

None

**Background papers**

None

**Report Author and contact details**

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