

Report to:	RESILIENT COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Relevant Officer:	Andrew Foot, Head of Housing
Date of Meeting	6 April 2016

HOMELESSNESS THEMATIC DISCUSSION

1.0 Purpose of the report:

- 1.1 To set out the extent and causes of homelessness in Blackpool, the response of the Council and partner agencies, and the challenges and opportunities that can be foreseen over the next few years.

2.0 Recommendation(s):

- 2.1 That the Scrutiny Committee considers the issues set out in the report and the effectiveness of the response of the Council and its partners.

3.0 Reasons for recommendation(s):

- 3.1 To help further develop effective responses to homelessness in Blackpool.

3.2a Is the recommendation contrary to a plan or strategy adopted or approved by the Council? No

3.2b Is the recommendation in accordance with the Council's approved budget? Yes

3.3 Other alternative options to be considered:
None

4.0 Council Priority:

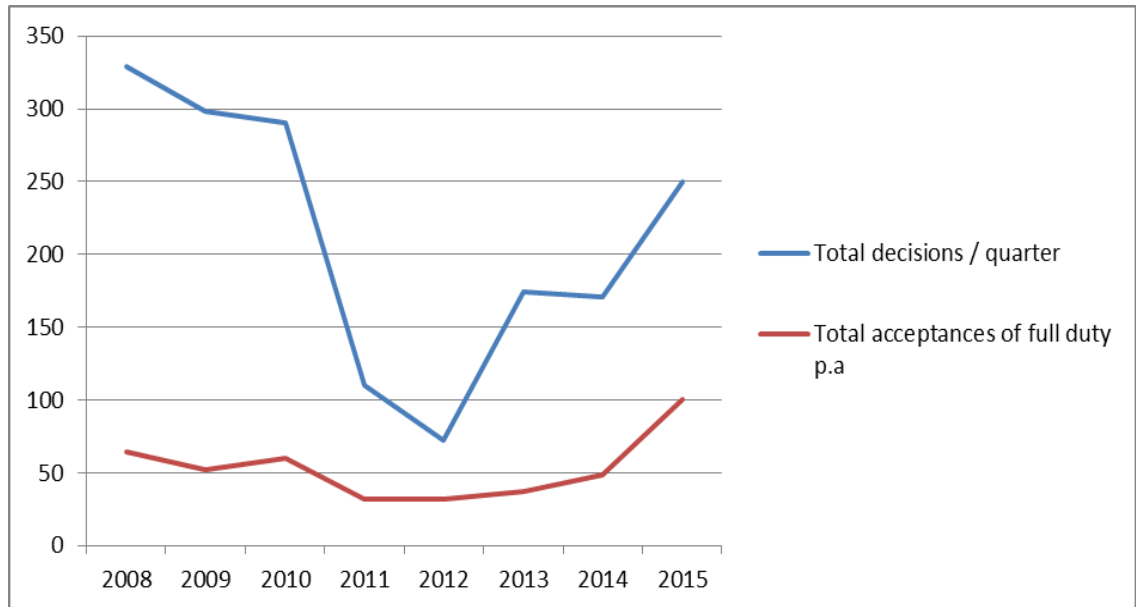
- 4.1 The relevant Council Priority is: "Communities: Creating stronger communities and increasing resilience"

