

EAST RENFREWSHIRE COUNCILCABINET24 September 2020Report by Director of EnvironmentREDESIGN OF HOMELESS SERVICES IN EAST RENFREWSHIRE**PURPOSE OF REPORT**

1. To advise the Cabinet of the need to review the approach to addressing homelessness in East Renfrewshire and to reinforce the importance of a corporate approach to tackling the issue in accordance with Scottish Government guidance issued in November 2019.

RECOMMENDATIONS

2. The Cabinet is asked to note the need to review the approach to addressing homelessness in East Renfrewshire and the importance of a corporate approach to tackling the issue.

BACKGROUND AND REPORT

3. The Covid crisis has highlighted to society just how many people are insecure in their housing situation. Domestic violence, financial hardship arising from an uncertain labour market or low wages and unscrupulous private landlords are all areas that can result in people losing their home at a moment's notice.

4. In such circumstances people will, assuming that they understand their rights, approach the council for assistance. Scotland has some of the most progressive housing and homelessness legislation in Europe and the assistance available can genuinely transform people's lives for the better. However, this isn't always the case. Sometimes there can be insufficient houses of the right type or size or not in the right location and people can be faced with either waiting in expensive temporary accommodation (an unsettling time for households) or be required to accept accommodation that isn't their first preference. The Local Housing Strategy is in place to try and address the issue of inadequate housing supply and the Council has committed to an ambitious council house building programme to assist with this.

5. Addressing the issue of homelessness is not just about the provision of housing alone. It is about access to support, financial advice, legal advice, mental health and addiction services. Sometimes practical services such as transportation or decoration is required.

6. Many of these services are already provided by either the Council, the NHS or third sector agencies. Frequently these individual services are excellent. However, a person facing homelessness can be required to make contact with and navigate a range of services to meet their needs. This can be complicated, time consuming and sometimes expensive.

7. The Council has agreed on a number of occasions that, as desired by the Scottish Government and COSLA, it will have a corporate duty towards homelessness. Some extracts from the guidance are attached as Appendix 1. All Scottish Local Authorities have a duty to provide advice and assistance to anyone who is homeless or threatened with homelessness

and prevent homelessness if possible, provide temporary accommodation while it investigates the circumstances and provide a reasonable offer of accommodation if a person is unintentionally homeless and has a local connection.

8. In addition there is a duty on local authorities to conduct a housing support assessment for applicants who are unintentionally homeless or threatened with homelessness. If an assessment of a need for support is made, local authorities must ensure that housing support services are provided.

9. Finally there is a requirement for local authorities to provide both preventative and supportive advice to households.

10. What this means in practice is the responsibility to address homelessness rests with a range of services and not, as is often perceived, just the Housing Service. There is capacity for an improvement in the Council's corporate approach to the provision of such services and how they knit together. However, it is acknowledged that it can be difficult for services to shape their service provision to meet the needs of homeless people without a clear indication of what services are needed and how these services can best be delivered.

11. The best way to establish what services are needed and how these services can best be delivered is to ask homeless people. We need to ensure that services are designed to meet the needs of customers as articulated *by them* and not as imagined by professionals. This can be about how appointments are made, how information is conveyed and how support is provided.

Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan

12. The Council has recently been provided with an element of short term funding from the Scottish Government to implement a legislative requirement known as the Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan.

13. The Scottish Government set up the Homelessness & Rough Sleepers Action Group (HARSAG) in October 2017 to produce solutions to end homelessness and rough sleeping. A key recommendation made by this group is that all local authorities transition to a rapid rehousing approach. The group found that homeless households in many areas were not being provided with offers of permanent housing in a suitable time period. This resulted in extended periods of time in temporary accommodation. As a result many authorities had huge pressures on their supply of temporary accommodation and were unable to meet their duty to provide accommodation to roofless households, resulting in rough sleeping.

14. "Rapid rehousing" is about rehousing people that have experienced homelessness as quickly as possible rather than staying in temporary accommodation for too long.

15. In East Renfrewshire there are low levels of rough sleeping and it has been shown that it mostly occurs before the household contacts the Council for assistance. In addition, the Council's allocation policy ensures homeless households are the top priority and any delay is caused by our desire to offer households choice wherever possible. However, in East Renfrewshire there is a small cohort of households who despite the provision of accommodation find themselves homeless again shortly thereafter. It is this cohort of people who perhaps encounter the greatest difficulty in accessing and effectively utilising the range of services required to address their homelessness.

