

# Blackpool Council



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## **HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS SCRUTINY REVIEW**



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## 1.0 Foreword

- 1.1 As scrutineers we realised we were undertaking our work against a backdrop of social deprivation and hardship with Blackpool having the worst health indicators in England. Our interest in housing and homelessness was multifaceted as we sought to enhance the protection of the vulnerable and the provision of opportunity for the aspirational. We were especially interested in the plight of rough sleepers, the journey of the homeless through the system and the roles of the private and voluntary sectors. We hope our analysis and conclusions give fresh impetus to the battle against homelessness and deprivation in housing.
- 1.2 I would like to extend the thanks of the review panel to all those who have taken part in the review process, including Council officers and witnesses from partner and charitable organisations. Their insight and knowledge of the issues investigated by the review has been invaluable in developing our final recommendations.
- 1.3 I also want to thank my fellow scrutiny members for their positive attitude throughout and I particularly commend our Scrutiny Adviser, John Greenbank.

Councillor Martin Mitchell  
Chairman, Housing and Homelessness Scrutiny Review



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## 2.0 Background Information

- 2.1 As part of its workplanning workshop for the 2019-2020 Municipal Year the Tourism, Economy and Communities (TEC) Scrutiny Committee identified housing and homelessness as an issue for review.
- 2.2 Housing and homelessness were considered significant issues facing Blackpool. In spring 2018, Full Council had agreed a Housing Strategy and Homelessness Prevention Strategy in response to the housing issues and Members wished to review what impact these had had and what other work was being undertaken to address these issues.
- 2.3 Following the workshop the Scrutiny Committee agreed on 19 June 2020 to undertake the review and nominations were sought for Members to sit on the Review Panel.
- 2.4 The Scrutiny Review Panel comprised of Councillors;
- Martin Mitchell
  - Paul Galley
  - Jane Hugo
  - Gerard Walsh
  - Paul Wilshaw
- 2.5 Councillor Mitchell was appointed as Chair for the Review Panel.
- 2.6 The review was supported by John Greenbank, Senior Democratic Governance Adviser (Scrutiny) who was in attendance at every meeting.
- 2.7 This review relates to the following priorities of the Council:
- Priority One – The Economy: Maximising growth and opportunity across Blackpool
- Priority Two – Our Communities: Creating stronger communities and increasing resilience

### 3.0 Methodology

- 3.1 The Panel held a meeting on 23 September 2019 to agree the scope of the review and discuss potential avenues of enquiry. The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Welfare Reform, Councillor Neal Brookes, also attended this meeting to discuss some of the housing and homelessness issues facing the Council and provide comment on the proposed scope.
- 3.2 Following agreement of the review's scope Members determined that they should hold meetings covering the following subjects;
- Rough Sleeping
  - The role of the Private Sector, including Blackpool Housing Company Ltd
  - The Journey of the Homeless when encountering Council services
  - The impact of Universal Credit
  - Non-Council homelessness services, including Fulfilling Lives
- 3.3 It was also agreed that once sufficient evidence had been gathered then a meeting should be held with Councillor Brookes and the corporate leadership team member responsible for housing to discuss potential recommendations.
- 3.4 It had originally been intended that the review would conclude in Spring 2020. However the advent of the Covid-19 Pandemic and subsequent national lockdown announced on 23 March 2020 caused the remaining meetings of the review to be postponed until the autumn of 2020.
- 3.5 Details of the meetings are held as follows:

Date	Attendees	Purpose
23/09/2019	Councillors Mitchell, Galley, Hugo, Walsh, Wilshaw  Councillor Neal Brookes – Cabinet Member for Housing and Welfare Reform  Mr Andy Foot – Head of Housing	Scoping Meeting
30/10/2019	Councillors Mitchell, Galley, Hugo, Walsh, Wilshaw  Mr Andy Foot – Head of Housing, Vikki Piper, Housing Options Manager Tim Coglean, Head of Public Protection  Antony Ryan, Client, Fulfilling Lives Heidi Church, Navigator, Fulfilling Lives	To discuss rough sleeping in Blackpool and hear evidence from an individual with lived experience of the issue.
26/11/2019	Councillors Mitchell, Galley, Walsh, Wilshaw	To discuss the role of the