5.0 Background Information

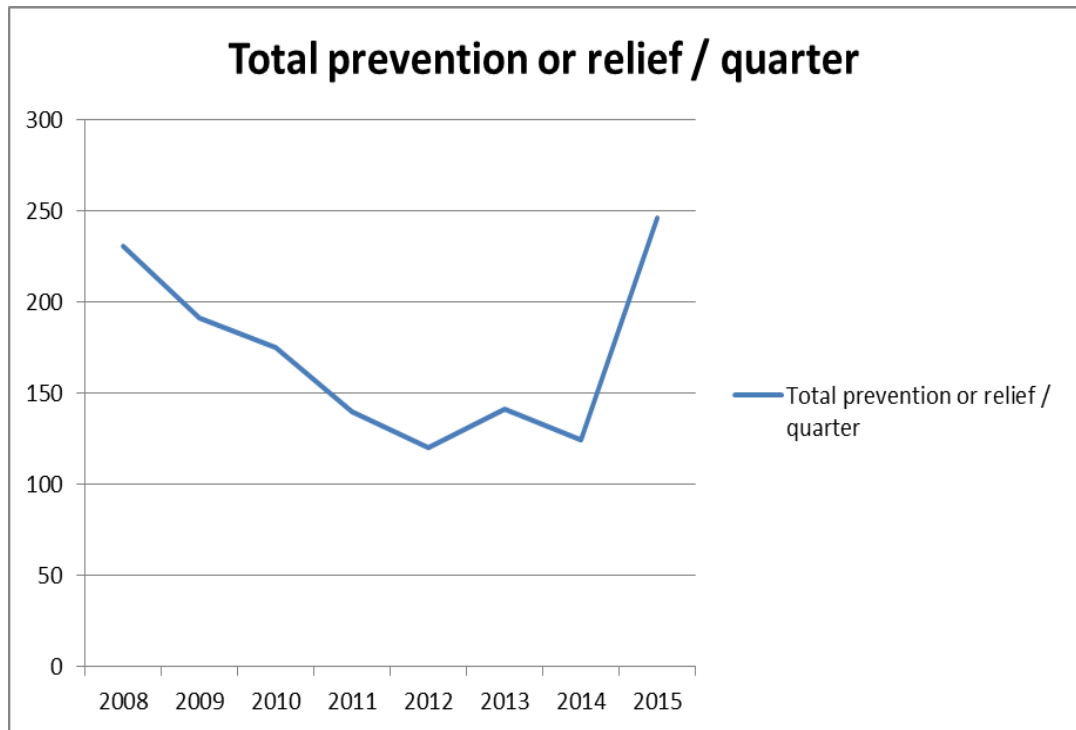
- 5.1 Having a safe place to shelter is one of the most basic human needs. To be without a home is devastating, with very serious consequences for health and life chances. So it is not surprising that homelessness is an emotive issue and has had especially high prominence nationally over the last couple of years as reductions in recorded homelessness over 10 years from 2003 to 2013 started to be reversed. But homelessness is an acute problem that has very many different causes – everyone has their unique story.
- 5.2 The challenge for public services and others working to reduce homelessness is to get to the root problems early and prevent the devastating effects ever arising. Where homelessness cannot be prevented, there is a need for an urgent response that leads to sustained housing and help with addressing the underlying issues that led to homelessness in the first place.

6.0 Level of Homelessness in Blackpool

- 6.1 Homelessness can be defined and measured in several different ways. The Government requires that local authorities submit quarterly returns on the numbers of people that have been formally assessed as being homeless in the borough, and the numbers of people who have received help that has prevented or relieved homelessness. There is also a requirement to undertake an annual count of rough sleepers in the borough. None of these figures capture the whole picture or everyone who is at risk of homelessness, but they at least provide consistent measurement over time so that we can see if the number of households facing homelessness is becoming more or less, and some consistency of measurement between different places.
- 6.2 Around 2,500 households (out of 64,000 total households in the town) seek help from the Council's Housing Options team each year because they are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. This level of contacts has remained broadly the same over the last five years. Not everyone who is at risk of homelessness will contact the Council, but most people who want help with their housing issues come through the Housing Options team. The number of staff in the Housing Options team has been cut by around a third over the last five years, but the range of services available has remained similar.
- 6.3 There have been approximately 1,000 formal homelessness assessments completed by the Housing Options team in the last year. Around 60% of these were found to be homeless but not in priority need, and 10% (around 100 households) were found to be homeless and in priority need, such that the Council had an immediate duty to find them accommodation. The pattern over the last few years is as shown below:



- 6.4 The level of homelessness assessments and the number of households found to be in priority need reduced to a low in 2011/2012 with an emphasis on prevention activity but there has been a significant increase in both assessments and the numbers of households found to be in priority need over the last three years despite continuing prevention work. This marked rise in recorded homelessness is similar to national trends.
- 6.5 The level of assessments for homelessness in Blackpool is relatively high in a national context, similar to cities like Bradford and higher than some London boroughs; it is by far the highest in Lancashire. The level of homeless households in priority need per 1,000 households in Blackpool is just below average compared with national figures, but relatively high compared with other parts of Lancashire. For example, in Quarter 2 2015/2016 there were 25 households in Blackpool, 11 in Preston, eight in Lancaster and six in Blackburn accepted as being homeless and in priority need. The big gap between high levels of people presenting as homeless and low levels of people being found to be homeless and in priority need reflects the dynamics in Blackpool, with high numbers of single people failing to keep their homes who are not classed as in priority need, with those in priority need made up predominantly of families with children, 16/17 year olds and people fleeing domestic violence.
- 6.6 The number of households who have received formal support to prevent or relieve homelessness has also increased in the last year as set out below:



- 6.5 The high figure in 2015/2016 partly reflects better recording, but is also consistent with higher demand on the service from people in urgent need of help. The figures are relatively high in a national context, reflecting both the high level of homelessness in Blackpool and the good level of support that is available.
- 6.6 The number of rough sleepers in Blackpool tends to increase slightly in the summer and reduce in winter, but when the last annual count was undertaken in November 2015, there were found to be five rough sleepers. This is likely to be an underestimate – there are generally 10-15 known rough sleepers in the town at any one time. The official figure of five compares with the official figure of 70 in the Manchester City Council area.
- 6.7 The number of applications for social rented housing has also risen in the last year to up to 900 new applications every quarter, compared with around 175 social housing lettings every quarter.
- 6.8 Lastly, there has been a lot of emphasis in Blackpool on the issue of local connection, given the attraction of the town to people coming from other areas. A significant minority of people approaching Housing Options have come to the town within the last six months and are therefore not eligible for full assistance as long as they have a connection somewhere else.

7.0 Reasons for Homelessness

- 7.1 In general, the crises that precipitate homelessness presentations in Blackpool are largely a product of social problems, rather than directly of housing shortages. Paradoxically, the easy accessibility of homes in the private rented sector and the transience that this fuels, leads to high levels of homelessness. Whilst it is relatively easy to arrange for a roof over someone's head to relieve immediate homelessness, there is a tendency in Blackpool for tenancies to continually break down because of the poor quality of accommodation, the poor behaviour of some tenants and the expectation that there will always be somewhere else available. This leads to many people getting into cycles of finding and losing their accommodation, often with their chances of getting somewhere decent to stay reducing as they get a reputation for rent arrears or anti-social behaviour.
- 7.2 The biggest officially recorded reasons for people becoming homeless are loss of private rented tenancies and eviction from family and/or friends. The figures hide a multitude of reasons for the breakdown of tenancies and domestic arrangements. Whilst it is relatively easy to find some other accommodation in the town's private rented stock, the real challenge is to get to grips with the underlying lifestyle problems and provide a holistic response, especially for those with Multiple and Complex Needs. National self-reported surveys of homeless people have identified the following health and lifestyle issues:-
- 39% take drugs or have recovered from drug use
 - 27% have or are recovered from an alcohol problem
 - 80% have some mental health issue and 45% have a diagnosed condition
- 7.3 It is difficult to say why there has been such an increase in homelessness in the last 18 months, but there are a couple of potential reasons:
- An increase in the number of people with multiple and complex needs and especially issues of substance misuse and mental health problems.
 - Welfare reform, including increased use of benefits sanctions, leading to crisis levels of debt and rent arrears.
- 7.4 There are also some particular stages in life where there can be a greater risk of homelessness. These include:
- Young people leaving home under the age of 18. Each year, around a hundred 16 and 17 year olds approach Housing Options because they are already living away from the family home or are at risk of leaving. In addition, young people contact other organisations in the town such as Streetlife. The Youth Offending Team also provides some help with housing for young people who come under their supervision.

- Transition after age 18. Around a third of people who contact Housing Options are aged 16-25. There are particular challenges for young adults in establishing themselves in their own homes, because of their immaturity and lifestyle issues, but also where there has been a dysfunctional family life, and because of more limited access to benefits and employment. A few young people who have been Looked After Children find themselves facing homelessness; this is extremely regrettable but Our Children are only a tiny proportion of all the 18-25 year olds who need help with keeping or finding a home.
- Leaving prison. There is a particular challenge for offenders to find appropriate accommodation, and despite the systems and protocols, some still find themselves with nowhere to go on release.
- Leaving hospital. Some patients need new homes because of changes in their condition or because their fragile domestic arrangements have broken down.

