

TENANTS' FORUM	Agenda Item
Thursday 9th November 2017	6i

HOMELESSNESS - UPDATE

To provide Members with an update on homelessness across the Borough and to advise of action being taken by the Council in response to the demand from homeless households.

INTRODUCTION

In common with local authorities across the country, the Council has seen a dramatic increase in homelessness over the past three to four years. This has been the result of a combination of factors:

- Rising house prices with home ownership being increasingly unaffordable for households on average incomes.
- An increase in evictions by private landlords caused by a rising rental market, a freeze in Local Housing Allowances and taxation changes affecting buy-to-let landlords.
- Reductions in funding for new affordable homes.
- The impact of welfare reform on low income households
- Cuts in Supporting People funding resulting in the closure of supported housing projects

As a result of these pressures, we are experiencing unprecedented demand for our services:

- Applications from homeless households have risen dramatically from 121 in 2014/15 to 391 in 2017/18.
- In the current financial year up to the end of September we have received 494 homelessness approaches – an average of 80 per month.
- Our use of temporary accommodation has increased significantly with 164 households in temporary accommodation on October 22. This compares to 24 at the end of March 2014 and 81 at the end of March 2017.
- Around 150 households are now applying to join the Keyways housing register every month.
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The demands on our service increased significantly with the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 in April. There is now a requirement for more in-depth casework and face-to-face interviews with a far greater number of customers in an effort to prevent homelessness.

THE COUNCIL'S APPROACH TO MANAGING HOMELESSNESS

In the face of unprecedented demand, the Council has taken action over a number of areas in order to provide a high-quality and responsive housing options service to customers whilst minimising the financial impact on the Council.

Our Housing Options team works with all homeless people providing advice and assistance to prevent or relieve homelessness. We also organise and chair the Kettering Homeless Action Partnership attended by more than 20 partner agencies.

Housing Options Staff Resources

Staffing capacity within the Housing Options team has been reviewed with the aim of ensuring that the Council can respond effectively in those areas where we are under particular pressure and where there are new and emerging challenges.

Following this review, the following new posts have been established within the Housing Options and Keyways teams:

- 2 x Senior Housing Options Advisor
- 2 x Housing Options Advisor
- 1 x Accommodation Officer
- 1 x Lettings Officer
- 1 x Apprentice

In recruiting to the posts, preference was given to candidates who possessed excellent customer service skills and had the ability to be innovative and proactive at work. Staff have been recruited to these posts and, following an induction programme, are now all operational.

The investment in new staff is helping us to reduce spending on temporary accommodation and agency staff, reduce rent loss through shorter void times and improve customer service.

Rough sleeping

Our Housing Options team will respond to any reports of street homelessness and encourage individual rough sleepers to work with us. The Council's Environmental Wardens also liaise closely with the Housing Options team, reporting rough sleeping and signposting individuals to relevant services.

In addition, we employ two Transitions Officers who specialise in assisting single homeless people and particularly those that are rough sleeping and who have substance misuse, mental health and/or offending behaviour issues. They are able to provide more intensive support to address housing and related support needs, and have access to units of supported accommodation across the north of the county.

The Council also works with Safe Until Daylight Community Interest Company to provide an extended winter provision night shelter for rough sleepers. The council

provided funding to help set up the facility in the winter of 2017, and is currently working with Safe Until Daylight to finalise arrangements for 2018's facility.

As part of our Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) the Council will ensure that any rough sleeper, regardless of eligibility, is accommodated during periods of extreme weather conditions.

Homelessness Reduction Act 2017

We have developed and implemented a Homelessness Reduction Act project plan which involved reviewing our homeless prevention policies, processes and staff training needs.

Local voluntary organisations were briefed in advance of the Act being implemented through meetings of the Kettering Homelessness Action Partnership.

A briefing session for public sector agencies on the Duty to Refer is being arranged for late November in collaboration with the Health and Wellbeing Board. This will enable agencies such as social services, probation, the NHS and jobcentres to notify the Council when they believe a service user is homeless or threatened with homelessness.

Acquisition of Temporary Accommodation

The Council is acquiring more than 30 properties on the open market for use as temporary accommodation. This will enable us to provide accommodation that is better located and of a higher standard than is generally available. We will also be investing cash in a Council owned asset rather than seeing money flow out of the authority to providers of nightly paid accommodation. To date we have purchased 13 properties within the Borough and are in the course of acquiring another 8 properties, also within the Borough.

We are also reviewing our portfolio of nightly paid accommodation to ensure that it continues to meet our needs in terms of location, suitability and cost.

Ensuring that our policies are fit for purpose

The Keyways housing allocations scheme has been reviewed so that statutory homeless households are given priority and rehoused more quickly.

A temporary accommodation policy has been devised to ensure that the needs and preferences of customers are taken into account when allocating temporary accommodation.

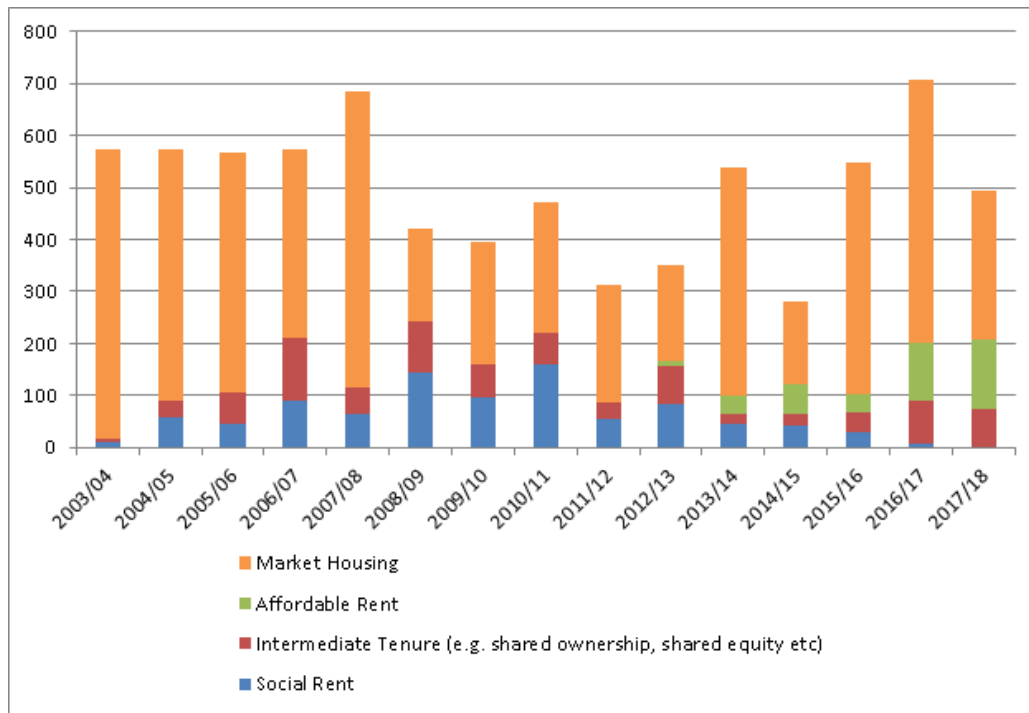
Maximising housing supply

Although the Council is taking action on various fronts to manage homelessness and assist homeless households at the point of crisis, there is also a need to maximise the supply of affordable housing for local people. We are taking action across several areas of activity to increase housing supply:

- Working with housing associations to build new affordable homes

- Building new council housing
- Reducing the number of void properties in the council housing stock.

Table 1 - Development of Affordable Homes 2003/04 – 2017/18



John Conway
Head of Housing
 8 November 2018