	<p>Andy Foot, Head of Housing</p> <p>David Galvin, Managing Director, Blackpool Housing Company Ltd</p>	<p>private rented sector in Blackpool, including the work undertaken by Blackpool Housing Company Ltd.</p>
10/02/2020	<p>Councillors Mitchell, Galley, Walsh, Wilshaw</p> <p>Vikki Piper, Housing Options Manager</p> <p>Lance Posting, Benefits Manager</p>	<p>To gain an understanding of the journey of the homeless when they present to Council services.</p> <p>Also to consider the impact of Universal Credit on those in housing need.</p>
15/09/2020	<p>Councillors Mitchell, Hugo, Walsh, Wilshaw</p> <p>Councillor Neal Brookes – Cabinet Member for Housing and Welfare Reform</p> <p>Vikki Piper, Acting Head of Housing*</p>	<p>To re-scope the Review’s Scoping Document to take into account the impact of the Covid-19 Lockdown on housing and homelessness.</p>
22/10/2020	<p>Councillors Mitchell, Hugo, Walsh, Wilshaw</p> <p>Vikki Piper, Acting Head of Housing</p> <p>Ian Treasure, Manager, Fulfilling Lives</p> <p>Paul Fisher, Major, Salvation Army</p> <p>Sandra Fisher, Major, Salvation Army</p>	<p>To consider the role of non-Council services in supporting those who are homeless or in housing need.</p>
12/11/2020	<p>Councillors Mitchell, Galley, Hugo, Walsh, Wilshaw</p>	<p>To discuss recommendations and the contents of the Review’s final report.</p>
03/12/2020	<p>Councillors Mitchell, Galley, Hugo, Walsh</p> <p>Councillor Neal Brookes – Cabinet Member for Housing and Welfare Reform</p> <p>Alan Cavill, Director of Communications and Regeneration</p> <p>Vikki Piper, Acting Head of Housing</p>	<p>To discuss proposed recommendations with the Portfolio Holder and Officers.</p> <p>To confirm the review’s final recommendations.</p>

3.6 Following the conclusion of the review’s meetings its final report was submitted to the 3 February 2021 meeting of the Tourism, Economy and Communities Scrutiny Committee for approval in advance of the 22 March 2021 meeting of the Executive for consideration of its final recommendations.

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\*NB Mr Andy Foot left the Council during February 2020, following which Ms Vikki Piper took on the role of Acting Head of Housing.

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## 4.0 Detailed Findings and Recommendations

### 4.1 Context of the Review

- 4.1.1 Housing is a major issue within Blackpool with a large quantity of low quality privately rented accommodation in the form of flats and bedsits. The letting of 80% of these properties to people relying on benefits set at fixed levels gives little incentive for investment from the private sector.
- 4.1.2 Blackpool has also typically experienced high levels of homelessness. Levels of homelessness in Blackpool are three times the national average per head of population and continue to be driven by chaotic lifestyles, social issues and poor quality housing, not by an absolute shortage of housing.<sup>1</sup> This issue is explored further later in this report.
- 4.1.3 Housing difficulties in inner Blackpool have been driven by conversions of former guest houses over a number of decades to poor quality residential uses. This accounts for around 8,000 privately rented homes in the inner area - 50% of the housing stock there:
- Over 80% of privately rented homes are let to recipients of Housing Benefit<sup>2</sup>
  - Rents and capital values in the area are based on Local Housing Allowance rates, with little premium for larger or higher quality homes, so no market incentives for improvement
  - There has been very little housing that would be desirable for professionals looking to work in the centre of Blackpool, with low values limiting development viability, and a strong competing offer in the suburbs
- 4.1.5 These conditions create deprivation and the immediate proximity of such extreme deprivation in inner Blackpool has a detrimental impact on the tourist economy and town centre. The poor living conditions in homes and neighbourhoods compound social problems and make it harder for residents to do well and benefit from new jobs.
- 4.1.6 Inward migration of people with housing needs is also an issue. Analysis of new Housing Benefit claims found that 83% of new claimants came from outside of Blackpool – representing over 4,500 households. Nearly two thirds of these new claimants from outside Blackpool found their new home in the inner area of Blackpool – an area with only 20% of the borough's housing stock. This led to many being housed in poor quality private rented housing.<sup>3</sup>
- 4.1.7 Conditions are relatively poor in the private housing stock because it is older on average than most other areas and low incomes make it hard for owners and/or occupiers to invest in their homes. A high proportion of homes are also let by private landlords to the Housing Benefit market with little incentive to invest. However, the social rented stock has received major investment over the last few years, including an additional £60 million invested in the Blackpool Coastal Housing's 5,000 homes to meet the Decent Homes Standard.