8.0 Impact of Homelessness

8.1 Homelessness is seriously detrimental to health. Those suffering from homelessness are more likely to have long-term health and mental health problems and while those conditions may help cause homelessness, once homeless, health conditions are likely to worsen further: [Homeless Link, The unhealthy state of homelessness, Audit results 2014].

- 41% of homeless people reported a long-term health problem compared with 28% of the general population.
- 45% had been diagnosed with a mental health problem compared with 25% of the general population.
- They are more likely to have problems with drugs, alcohol and smoking. 36% had taken drugs in the past compared with 5% of the general population. 77% are regular smokers compared with 20% of the general population and are less likely to want to quit (41% vs 63%).
- 27% reported to be suffering or recovering from an alcohol problem. Around two-thirds drink more than the recommended amount each time they drink, in comparison to a third of the general public.
- Homeless people are heavier users of health services when compared to the general population.
- Accident and Emergency visits per homeless person are four times higher than for the general public
- On average there were 1.18 hospital admissions per year for homeless people compared with 0.28 per year for the general public.
- Homeless people access GPs roughly 1.5-2.5 times more than the general public each year, which is lower than their comparative use of hospital services (four times more). This suggests a large number of homeless people could still be approaching hospitals as a first choice for healthcare.

- 8.2 Rough sleepers face especially serious effects, with cold, hunger and fear experienced by people sleeping rough disrupting their sleep, which in turn damages both mental and physical health. Health is also damaged through a lack of basic facilities for personal care, such as bathing and washing clothes. Problems with drugs or alcohol are often made worse through being on the street.
- 8.3 Homelessness is especially difficult for children, and is likely to affect their life chances and ability to develop in education and establish healthy social relationships. Young people who are homeless and on their own can be especially at risk of exploitation and falling into substance misuse and criminality.

9.0 The Response of Blackpool Council and other partners

- 9.1 The issues that lead to homelessness in Blackpool tend to be the same issues that are addressed by a number of services and agencies – homelessness is one symptom of a cocktail of transience, poverty, and social problems. So it is really important that services work together effectively to address these issues holistically.
- 9.2 Nevertheless, helping to prevent and address homelessness has its own specialist skill set and is an essential underpinning to establishing more resilient individuals and communities in the town. There are a number of different agencies involved, and the responses are set out below according to the different roles:

Preventing homelessness

- 9.3 Prevention work with individuals at risk of homelessness is led by Blackpool Council Housing Options team. The Council has a statutory duty to provide housing advice, and to produce a Prevention of Homelessness Strategy. Much of the work around prevention is non-statutory, but is seen as critical to reducing the harm of homelessness and the greater costs of crisis response. In Wales, prevention work has become a statutory responsibility for local authorities and the same duty may well be introduced in England in the next few years.
- 9.4 Around a third of the work of the 21-strong Housing Options team is working with individuals to stop them from becoming homeless, including helping them find alternative accommodation before they lose their current home. Most of this work is in response to people contacting the Council directly, but the team also looks to identify issues from applications for social housing, and the Transience team refers in from their outreach work in inner Blackpool. The service also links into other services and multi-agency forums that deal with high risk cases.
- 9.5 The most common activities are negotiating with landlords to prevent evictions, accessing debt advice and emergency financial help, and helping individuals find their own alternative accommodation. The team liaises with the probation services and

Shelter in local prisons, and has a link worker based at Blackpool Victoria Hospital to pick up cases there. A specialist Mediation Officer negotiates with parents and relatives of 16 and 17 year olds to prevent homelessness.

