

Consultation Document

Six Priorities for Homelessness Strategy 2020-2025

Background

Local Housing Authorities are required to review and refresh their Homeless Strategies every five years and consult with partners following a homeless review of the local area.

The below priorities are proposed following a detailed evidence review of homelessness within Stafford Borough. Nationally there is a lot of publicity about there being a crisis in housing supply, this isn't acute in Stafford due to recent strong delivery of housing however the Borough is facing other issues that need to be addressed, many of which are reflected nationally. It is noted that Stafford is not a stock holding authority for social housing and is therefore reliant on working closely with partners to prevent and relieve homelessness. There are working relationships with private sector landlords and letting agents within the Borough that are developing however this remains a challenge with market rents exceeding local housing allowance rates and a general reluctance in the private sector to rent to tenants in receipt of benefits.

The priorities recognise that provision of social housing is often not the principal driving force behind homelessness. Some households are either losing tenancies, or are unable to access accommodation, due to unaddressed support needs. Support needs of households are being assessed as too high for much of the existing accommodation provision meaning landlords are often unwilling to give them a tenancy, but too low to meet the criteria for statutory support.

The below priorities look to address these issues with existing resources available within the Borough.

1. Early Intervention

Stafford Borough Council are committed to homeless prevention and the importance of early intervention in order to reduce the cost impact of homelessness on both individual households and public sector services. The Housing Options Team have demonstrated this commitment by achieving

Gold Standard for homeless prevention awarded by the National Practitioners Support Service.

Stafford Borough Council will work with core partners to understand the root cause of homelessness and help identify hidden homelessness within the Borough. The Housing Options Team work closely with partners and community groups to upstream homeless prevention, as demonstrated by well attended joint workshops and forums hosted by the Borough Council and a programme of awareness raising with key partners on what the role of the Options Team is and how partners can work with us to help achieve our objectives. The roll out of Universal Credit in Stafford has presented an opportunity to upstream homeless prevention by further developing partner relationships with the Job Centre Plus, landlords, the Benefits Service and the Citizen's Advice Bureau with a focus on providing households with support to transition onto the new benefit, with clear pathways to housing advice where appropriate. Our approach to Universal Credit has been mirrored by our work with local foodbanks where the Housing Options Team chair a Forum which aims to coordinate local foodbanks with a view to ensuring households who may be at risk of homelessness can access core services at the earliest opportunity.

This approach recognises the wider impact of homelessness, particularly in relation to health and wellbeing, and is part of our commitment to empowering individuals and building resilient communities within Stafford.

2. Engagement

The Housing Options Team work with individuals and households to prevent or relieve their homelessness through the use of personalised housing plans. For this to be successful we must have the engagement of the individuals and households that we are working with which can often be difficult when we are dealing with high pressure, crisis situations and increased presentations from households with multiple and complex needs, who often have a mistrust of public services.

Stafford Borough Council is proud to promote a person centred Housing Options Service that treats individuals with compassion, understanding and empathy as demonstrated by our commitment to face-to-face interviews.

Every household who approaches as homeless or threatened with homelessness is provided with an holistic housing needs assessment and interactive personalised housing plan that provides clear advice and empowers personal responsibility for an individual's housing and support needs. We encourage individuals to share the plan with relevant partner agencies such as children's services, job centre plus, the Citizens Advice Bureau and any community groups they are working with. The Housing

Options Team will proactively work with partners and value their input to fully develop personalised housing plans with an aim of securing and sustaining long term sustainable accommodation.

3. Clear Pathways out of Street Homelessness

Stafford Borough Council is committed to making even more progress in tackling rough sleeping within the Borough. The Housing Options Team recognise that housing need for rough sleepers is often a manifestation of complex support needs that must be addressed for accommodation offers to be sustainable. The Community Matron for the Homeless is pivotal in highlighting the complex support needs of rough sleepers and provides clear pathways into mental health services, amongst others, whilst linking closely with the Housing Options Team. This role has been supported by Housing First funding which provides eight units of accommodation with specialist support for entrenched rough sleepers in Stafford.