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<sup>1</sup> Blackpool Council's Housing Strategy 2018-2023

<sup>2</sup> Blackpool Council's Housing Strategy 2018-2023

<sup>3</sup> Housing Strategy 2018-2023



4.1.8 Blackpool has a relatively high proportion of households who the Government classes as being in “fuel poverty” – 13.5% of households - because of a combination of low incomes and poor energy efficiency in the local housing stock.

4.1.9 The extent of homelessness in Blackpool is shown by<sup>4</sup>:

- Around 3,200 households (out of 64,000 total households in the town) sought help from the Council’s Housing Options team in 2018/2019 because they were homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. This level of contacts is rising year on year.
- Most households are helped before they become homeless, with homelessness prevention increasing and the number of people becoming homeless going down. The total number of households found to be homeless has reduced slightly over the last three years, reducing from 702 in 2015/2016 to 603 in 2017/2018 (comparable figures not available for 2018/2019 as the legal framework changed). Despite this reduction, as previously mentioned, Blackpool still has over three times the national average number of homeless households per head of population, with the difference mostly accounted for by high numbers of single people and couples without children.
- Temporary accommodation is provided to households who are homeless and in priority need because they are vulnerable, including families with children, with typically 35-40 individuals and families in temporary accommodation at any one time. Temporary accommodation hostels owned by the Council and managed by Blackpool Coastal Housing have had very high levels of occupancy for the last three years and this has led to fairly frequent use of short term Bed and Breakfast accommodation. But the number of households in temporary accommodation is still lower than most comparable areas and the average length of stay in temporary accommodation has reduced from 56 days in 2017/2018 to 33 days 2019/2020.
- The number of rough sleepers rose in Blackpool in the years up to 2015 but has been steady for the last three years. The number of rough sleepers can appear higher because it is often hard for the public to distinguish rough sleeping from those begging and street drinking. The count in November 2018 identified 12 rough sleepers in the town at that point, which was the third highest total in Lancashire after Preston and Blackburn, and around 120th in the country (out of 325 local authority areas). While the number out on any one night has been steady, the total number of individuals found to have slept rough at least once in a year increased significantly from 160 in 2015/2016 to 235 in 2017/2018.

4.1.10 Whilst there has been some success in preventing homelessness and reducing the number of households who end up homeless the rise in the total number of people at risk of rough sleeping is a particular cause of concern as this category includes high numbers with complex problems and advanced support needs.

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<sup>4</sup> Blackpool Council’s Homelessness Prevention Strategy 2018-2023

- 4.1.11 It was reported that social issues are the most important driver of homelessness in Blackpool, not lack of accommodation; there is a large supply of easily accessible flats in the town. The easy accessibility of homes in the private sector fuels transience and leads to high levels of 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. The biggest challenge is to give the right support to help people address issues in their lives.<sup>5</sup>
- 4.1.12 Many of the increasingly large number of people who have slept rough at least once in the past year had also in the same time period acquired accommodation which they had then lost. The cause of this was often chaotic lifestyles and social isolation. Reasons for increased rough sleeping include the impact of welfare reform and the reduction of support services. A large majority of rough sleepers have complex needs, predominantly relating to substance or alcohol abuse or mental health.
- 4.1.13 The Council's Housing Strategy 2018 and Prevention of Homelessness Strategy 2018 set out all of the current challenges and priorities for action, the following key issues were highlighted<sup>6</sup> for consideration by the Panel:
- Building more new desirable family homes in inner Blackpool to establish a more sustainable mix of homes. This is essential to the town's future and has to be done at a scale to give confidence to developers and new residents. Foxhall Village is the first successful example of this but further developments will be financially undeliverable without grant funding from Government to help acquire land and demolish existing buildings.
  - Re-modelling the stock of Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs) to create better quality homes that are attractive to a wider market. My Blackpool Home is actively delivering more homes through conversion and refurbishment but cannot afford to acquire and re-model many existing HMOs while they continue to be profitable for current owners, fuelled by benefits payments. In February 2020 the Council's Adult Social and Health Scrutiny Committee established a scrutiny review to investigate this issue. Members of the Housing and Homelessness Scrutiny Review were asked to sit on this review to ensure no duplication of work took place.
  - Continuing high numbers of people coming for help with housing. Council services can provide a good response to prevent homelessness and link homelessness support with wider help however cannot address the underlying social issues that drive homelessness without much wider investment and coordination of support between public agencies. The difficulty of this is exacerbated by the constant in-flow of vulnerable people from other areas.
  - Continuing challenge of regulating the private rented sector. While the Council is ambitious in its aims to transform the structure of the housing stock over time, it