16. Often such households can be placed in bed and breakfast accommodation due to a lack of suitable accommodation.

Unsuitable Accommodation Order

17. In 2014, the Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order limited the time that local authorities could place homeless applicants that were pregnant or a household which includes dependent children in temporary accommodation that was unsuitable for no longer than 14 days, and only where the local authority had no suitable accommodation immediately available.

18. Unsuitable accommodation is defined in the order as accommodation which does not meet standards relating to physical properties of the accommodation, its proximity to health and education services and its suitability to be used by children. Consequently the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for such households is deemed unreasonable.

19. The Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2017 reduced the maximum time to be spent in unsuitable accommodation from 14 days to 7 days for the same group.

20. As part of the recommendations from the HARSAG work, the Scottish Government are extending this duty to all households and this came into effect from 5th May 2020.

21. This new piece of legislation makes it even more important that East Renfrewshire Council's provision of temporary accommodation is sufficient and fit for purpose

Service Design

22. The Scottish Government has introduced a new method of developing and reviewing services, known as "The Scottish Approach to Service Design".

"The vision for the Scottish Approach to Service Design is that the people of Scotland are supported and empowered to actively participate in the definition, design and delivery of their public services (from policy making to live service improvement).

23. Given the stated complexities of the navigating homeless services and given the desire of the Scottish Government to utilise a service design approach it is proposed to apply this approach to the delivery of homeless services in East Renfrewshire Council.

24. The numbers involved are relatively small. In 19/20 there were 344 homeless presentations to ERC. This means that such an approach is ideal to involve homeless households to design how services are delivered.

25. What this will mean in practice is that when we approach service users we would not only ask them about a range of services that they may have used, but involve them in how they were delivered. There is a degree of flexibility in how this could be done and a Council wide collaborative approach to the task will be adopted involving **all** departments whose services in any way relate to issues around homelessness.

26. This approach will engage not only with service users, but also with the various Council services that homeless households' access to ensure a truly corporate approach can be delivered.

27. When commencing this work a key driver will be looking at the causes of homelessness and will review the following areas:

- What key services did the household regularly engage with?
- What support services were in place?

- Do the various services have effective communication and a joined up approach driven by the needs of the household?
- Were there missed opportunities to prevent homelessness?

28. Any significant changes to service provision that are suggested in the course of the review/service redesign would be the subject of a further cabinet paper.

FINANCE AND EFFICIENCY

29. The Scottish Government set aside an overall budget of £24m to support the work of the Rapid Re-housing Transition Plans over a five year period. The budget is allocated to authorities based on annual homeless presentations. This funding will finance the work to be undertaken in East Renfrewshire Council.

CONSULTATION AND PARTNERSHIP WORKING

30. To ensure an effective and comprehensive corporate approach a working group of senior officers will be established. Each Director will be asked to nominate a representative or representatives for their service. This group will be co-ordinated and chaired by the Head of Environment (Strategic Services) who would agree the approach and review the findings. The findings of the exercise would not commit services to making any changes to their service provision but merely provide an opportunity to obtain valuable feedback from customers of their services who have been homeless.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE PROPOSALS

31. There are no immediate implications associated with this report in terms of finance, property, legal, IT, equalities and sustainability.

CONCLUSIONS

32. Whilst homelessness & rough sleeping in East Renfrewshire is lower than some of our neighbouring authorities, it still presents a significant challenge for the Council and the local community.

33. By taking a corporate and Scottish Government Service Design approach there is an opportunity to deliver services differently and based on the need of the household. There is also a significant opportunity to break the cycle of homelessness that some households find themselves in.

RECOMMENDATIONS

34. The Cabinet is asked to note the need to review the approach to addressing homelessness in East Renfrewshire and the importance of a corporate approach to tackling the issue.

Director of Environment

Further information can be obtained from: Phil Daws, Head of Environment (Strategic Services) phil.daws@eastrenfrewshire.gov.uk 0141 577 3186

Convener contact details

Councillor Danny Devlin
(Convener for Housing and Maintenance Services)

Home: 0141 580 0288
Office: 0141 577 3107/8

September 2020

BLANK PAGE

Extracts from Code of Guidance on Homelessness Guidance on legislation, policies and practices to prevent and resolve homelessness (Interim Update) November 2019 relevant to corporate responsibility for homelessness.