- 9.6 The Housing Options team has worked with Adult Learning to establish a new three part tenant training course called Key to Your Door that is growing in attendance. Housing Options clients and people referred in from other services are taken through the rights and responsibilities of a tenant and then employment aspirations and healthy lifestyles. It is intended to equip people to keep their tenancies and to demonstrate to landlords their commitment to acting responsibly.
- 9.7 The eight-strong Blackpool Council Lets team is now within the new Blackpool Housing Company, but is funded by Housing Options to find approved private rented accommodation for residents with a full local connection (three years residence, close family in the town for five years, or employment here), underwritten with a rent deposit, and some tenancy support.
- 9.8 An externally commissioned Tenancy Sustainment Service is used to work with people who are at risk of losing their tenancy and need some ongoing support to get on top of things. This is accessed through Housing Options and commissioned by Social Services Commissioning as part of their Housing-related support budget.
- 9.9 Streetlife supports and advises young people at risk of homelessness from its base at Buchanan Street. The Bridge at the Salvation Army provides advice and support to adults during the day. A number of other organisations provide food and social contact for people in the evenings on a regular basis; most of those attending are not currently homeless.
- 9.10 The Council operates a local connection policy for the services that it provides and commissions. Housing advice is available to anyone, but active assistance with finding and maintaining housing in Blackpool is only available to people who have been in the town for at least six months. If someone is new to the town, the focus is on re-establishing connections back to suitable accommodation in their home town.
- 9.11 In summary, a wide range of prevention support is available and is usually successful in preventing homelessness as long as people who need help are identified early.

Dealing with crisis

- 9.12 The Council has a statutory duty to assess homelessness and provide emergency accommodation to those thought to be in priority need, including whilst the assessment is undertaken. Nearly all of those in priority need are housed in the Council's hostels which are managed by Blackpool Coastal Housing. Staffing levels have been increased in the hostels since September 2015 to reflect the very levels of occupancy currently being experienced.

- 9.13 Occasionally, adults and families are housed in Bed and Breakfast accommodation for short periods if no other emergency accommodation is available. People housed in emergency accommodation hostels stay there until all assessments have been completed and permanent accommodation can be arranged – often around three months.
- 9.14 Emergency night shelter accommodation is also available to people who need a roof over their heads for a few nights. This is commissioned from Caritas at Vincent House and the Ashley Foundation at Elm House. Streetlife also has its own night shelter accommodation for young people. In Council commissioned accommodation, a local connection is required to stay in night shelter accommodation for more than three emergency nights.
- 9.15 Outreach work to find and help rough sleepers is coordinated by the Housing Options team, working with enforcement teams within the Council – a carrot and stick approach – and with Fulfilling Lives who are set up to help people with multiple and complex needs get all of the help they need.
- 9.16 While statutory duties are limited to determining homelessness applications within a statutory framework, providing temporary accommodation to those in priority need, and providing long term housing to this group, much of the work of the Housing Options team is concerned with helping everyone else find a home as long as they are homeless and have a local connection of three years residence, close family in the town for five years, or employment here. This is essential to enabling troubled residents to get their lives back on track.
- 9.17 Residents presenting to the team are assisted with access to social housing and private rented housing, but also by referring into and tracking progress through the hostel accommodation commissioned by Social Services Commissioning. There are currently 48 hostel places for adults and 60 places for young people. The accommodation providers commissioned by the Council are Bay Housing Association, Caritas, the Ashley Foundation, and Places for People. Since the current contracts began in November 2014, there has been increased emphasis on ensuring that those staying in the hostels develop their skills and are ready to move on to independent accommodation in around six months. The occupancy of the hostels varies according to need but at times has been at maximum capacity.
- 9.18 The Fulfilling Lives project went live in September 2014 to identify and provide intensive support for a caseload of up to 240 people with multiple and complex needs and work with them for up to two years. The project will last for seven years and should help reach and transform the lives of people who currently fall out of existing services through their challenging behaviour.

9.19 The work to address crisis need is effective for many people, and Blackpool does not have the problems found in some other parts of the country of people being stuck indefinitely in temporary accommodation because a permanent home cannot be found. Nonetheless, there is not enough social housing for everyone who needs it, and the quality of much of the housing that people end up in is unacceptably poor. It is often hard to find anywhere for the most difficult and high risk individuals to stay so a small minority of people simply can't get any housing.

9.20 Proactive work to keep rough sleeping to low levels has been effective, but there are still too many people with complex issues who fail to establish themselves in a new home and who never develop the wider constructive activities and positive relationships that they need. This results in them coming back again for further assistance in the future. It is unrealistic to think that we can always successfully resolve deep seated personal issues, but there are still opportunities to develop more effective approaches to support.