<sup>5</sup> Homelessness Prevention Strategy 2018-2023

<sup>6</sup> Housing Strategy 2018-2023

will have to use all of its powers to enforce minimum conditions and drive out bad practice now. There is constant pressure on Housing Enforcement who do not have sufficient resources to address all of the issues that arise in Blackpool's very large, poor quality, private rented sector. As well as increased enforcement activity support is needed from Government to make Housing Benefits payments reflect the quality of homes and create the financial conditions for landlords' investment in better accommodation.

- Lack of capital funding and services to advise and assist owner occupiers to maintain and improve their homes and a lack of consistent funding to address poor energy efficiency. Work is needed to maximise the funding that can help low income owners and tenants get the property improvements they need to stay healthy.

## **4.2 The Council's Response to Housing and Homelessness**

### **4.2.1 Improving existing homes**

4.2.2 New licensing schemes have been introduced to parts of inner Blackpool to help maintain minimum standards in the private rented sector – following the selective licensing schemes in South Beach and Claremont, the largest scheme to date went live in the Central area on 26 March 2019. Additional licensing of HMOs has already been in place in the Central area since July 2016. The schemes aim to improve management standards, reduce Anti-Social Behaviour and consequently the adverse impact of privately rented accommodation on the inner area neighbourhoods.

4.2.3 A new wholly-owned company, Blackpool Housing Company, was formed to acquire a market changing stake in the private rented sector and deliver better quality and more stable private rented properties. Three years in to the acquisition and investment phase "My Blackpool Home" has acquired and refurbished 300 properties and is on target to have 425 homes by March 2020.

4.2.4 The Clusters of Empty Homes Fund helped refurbish and bring back into use 100 empty homes, using £1.6 million of grant assistance.

4.2.5 In the Revoe area of inner Blackpool, 700 private homes have benefitted from external solid wall insulation. Most recently, the Central Heating Fund has improved EPC ratings so that 96% of homes receiving investment achieved an EPC rating of level A-D.

### **4.2.6 Improving Council Housing**

4.2.7 The Council has been able to demolish tower blocks and replace them with high quality family accommodation for affordable rent. The last phase of the Queens Park estate re-development was completed early in 2019. A total of 500 flats have been demolished and 103 new houses and 88 flats have been developed for Council tenants.

4.2.8 At Troutbeck Crescent 81 flats are being demolished and replaced with 75 high quality new family homes, bungalows and flats.

#### 4.2.9 Building more high quality homes

4.2.10 Support has been given to the ambitious development of 410 new homes at Foxhall Village with site assembly and preparation so that the Council's developer partner, Hollinwood Homes, can bring forward the new homes. To date 200 homes have been successfully delivered and the third of four phases started in June 2019, to include further affordable homes as well as homes for sale.

#### 4.2.11 Tackling Homelessness

4.2.12 the Council has also sought and invested new resources into services to help prevent and resolve homelessness, including the Flexible Homelessness Support Grant and the Homelessness Reduction Act New Burdens Funding<sup>7</sup>. While the demand for help has increased the number of people becoming homeless had been stabilised before the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown.

4.2.13 The Review Panel agreed that additional monitoring of housing and homelessness issues were required by the Tourism, Economy and Communities Scrutiny Committee. It has therefore been recommended that an annual report be provided to the Committee to provide Members with an ongoing overview of the work being undertaken.

#### **Recommendation One**

**That the Tourism, Economy and Communities Scrutiny Committee receive an annual report on Housing and Homelessness informing them of work undertaken, performance and funding received.**

#### **4.3 Covid-19 Lockdown<sup>8</sup>**

4.3.1 On 23 March 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic the Government ordered a nationwide lockdown. As a result of this Local Authorities were directed to do whatever they reasonably could to accommodate anyone rough sleeping, or at risk of rough sleeping by the weekend of 28 March 2020. Government guidance also advised that night shelters should close.