Partner agencies within Stafford have demonstrated their commitment to providing clear pathways out of street homelessness through the establishment of the Stafford Inclusion Team which is a multi-agency drop in where rough sleepers can access core service, without the requirement for appointments or referrals. The Inclusion Team is supported by Stafford and Rural Homes, the police, drug and alcohol services, mental health services and the Job Centre Plus amongst others. The work is supported by the Vulnerabilities HUB which maintains a weekly named list of rough sleepers within the Borough.

The Housing Options Team runs a drop- in service with dedicated officers available to assist those who would be roofless that night. Fortnightly walk throughs of Stafford town see the Options Team working in partnership with the town centre police to further encourage individuals to access housing services.

4. Robust Partnerships

It is widely recognised that no single organisation can prevent or relieve homelessness. Addressing the underlying causes of homelessness and working closely with relevant partners is pivotal to the success of the Housing Options Team. The Housing Options Team has well established partner relationships with core agencies within the Borough, as demonstrated by the Homeless Forum. It is a priority for Stafford Borough Council that these relationships continue to develop and strengthen in order to ensure the Borough is best equipped to deal with the changing pressures of homelessness.

In Stafford, robust partnerships are particularly important as the Council does not own housing stock. Additionally, Stafford is part of the two-tier local government system where responsibility is shared between the Borough and the County Council. It is essential that robust partnerships function at both an operational and strategic level and that there are clear pathways of housing and support for individuals accessing services. The Housing Options Team has demonstrated the success of this approach through our nomination agreements with local registered providers and our success in obtaining and sustaining long term social sector tenancies for vulnerable households.

5. Expanding Options to Prevent and Relieve Homelessness in Stafford.

Stafford Borough Council is committed to providing suitable housing options for all individuals or households who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. It is recognised that this may extend beyond the provision of housing and can include tools to prevent homelessness such as mediation, referrals for benefit and debt advice or alternative options that will allow a household to remain in their current accommodation, where it is safe and reasonable to do so.

Stafford Borough Council promotes the best use of housing stock and has entered into nomination agreements with registered providers which allows for direct offers of accommodation for households on our waiting list. Stafford Borough Council developed and reviewed the Allocation Policy in 2017 which has been successful in assisting us to prevent and relieve homelessness for vulnerable households within the Borough. Following the implementation of the Homeless Reduction Act and current demand for the service (as outlined in the Evidence Review), the following changes are being proposed to that Allocation Policy, these changes are highlighted in red below:

Band	Criteria	Examples of Need
Band A	Emergency Priority	<p>Homeless applicants owed a main housing duty (Section 193(2) duty) who are priority need and not intentionally homeless.</p> <p>Applicants who are homeless and are owed the relief duty (Section 189B duty) and would be owed, or be likely to be owed, the main housing duty (Section 193(2) duty) when the relief duty comes to an end because they are or would be likely to be priority need and unintentionally homeless.</p> <p>Medical Emergency</p>

		<p>Households unable to remain in their current property due to domestic abuse where a move within/ to Stafford Borough would resolve their safety issues.</p> <p>Households unable to remain in their current property due to fire or flood.</p>
Band B	Urgent Need to Move	<p>Homeless applicants who are owed the Section 189B Relief Duty for as long as that duty is owed to the applicant, and they would not be owed, or are unlikely to be owed, the main housing duty (section 193(2) duty).</p> <p>Applicants who have been accepted through the Move – On Protocol (from supported accommodation).</p> <p>Applicants whose current housing situation is having a serious detrimental impact on their health so that they require re-housing based on medical grounds.</p> <p>Applicants whose current living conditions have been assessed as unsuitable or unsafe for them to continue to occupy by Housing Standards.</p> <p>Applicants who are overcrowded by two or more bedrooms.</p> <p>Applicants who are under occupying by two or more bedrooms.</p> <p>Injured members of the armed forces or their bereaved spouses, such injury incurred through active service.</p>
Band C	High Housing Need	<p>Applicants who are owed a Section 195 Prevention Duty for as long as that duty is owed to the applicant.</p> <p>Applicants who have entered into agreements to live with family and friends for a minimum period of six months whilst they find alternative accommodation.</p> <p>Applicants who are sharing facilities, such as a kitchen or bathroom following an offer of accommodation from the local authority and/ or where the applicant has medical, care or support needs that require self-contained accommodation.</p>