10.0 **Challenges and Areas for Further Development**

10.1 The Council's Prevention of Homelessness Strategy 2014 sets out an action plan for further strengthening our approach to preventing and dealing with homelessness. There are a number of principles that underpin our approach:

- Focus support on people with a strong local connection
- Achieve a strong alignment of homelessness prevention with all services providing support to vulnerable people
- Support the improvement of housing and neighbourhoods within Blackpool
- Use the private rented sector to discharge the main homelessness duty
- Further develop prevention work
- Establish a better approach for 16 and 17 year olds
- Ensure an effective approach to dealing with rough sleeping
- Balance between effective support and encouraging personal responsibility
- Comprehensive housing pathways from homelessness and need for support to independent living
- Provide access to quality housing options and support in the private rented sector
- Provide an effective approach for people who are high risk

10.2 There is a need to develop a new strategy later in 2016, and it is important that it becomes less of a detailed action plan for the Housing Options service and more of a jointly owned vision for how we meet ever growing demands in an environment of reducing local authority funding.

10.3 There are a number of challenges and areas of ongoing work that are important:

- "Positive Transitions" work between Housing Options and Children's Services to improve accommodation and support for young people at risk of homelessness. The work aims to provide a more integrated service for young people, especially through drawing together services in a Vulnerable Adolescents' Hub. The work also includes new approaches to identifying young people at risk of homelessness from an earlier age, and expanding the range of accommodation and support options for all vulnerable young people, whether they are Our Children, under the Youth Offending Team, or coming to Housing Options for help for the first time.
- There is a challenge to build on the work with young people and start to offer more integrated services to vulnerable adults, and especially those with multiple and complex needs, of which support with housing would be a part. While Housing Options and the Tenancy Sustainment Service seek to address wider issues, such as by referring into employment advice or to Fulfilling Lives, a single holistic service focused on the client group could be more effective.
- Voluntary agencies can play an increasingly critical role in helping to support vulnerable people but it is important that the Council provides a clear framework of strategy and guidance so that support is coordinated and effective. This is especially true as funding for Housing-Related Support further reduces – a 20% budget cut is planned for 2016/2017. A new, mature, relationship is required between the Council and increasingly independent partners.
- The Housing Options service is intending to pursue the National Gold Standard Programme to be amongst the very best services. Better information systems provide an opportunity to link up even better with other services and to focus on the cases of people who keep coming back with similar issues. However, there will be further pressures on the Housing Options service budget, which is already reliant on some funding that will run out in a year's time.
- The slow move to Universal Credit and further welfare reform presents new challenges to residents and the providers of affordable and supported accommodation. The volume of need is likely to rise even more, further stretching the existing support and specialist accommodation. Higher rates of Housing Benefit may not be available for accommodation owned by the Council and housing associations from April 2019.

Does the information submitted include any exempt information?

No

List of Appendices:

None

11.0 Legal considerations:

11.1 The Council has a number of legal duties around homelessness, including duties to produce a Prevention of Homelessness Strategy, provide housing advice to all, assess for homelessness, and provide immediate housing for those homeless and in priority need. The Council also has a duty to develop a policy for the letting of social housing – the “allocations scheme”- and let the majority of social homes to those in housing need according to the allocations scheme.

There are further duties in relation to homeless 16 and 17 year olds, which require that there is a protocol in place with Children’s Services and that children are safeguarded and cared for appropriately.

12.0 Human Resources considerations:

12.1 Not applicable

13.0 Equalities considerations:

13.1 Not applicable

14.0 Financial considerations:

14.1 Not applicable

15.0 Risk management considerations:

15.1 Not applicable

16.0 Ethical considerations:

16.1 Not applicable

17.0 Internal/ External Consultation undertaken:

17.1 A Homelessness Partnership brings together the different agencies dealing with homelessness issues in Blackpool through a quarterly meeting. There is wider consultation when a new Prevention of Homelessness Strategy is developed.

Work is underway to explore how service users’ views can be taken into consideration in a more systematic way in the development of services.

18.0 Background papers:

18.1 None