4.3.2 Blackpool Council and its partners had anticipated that this may occur and was therefore prepared to move quickly to accommodate those at risk. Particular attention was also paid to families in the pre-lockdown period and the Housing Service, supported by My Blackpool Home, was able to quickly move a number of families into settled accommodation.

<sup>7</sup> Homelessness Prevention Strategy 2018-2023

<sup>8</sup> Homelessness – Covid 19 Response – Housing Services Report to 22 July 2020 Scrutiny Leadership Board

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- 4.3.3 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.
- 4.3.4 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.
- 4.3.6 The emergency beds on Chapel Street initially had to close as they only provided night-time 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.
- 4.3.7 Housing Options and Public Health quickly worked together, with other key partners, to put the national model of best practice in place, including:
- Covid-19 non-symptomatic/low risk: Accommodation for people to comply with Government guidelines but are not yet symptomatic.
  - Covid-19 Protect: Accommodation for people with underlying health issues
  - Covid-19 Care: Accommodation for people who have/may have symptoms
- 4.3.8 At the start of the lockdown period, it became apparent that the support mechanisms in place for the general population were not suitable for the homeless population who were being placed in Bed and Breakfasts throughout Blackpool.
- 4.3.9 Whilst their housing needs were being met their support requirements were different and complex. 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.
- 4.3.10 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 Blackpool Fulfilling Lives. Items provided included radios, cleaning products, clothing and toiletries.
  - A fortnightly laundry service was funded by Blackpool Fulfilling Lives (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. Nicotine Replacement Therapy was also 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.
- 4.3.11 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. Overall the work of the group was noted to have been successful in co-ordinating the response to the lockdown. Members considered that the valued support provided during the lockdown could be further targeted to work to prevent homelessness and support the homeless post-pandemic. The Review Panel therefore recommended this group continue following the lockdown to co-ordinate the multi-agency response to homelessness.
- 4.3.12 The Review Panel noted that the Council and third party agencies, through the Blackpool Homelessness Partnership, had performed well during the Covid-19 Lockdown and had been able to protect those at significant risk of infection. In light of this it was recommended that the Chair of the Review Panel write to Blackpool Homelessness Partnership in recognition of their good work.
- 4.3.13 Members were also provided with reassurance that the Blackpool Homelessness Partnership and the Fylde Coast Partnership, which included the Council, Clinical Commissioning Group and NHS Trusts, were monitoring Covid-19 levels and were prepared for a resurgence of infections and potential future restrictions.
- 4.3.14 During the presentation of evidence provided to the Review at its September 2020 meeting the Acting Head of Housing, Ms Vikki Piper, informed Members that the impact of Covid-19 would necessitate a review of the performance of the Council's existing Homelessness Prevention Strategy. Members welcomed this and recommended that the views of people with lived experience of housing services, both before and during the lockdown, be included to help shape the Strategy.

**Recommendation Two**

**That the Chair of the Review Panel write to the members of the Blackpool Homelessness Partnership in recognition of their good work during the Covid-19 Lockdown.**

**Recommendation Three**

**That the Homelessness Support Group be maintained following the pandemic to co-ordinate support to the homeless. If agreed, an update on the work of the group to be provided to the Tourism Economy and Communities Scrutiny Committee within six months of the submission of this report to the Executive.**

#### **Recommendation Four**

**That the performance of the Homelessness Prevention Strategy 2018-2023 be reviewed in the light of the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic and that people with lived experience of homelessness be involved at an early stage of this review in addition to the Tourism, Economy and Communities Scrutiny Committee.**

#### **4.4 Alternative Giving Scheme**

- 4.4.1 The Review Panel heard details of the Council's Alternative Giving Scheme, which was designed to raise awareness of the Blackpool Food Partnership. The aim of the scheme was to encourage donations to the partnership, instead of giving money to individuals begging on the street. It was recognised that although well intentioned, giving money to those begging could result in it being spent inappropriately, for example on drugs and alcohol. However donations to the partnership would be used to support its food bank, which provided food parcels to those in need.
- 4.4.2 Advertising of the scheme had taken place with posters on public transports and in bus and tram stops.
- 4.4.3 Although supportive of the scheme and its aims, the Review Panel noted that they, as Councillors, had been unaware of it. The scheme was recognised as an important part of supporting the homeless and those using food banks, by allowing those members of the public who wished to give money a facility to do so where it could be spent appropriately. However it would require wider publicising to ensure its potential was realised.

