

Report to:

SCRUTINY LEADERSHIP BOARD

Relevant Officer:

Ms Vikki Piper, Acting Head of Housing Services

Date of Meeting

22 July 2020

HOMELESSNESS – COVID 19 RESPONSE

1.0 Purpose of the report:

1.1 To provide an overview and understanding of the Council’s response to Covid-19, in respect of homelessness.

2.0 Recommendation:

2.1 To review and scrutinise the Council’s response to Covid-19 in respect of homelessness.

3.0 Reasons for recommendation(s):

3.1 To provide robust scrutiny of decisions and processes.

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

3.3 Is the recommendation in accordance with the Council’s approved budget? Yes

4.0 Other alternative options to be considered:

4.1 None

5.0 Council priority:

5.1 The relevant Council priority is

- Communities: Creating stronger communities and increasing resilience.

6.0 Background information

On Thursday, 26 March 2020, central government directed all local authorities to do whatever they reasonably could to get “everyone in...by the weekend”; in other words, to accommodate anyone rough sleeping, or at risk of rough sleeping. Government guidance also advised that night shelters should close.

In Blackpool this move had been anticipated and, with the aid of partners, the Council had begun placing individuals into a network of Bed and Breakfasts from Monday, 23 March.

Particular attention was also paid to families in the pre-lockdown period, and the Council was able to quickly move a number of families into settled own accommodation, with support from My Blackpool Home.

This allowed Blackpool Coastal Housing (BCH) to re-organise the family hostel (Central Drive) so that each family had their own kitchen and bathroom, allowing for social distancing/self-isolation.

In respect of single people, the decision was taken, with BCH, to reduce the number of people in the single person hostel (Gorton Street) to reduce pressure on shared spaces. BCH implemented guidance from public health in supporting the remaining residents to stay as safe as possible.

The emergency beds on Chapel Street initially had to close as they only provided nighttime accommodation, but with the support of Blackpool Coastal Housing repairs team, and Blackpool Fulfilling lives, Street Angels were able to re-open within two weeks, providing 24 hour accommodation for up to eight single people.

Health information suggested that homeless people would be at particular high risk from the virus, both in respect of likelihood of infection, and serious complications, due to identified underlying medical conditions, and general poor health. Guidance was also therefore provided by government on how local authorities should triage accommodation, from a clinical perspective, to keep homeless people safe from harm.

Housing and Options and Public Health quickly worked together, with other key partners, to put the following national model of best practice in place:

1. COVID non-symptomatic/low risk: Accommodation for people to comply with Government guidelines but are not yet symptomatic.
2. COVID Protect: Accommodation for people with underlying health issues
3. COVID Care: Accommodation for people who have/may have symptoms

6.1 The Accommodation

Accommodation was sourced by The Housing Options Team, in line with the associated guidance and best practice:

1. Covid non-symptomatic/low risk – a range of accommodation was sourced within B and Bs, and existing temporary accommodation. All accommodation

was ensuite, enabling people to socially distance/self-isolate if needed.

2. Covid Protect – fully self-contained dispersed properties were identified within Council stock, managed by Blackpool Coastal Housing.
3. Covid Care – A separate B and B to those already in use was identified, and Blackpool Teaching Hospital (BTH) provided on site nursing staff seven days per week. The Ashley Foundation provided housing support, and a daily Multi-Disciplinary Team meeting (MDT) was arranged for all agencies to share information. Fylde Coast Medical Services also offered safe transport. This facility ensured that if anyone within the previous categories became symptomatic, they could immediately be isolated and cared for, in many cases, without the need to go to hospital. The MDT's ensured that any additional needs, such as mental ill health or dependency, could also be met within the same setting.

For all categories, wrap around support was rapidly mobilised, ranging from housing, physical health, mental health, substance misuse services, food, and general welfare.

The daily MDT's established specifically for Covid Care, were extended across all categories, so that agencies could quickly share critical information around the support needs of individuals, as soon as they were accommodated.

6.2 **The Support and role of third sector services**

At the start of the lockdown period, it became apparent that the support mechanisms in place for general population weren't suitable for the homeless population who were being placed in B and Bs throughout Blackpool

Whilst their housing needs were being met, their support requirements were different. As such a "Homelessness Support Group" led by Public Health, was developed, essentially comprising of the existing homelessness partnership members plus other agencies working with homeless people.

The Homeless Support Group worked collaboratively to provide the following additional support:

- Twice daily food deliveries, coordinated by Blackpool Council and Blackpool Food Bank, and provided and delivered by a partnership of Soup Kitchens (The Well Café, St. Marks Church, Streetlife and The Albert Project). The Hive Café also provided a vital catering service.

- Over 100 Care packs and other items were delivered by a number of partners, including Streetlife, Headstart, Salvation Army, Comfort Zone and BFL. Items provided included radios, cleaning products, clothing and toiletries.
- A fortnightly laundry service was funded by BFL, and coordinated by Blackpool Council.
- For those moving into dispersed accommodation, food parcels via Corona Kindness were provided and face-to-face welfare checks undertaken weekly. This included where needed a Stop Smoking intervention, and NRT was available.
- Priority in patient detox was made available by Delphi, and a community needle exchange provided. Hotels were also provided sharps boxes and Naloxone support if needed.

This additional support reduced the need for people to leave their accommodation as frequently, enabling them to comply with the government guidance on essential travel.

6.3 Housing Options Service delivery

Changes were made to Housing Options normal operations with effect from Monday 23 March 2020.

Under normal circumstances the Housing Options service is predominantly a drop in service, however once lockdown commenced, it was recognised that this would not be safe or practical. Customers were therefore encouraged to contact by phone wherever possible, and additional telephone lines were added to facilitate this.