		<p>Those overcrowded and short of one bedroom.</p> <p>Those under occupying by one bedroom.</p> <p>Applicants approved as foster or adoptive parents who need to move to facilitate the placement of a child/ children.</p>
Band D	No/ Low Housing Need	<p>Applicants living separately with ex-partners following a non-violent relationship breakdown.</p> <p>Those who have outstanding debts to a landlord and who have not entered into or are not adhering to a payment plan</p> <p>Those who have deliberately worsened their housing situation, or have been found intentionally homeless.</p>

NB: Definitions for Homeless duties:

Section 193(2) Main Housing Duty – Duty on the local authority to find suitable accommodation for households who are eligible for assistance, homeless, priority need, not intentionally homeless and have a local connection to the Borough.

Section 189(B) Relief Duty – Duty on the local authority to take reasonable steps to find suitable accommodation for households who are homeless and have a local connection to the Borough. This duty does not take into account priority need or intentionality. The duty lasts for a period of 56 days, or until suitable accommodation is found. If suitable accommodation has not been found the local housing authority must make a decision as to whether to accept the main housing duty, or whether to find the household intentionally homeless.

Section 195 Prevention Duty – Duty on the local authority to take reasonable steps to secure accommodation for a reasonable period of time for households who are threatened with homelessness. This duty does not take into account priority need, intentionality or local connection. The duty last for 56 days, or until accommodation has been secured for a reasonable period of time. If the applicant becomes homeless, we must make a decision as to whether to accept a relief duty.

The above changes reflect current data that demonstrate a blockage of individuals in Band B. It also reflects current causes of homelessness and should allow more flexibility for households and encourage the use of entry level accommodation (i.e. supported accommodation and house shares in the private rented sector) as a starting block for single households, reducing pressure on both temporary accommodation and one bedroom properties. It also provides households who are living with family and friends the option to negotiate an extended stay to plan a move rather than present as homeless.

Other areas have been updated to allow for more flexibility under the policy and to promote best use of housing stock.

Stafford Borough Council recognise the importance of supported accommodation, for those individuals and households who would not be able to sustain a tenancy independently. The Council are committed to reviewing both bed spaces and levels of support provided in the existing supported accommodation in Stafford.

Access to the private rented sector remains challenging, with a growing disparity between market rent and local housing allowance making properties unaffordable for households in receipt of income-based benefits. Landlord perception is also a challenge with some landlords having blanket policies which refuse to let to households in receipt of Housing Benefit, particularly Universal Credit. The Housing Options Team have responded to these challenges by developing a Private Sector Toolkit that provides Landlords and Letting Agents with a variety of options to reduce perceived financial, and other, risks of letting to low income or vulnerable households.

The continued delivery of suitable affordable accommodation remains a Council priority and is essential in tackling homelessness.

6. Sustainment

The most successful outcome for the Housing Option Team is to enable households to live in long term sustainable homes. This requires a detailed assessment of circumstances that may go beyond statutory assessments of suitability. Stafford Borough Council recognises that a stable home enables people to access support services, integrate into their local community and obtain and sustain training and employment. It is important that offers of accommodation meet the support needs of households in order to promote long- term accommodation options.

The Housing Options Team fund a Tenancy Sustainment Officer who provides practical advice and support to help the most vulnerable households to achieve long term sustainable homes. Support packages are tailored to the individual and can include practical solutions such as taking individuals to appointments, accessing benefit services and applying for grants for white goods or furniture. This approach has been successful in sustaining accommodation and encouraging individuals to take personal responsibility for their home.