#### **Recommendation Five**

**That the branding of the Alternative Giving Scheme (Blackpool Food Bank) be reviewed by Housing Services to determine how to highlight to the public how they can donate to homeless causes in Blackpool and to provide greater clarity to Council Officers on how they can promote the scheme.**

#### **4.5 Severe Weather Emergency Protocol**

- 4.5.1 The Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) is a function used to protect the health and wellbeing of those sleeping rough in adverse weather conditions. Having a protocol is not a statutory function but is considered best practice by Homeless Link (a national charity of which the Council is a member)<sup>9</sup>.
- 4.5.2 Council policy states that if three consecutive days of temperatures below freezing are forecast then accommodation should be offered to those sleeping rough. It was also

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/guidance-on-severe-weather-emergency-protocol-swep-and-extended-weather-provision>

noted that the SWEP is often used as an opportunity to further engage with the homeless and attempt to prevent their return to rough sleeping.

- 4.5.3 Although it was recognised by the Review Panel that freezing weather conditions could be dangerous to those sleeping rough, it was also raised that other weather conditions, such as heavy rainfall could be equally as hazardous. However these were not mentioned by the protocol. There it was decided that a recommendation should be included to ask that consideration be given to expanding the scope of the SWEP to cover all severe weather events.
- 4.5.4 Members also felt that the three day forecast before the SWEP could be implemented was too long, recognising that even a single night of severe weather could cause significant harm or death to a rough sleeper. A recommendation was therefore made that consideration be given to reducing this timescale, so that the SWEP could be implemented as soon as severe weather is forecast.

**Recommendation Six**

**That Housing Services give consideration to using the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) in all severe weather events. Consideration should also be given to reducing the number of days of severe weather forecast, currently three, before the using the SWEP.**

**Recommendation Seven**

**That notification of the implementation of the SWEP be extended to include Councillors.**

**4.6 Accreditation of Lettings Agents**

- 4.6.1 During its consideration of the role of the Private Sector in housing in Blackpool the Review Panel was informed that the Council had sought funding from the government in 2018 to establish a scheme for the accreditation of lettings agents within Blackpool.
- 4.6.2 Such a scheme would give accredited status to lettings agents who maintained their properties to a high standard. It was hoped that this would then encourage the improvement of housing stock in the private sector.
- 4.6.3 Despite the offer of funds by the government to support this proposal Officers had determined that the amount offered would be insufficient to establish an accreditation scheme in Blackpool. A second bid had been made in 2019 but had again failed to secure sufficient funding. As a result no scheme had yet been established in Blackpool.
- 4.6.4 While noting that it was not practical to establish an accredited lettings agent scheme without government funding, the Review Panel recognised that such a scheme would be of benefit to Blackpool. Therefore members recommended that should sufficient funds become available further consideration should be given to developing an Accredited



Lettings Agent scheme, to encourage the improvement of housing stock in the private sector.

#### **Recommendation Eight**

**That, should funding become available within the next two years, the Council re-consider the development of an Accredited Letting Agents Scheme. If such a scheme becomes viable then details should be provided directly to the Tourism, Economy and Communities Scrutiny Committee.**

#### **4.7 Lived Experience**

- 4.7.1 At its 30 October 2019 meeting the review heard evidence from a Client at Blackpool Fulfilling Lives. They described their experience of substance abuse and homelessness in Blackpool including his interaction with various homeless services.
- 4.7.2 As part of their evidence they informed Members that they had attempted contact with the Council's Housing Options service but had been unsuccessful in obtaining assistance. This had resulted in them holding a negative view of the face-to-face contacts with the Housing Options service and its ability to help homeless people.
- 4.7.2 Although the Review was unable to determine the exact circumstance of Mr Ryan's case and why they had not received assistance when they presented themselves to Housing Options, Members were appreciative of their attendance at the meeting and the evidence they had provided.

#### **4.8 Housing Options Mystery Shopping**

- 4.8.1 As part of the evidence received regarding the performance of the Council's Housing Options service, Members queried if any mystery shopping exercises were undertaken to monitor the performance of face-to-face contacts with the service. Officers explained that no such exercises were undertaken but that other key performance data was collected, outlined in the Housing Strategy and Homelessness Prevention Strategy.
- 4.8.2 The Review Panel had been made aware that Fulfilling Lives had adopted a scheme which could be used by Housing Options to mystery shop homelessness services in Blackpool. This scheme had been adopted by other members of the Blackpool Homelessness Partnership.
- 4.8.3 Although the Council had chosen not to take up this scheme Members were of the view that a mystery shopping exercise would be of benefit to the Housing Options service in allowing officers to gain insight into the experiences of the individuals presenting to it. Therefore it was recommended work be undertaken to develop a mystery shopping exercise for Housing Options face-to-face services.