1.5 The Code sets out a summary of legislative duties with supporting explanation and guidance. It is principally intended for local authority staff dealing with homelessness policy and responsible for making decisions on homelessness applications. It should be emphasised, however, that a local authority's duties towards a person experiencing homelessness are corporate in nature and not solely the responsibility of the department dealing with housing. This corporate approach is a key feature of local homelessness strategies (see paragraph 2.2).

2.2 Refreshed guidance published in September 2019 to support local authorities in preparing Local Housing Strategies encourages each authority to provide information on its approach to tackling homelessness. All local authority departments and all relevant local agencies should work together to prevent homelessness occurring wherever possible. It is also vitally important that, where homelessness does occur and is being tackled, consideration is given to the factors which may cause repeat homelessness and action taken to prevent homelessness recurring. Preventing homelessness is important to alleviate the misery that homelessness causes. It also helps to prevent the additional problems that can be caused by being homeless (such as health problems, losing employment, and losing contacts with support networks). It is also important to allocate resources to preventing homelessness to reduce pressure on health, housing, social work, employment and justice services in the longer term.

CHAPTER 3 - WAYS OF WORKING

3.1 **Summary** - this chapter sets out how relevant parts of local authorities should work in partnership to deliver effective services to homeless people, and gives advice on drawing up relevant protocols on working together and sharing information. Local authorities should assess the applicant household's needs in their entirety and should work in partnership across departments and with other agencies to meet those needs, and in such a way that applicants feel valued and respected.

Partnership working

3.2 The defining characteristic of those experiencing homelessness is that they need a home, and as such they should not necessarily be regarded as a community care client group or in need of other types of support. However, it must be acknowledged that people experiencing homelessness may require housing support services, social work support, health care, assistance in rebuilding social networks and accessing employment and training opportunities and a range of other support services.

3.3 Housing departments must co-operate as necessary with other council departments and landlords and a wide range of statutory, voluntary and private sector agencies in order to ensure that the support which is required is provided. Other departments must also ensure that they deliver services and adopt policies which are consistent with the aim of preventing and tackling homelessness. Effective co-operation is particularly important when such support is required to prevent homelessness occurring in the first place or to ensure those experiencing homelessness can maintain themselves in a new home, and do not become homeless again.

3.4 Enabling the shift to prevention and supporting quick, effective responses to housing crises, will both be best served by planning and working across housing partners and the wider third and public sector responsible for supporting vulnerable people. The Ending Homelessness Together Action Plan²⁸ outlines what we can do to ensure planning and

resources are joined up around a person-centred approach, keeping the needs of the people the services are for at the forefront and talking more with each other about how to end homelessness and rough sleeping.

3.5 Local authorities should ensure that there is provision for joint training approaches which involve all sectors and providers with a role to play in delivering the homelessness strategy (see paragraph 2.2). As a minimum, training should cover the definition of homelessness, risk assessment techniques to help "first-to-know" agencies to respond effectively, needs assessment, support packages, consultation techniques, information sharing and how to help and empower homeless people to find appropriate solutions. All partners should be involved in jointly assessing training needs and arranging for these needs to be met.

3.6 Homelessness strategies should also provide for the development and agreement of inter-agency protocols, particularly where these are necessary to clarify arrangements for preventing homelessness. Such protocols should cover basic contact details, information sharing and procedures for swift communication of any new developments (e.g. new legislation) alongside more detailed information regarding operational practices. The implementation of these protocols should be monitored in order that they can be revised if necessary. All protocols and partnerships should be periodically evaluated.

3.7 All protocols, and wider arrangements, should take account of the need to develop an information sharing regime which preserves client confidentiality and complies with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), without erecting barriers to timely action to help homeless people.

3.8 Local authorities and partners should work towards establishing a common definition of vulnerability in order to ensure that all the needs of the household can be met. However agencies should also be aware that partners may be working to different legislative definitions for certain aspects of their work. Whilst every attempt should be made to take a flexible approach, and to find a solution which best meets the need of the homeless household, agencies should be aware that these differences may affect the criteria used in different assessments.

3.9 All partners should also be involved in monitoring implementation of the homelessness strategy and should be represented on any fora established for this purpose.

4.3 Initial identification of homelessness or threatened homelessness may be via the housing department or other routes such as social work or youth services. Local authorities have a corporate responsibility towards the applicant to ensure they are helped appropriately and effectively, and all relevant departments must play a part in discharging this responsibility. Chapter 3 of this Code gives guidance on how different parts of local authorities should work together.