However, understanding the needs of customers accessing homelessness services, it was determined that Housing Options could not entirely close the doors, and a drop in service was therefore maintained in the afternoons for those who were homeless and had no other way of contacting the service. An intercom was installed at the front door to facilitate this, allowing the service to screen customers for symptoms and admit people into the office one at a time.

In addition, Housing Options continued to conduct street outreach with key partners, including Blackpool Fulfilling lives (BFL), to identify anyone new to the streets, and also continued to provide advice to people who might be at risk of homelessness, supporting them to remain in their own homes as long as it was safe to do so.

Out of office hours, the Council's Emergency Duty Team took calls and made placements of behalf of the service. Full handovers were given each evening and morning between the respective teams to ensure clear and efficient communication and sharing of information.

6.4 **Demand**

A total of 885 households have approached the Council for housing assistance since 23 March 2020 to date.

Just over 400 households have been provided with emergency accommodation since the early stages of lockdown in late March. At its peak, the Council were supporting 193 households in Temporary accommodation, approximately 96 of which were in one of 11 emergency B and Bs.

At the time of writing this report, there are 153 households in temporary accommodation, 55 of which are accommodated within one of 7 remaining B and Bs, and over 28,500 meals have now been distributed to the homeless community.

6.5 **Challenges**

At the time of lockdown, there were only 11 identified rough sleepers in Blackpool; however the high levels of transience and "sofa-surfing" in Blackpool, put a significantly larger number of people "at risk" of rough sleeping, especially when social distancing within these environments was no longer possible, This placed a disproportionately high demand on Blackpool for emergency accommodation.

Blackpool also has a higher level of complex needs within its community than most parts of the country, and so being able to provide multi agency support, alongside accommodation, was critical.

The vast majority placed in temporary accommodation are Blackpool people, known to services, and most have complied with Government guidelines; however, there has been a small minority of problematic individuals within this cohort.

The Council provided security services where appropriate and additional support was requested from the Police, in managing what are sometimes very difficult situations. A CCTV van was also deployed in the most challenging area, and a multi-agency "walkabout" was conducted between Housing, Community safety, Police and ward Councillors, to provide visibility and reassurance to residents.

Weekly multi-agency Homeless Risk Management meetings were also introduced, bringing agencies together in a problem solving environment, to both manage and

support individuals with the most complex needs

Blackpool also has a smaller than average stock of Social Housing, and relies heavily on the private rented sector to resettle homeless people. At the time of lockdown, the private rented sector, along with many other sectors, closed for business. This has made it incredibly difficult to move people on from temporary accommodation into more settled accommodation.

In respect of the Housing Options service, homeless presentations remain high, and more routine demand such as housing advice and prevention work has started to re-emerge, as people return to some degree of normality

6.6 **Current position**

As previously stated, at the time of writing this report, there are 153 households in temporary accommodation, 55 of which are placed within one of seven remaining B and Bs.

Other forms of temporary accommodation include 40 dispersed units within Council stock (managed and supported by BCH), existing hostel provision, and some additional temporary supported accommodation.

For context, normal levels of temporary accommodation in Blackpool are between 40 and 50 households at any one time.

Of the over 200, households that have now moved on from temporary accommodation, approximately:

- 75% have done so with the support of the Council, either into their own tenancy, supported housing, home area (where not from Blackpool), or returned to family/friends.
- 10% have gone into institutional settings
- 15% have left the emergency provision with no forwarding address.

To date, only four people have returned to rough sleeping, and at the time of writing this report, there are only two verified rough sleepers in Blackpool at the time of writing.

Although high numbers of infections were expected within the homeless population, fortunately, this did not happen, and so the Covid Care facility has now been stood down.

6.7 **Next Steps and positives to be taken forward**

Government guidance has been more recently updated encouraging local authorities to move people on from emergency and temporary accommodation, and to start to re-apply the normal statutory thresholds in respect of new presentations.

As lockdown eases and shops, takeaways, restaurants, and soup kitchens begin to re-open, the food delivery is gradually being stepped down.

The private rented sector has now slowly started to re-open and we are starting to see an increase in move on flow, with the support of My Blackpool Home.

Initial resettlement/tenancy support is being provided by Housing Options to all people moving on from emergency Covid accommodation.

Multi- agency support remains in place and, having recognised the importance of providing more accessible health care to homeless people, the CCG have committed to funding a “Homeless Health Team” for an initial two-year pilot. This service will provide additional outreach, and both physical and mental health support, to people with complex needs who are homeless / at risk of homelessness.

In addition, through the Homeless Support Group, a “buddy system” has been developed to provide non-statutory support and connectivity, to further help people resettle into their new homes and communities.

Government has announced further funding to support rough sleepers/people at risk of rough sleeping who have been provided with emergency accommodation since March, but at the time of writing, there is no further information in respect of the detail of this funding. It will be of utmost importance that long-term funding commitments are now made to this client group to prevent a return to levels of rough sleeping seen before the pandemic.

Does the information submitted include any exempt information? No.

7.0 **List of Appendices:**

7.1 None.

8.0 **Legal considerations:**

8.1 Government guidance required all homeless people be provided with accommodation during the pandemic.

9.0 Human resources considerations:

9.1 None.

10.0 Equalities considerations:

10.1 None.

11.0 Financial considerations:

11.1 Covid related costs were not originally factored into the Council's revenue budget for 2020/2021. Government has announced funding for support and details are awaited.

12.0 Risk management considerations:

12.1 None.

13.0 Ethical considerations:

13.1 None.

14.0 Internal/external consultation undertaken:

14.1 None.

15.0 Background papers:

15.1 None.