#### **Recommendation Nine**

**That a mystery shopping exercise be developed to help assess the performance of Housing Options' face-to-face services. The data from this exercise to be then reported to the Tourism, Economy and Communities Scrutiny Committee as part of the first recommended annual report scheduled for November 2021.**

#### **4.9 Funding**

- 4.9.1 A common theme in evidence provided to the review by witnesses was that increased funding is required to ensure that homelessness work could be successful.
- 4.9.2 Although it was recognised that long-term prevention of homelessness required engagement with individuals to address personal issues that the homeless possess additional funding would help in providing this.
- 4.9.3 The Review Panel therefore recommended that the Housing Service should continue to seek sources of additional funding from central Government. It also asked that the Tourism, Economy and Communities Scrutiny Committee be kept informed of these efforts so that outcomes could be monitored by Members.

#### **Recommendation Ten**

**The Council should continue to take every opportunity to press for extra funding for those in housing need from central government. The Tourism, Economy and Communities Scrutiny Committee to be informed when extra funding is secured and involved in monitoring of its usage and outcomes. This information should be included in the annual report to Committee.**

## 5.0 Summary of Recommendations

### Recommendation One

That the Tourism, Economy and Communities Scrutiny Committee receive an annual report on Housing and Homelessness informing them of work undertaken, performance and funding received.

### Recommendation Two

That the Chair of the Review Panel write to the members of the Blackpool Homelessness Partnership in recognition of their good work during the Covid-19 Lockdown.

### Recommendation Three

That the Homelessness Support Group be maintained following the pandemic to co-ordinate support to the homeless. If agreed, an update on the work of the group to be provided to the Tourism Economy and Communities Scrutiny Committee within six months of the submission of this report to the Executive.

### Recommendation Four

That the performance of the Homelessness Prevention Strategy 2018-2023 be reviewed in the light of the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic and that people with lived experience of homelessness be involved at an early stage of this review in addition to the Tourism, Economy and Communities Scrutiny Committee.

### Recommendation Five

That the branding of the Alternative Giving Scheme (Blackpool Food Bank) be reviewed by Housing Services to determine how to highlight to the public how they can donate to homeless causes in Blackpool and to provide greater clarity to Council Officers on how they can promote the scheme.

### Recommendation Six

That Housing Services give consideration to using the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) in all severe weather events. Consideration should also be given to reducing the number of days of severe weather forecast, currently three, before the using the SWEP.

**Recommendation Seven**

**That notification of the implementation of the SWEP be extended to include Councillors.**

**Recommendation Eight**

**That, should funding become available within the next two years, the Council re-consider the development of an Accredited Letting Agents Scheme. If such a scheme becomes viable then details should be provided directly to the Tourism, Economy and Communities Scrutiny Committee.**

**Recommendation Nine**

**That a mystery shopping exercise be developed to help assess the performance of Housing Options' face-to-face services. The data from this exercise to be then reported to the Tourism, Economy and Communities Scrutiny Committee as part of the first recommended annual report scheduled for November 2021.**

**Recommendation Ten**

**The Council should continue to take every opportunity to press for extra funding for those in housing need from central government. The Tourism, Economy and Communities Scrutiny Committee to be informed when extra funding is secured and involved in monitoring of its usage and outcomes. This information should be included in the annual report to Committee.**

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## 6.0 Financial and Legal Considerations

### 6.1 Financial

6.1.1 *Director of Resources to be consulted*

### 6.2 Legal

6.2.1 *Legal Services to be consulted*

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**Housing and Homelessness Scrutiny Action Plan**

To be completed following Committee approval

Recommendation	Cabinet Member's Comments	Rec Accepted by Executive?	Target Date for Action	Lead Officer	Committee Update	Notes
Recommendation One						
Recommendation Two						
Recommendation Three						
Recommendation Four						
Recommendation Five						
Recommendation Six						
Recommendation Seven						
Recommendation Eight						

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<b>Recommendation Nine</b>						
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