

REPORT TO: Executive Board

DATE: 19th November 2020

REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director, People Directorate

PORTFOLIO: Physical Environment

SUBJECT: Eligibility criteria for the Council's Housing and Homelessness Services during the Covid-19 pandemic

WARD(S) Borough-wide

1.0 **PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

1.1 This Report describes changes to the eligibility criteria for accessing housing and homelessness support that were made as a result of delegated powers to the chief executive during the Coronavirus pandemic. It considers the impact and implications of these changes and seeks approval for an extension of new arrangements.

2.0 **RECOMMENDATION: That:**

- i) **Executive Board note the contents of this Report and**
- ii) **Consider the recommendation in paragraph 3.3.3 of this Report to continue with the current approach to determining homelessness eligibility, subject to a review towards the end of the year**

3.0 **SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

3.1 **Context:**

3.1.1 Under normal circumstances, Local Authorities have a duty to provide temporary accommodation to people who have a priority need, as defined by legislation. The categories of people who fall within this priority needs are:

- Pregnant women
- People with dependent children who live with them
- A person who is deemed vulnerable
- All 16- and 17-year-olds
- A person under the age of 21 who is a former care leaver or foster child

- 3.1.2 The plight of rough sleepers around the country had already drawn the attention of central government, which had pledged to ensure that enough services and supports were available across the country to reduce and potentially eliminate the need for people to sleep rough. Rough sleeping is the extreme end of a spectrum of housing need, and the approach of central government has been to ensure that services and supports are in place to reduce the risk of people reaching that far end of the spectrum.
- 3.1.3 At the start of the lockdown period of the pandemic, central government announced that all local authorities should continue with the statutory eligibility criteria for services but also adopt an approach of supporting all people who approach housing and homelessness services for help, irrespective of their priority need. This meant that, although those in priority need would continue to be supported as before, there was now an additional layer of support for a wider group of vulnerable people that was needed.
- 3.1.4 In accordance with this “all-in” approach, Halton chief executive used his delegated powers to agree this change in eligibility. A similar approach has been agreed across the rest of the Liverpool City Region, with a further review to take place at the end of the year. Six months have now passed and the guidance has not changed; this Report seeks approval to extend the changed eligibility criteria for a further period, as described below.

3.2 **Impact of the change in eligibility:**

- 3.2.1 Understandably, the widening of the eligibility criteria has resulted in substantially more direct involvement with people who would not otherwise have been deemed eligible for services, and in particular a considerable number of single homeless people who would previously have been given advice and support, but who would not have fallen within the statutory duty to be accommodated. These additional people are regarded internally as “Covid placements”, and it should be noted that these placements are on top of the placements made of people who fit the statutory priority need criteria.
- 3.2.2 By 19th October 2020, 128 Covid placements had been made. More recently, the imposition of Tier 3 Covid restrictions on the area has led to a further increase in demand for support and placements; this seems to be because of “sofa surfers” (people who are essentially homeless but who sleep in the homes of friends or family on a temporary basis). The Tier 3 regulations about people staying in other people’s homes, with the additional fear of transmission of the illness, meant that many people no longer had the option of staying with others, and therefore had no choice other than to present themselves as homeless.

- 3.2.3 This has then created the problem of how to manage this increased level of demand. Existing services had been set up on the basis of a generally known local demand, which, although stretched at times, was adequate. Existing service provision quickly filled up, and it became necessary to place a number of people in hotel accommodation, sometimes some distance away (many local hotels had shut because of the lockdown restrictions), which increased their risks of exposure to coronavirus through travelling on public transport. At any one time, there are still around 14 people staying in temporary hotel accommodation, although most of these are now placed more locally.
- 3.2.4 Other service provision had to be put in place. Some mothballed units at Grangeway Court were reinstated; a new scheme at Columba Hall in Widnes was put in place on a short-term basis, allowing placements of people with less complex needs; local private landlords were contacted to see if they could help; other currently commissioned services also expanded their provision.
- 3.2.5 All this has come at a cost. Around £150,000 has been committed to these Covid-related expenditures, including payments of hotel costs, refurbishment of the mothballed units, acquisition of furniture for new placements and funding of additional placements in existing commissioned services. Some of this has been recouped by Housing Benefit payments, and much of it has been badged against the national Covid payments from central government. However it is likely that there will be a substantial financial shortfall at the end of the year because of the impact of the coronavirus on homelessness provision.

3.3 **Discussion and Recommendation:**

- 3.3.1 The thrust of current government policy is now to support people to move on from their homeless accommodation into more permanent settings, and to return to a more normal approach to the delivery of housing and homelessness services. For their part, central government had previously ordered an embargo on evictions of people in rented properties, and this embargo has now been lifted; although the impact of this is not likely to appear for some months (there will be a time-lag because of the time it takes to get eviction cases through court), it is likely that this will further increase the numbers of people across the country who will present themselves as homeless.
- 3.3.2 The question, therefore, is whether it is appropriate to continue to offer a wider eligibility of access to homelessness support, or whether we should return to a stricter statutory definition of homelessness eligibility as described in paragraph 3.1.1 above. If the wider definition is to continue to be used, then this will result in substantial additional costs to the local authority. Equally, it will

ensure that many of the more vulnerable people in our area will continue to receive support.

3.3.3 At this stage, given the recent placement of Halton into Tier 3 of the coronavirus restrictions, and the subsequent announcement of a further national lockdown, it would seem to be inappropriate to tighten the approach that we have taken to supporting local residents who are homeless. Across the country, some 15,000 homeless people were found at least temporary accommodation during the last lockdown; a recent article in The Lancet found that over 260 lives were saved as a result. As winter approaches, it seems that the coronavirus will become more widespread, and it is those who are homeless, or facing potential homelessness, who will be amongst the most vulnerable to the illness.

3.3.4 The approach taken by the other local authorities in the LCR is to continue with this wider definition at least until the end of this year, and then review its need over the longer-term. It is therefore recommended that we adopt a similar approach in Halton, although given the current situation with covid-19, this review should take place at the end of the financial year, rather than the calendar year.

3.3.5 The key issue will be the extent to which the national Covid restrictions imposed on Halton are relaxed. If and when Halton reaches the stage of moving back to Tier 2 restrictions (or, hopefully, lower), then we may have to adopt a more nuanced approach to eligibility, to take account of the extent to which the behaviours of some individuals have contributed to their homelessness. This would be the subject of a further Report to the Executive Board before any such decision were taken.

4.0 **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 There are no policy implications arising from this Report.

5.0 **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 The financial implications are as described in paragraph 3.2.5 of this Report.

6.0 **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES**

6.1 **Children & Young People in Halton:** children and young people, and any families where children are dependents, have always been a priority need for temporary accommodation, and this has not changed under the local amendments to the eligibility criteria. All children and families who have needed temporary accommodation during the period of the pandemic have been provided with this.

6.2 **Employment, Learning & Skills in Halton:** there are no

implications for employment, learning and skills in Halton arising from this Report.

6.3 **A Healthy Halton:** people who are at risk of homelessness, and rough sleepers in particular, frequently have complex lives and multiple problems, including addictions and health problems. People in this position have generally been regarded as being vulnerable, which has placed them within the priority for support, and the changes to the eligibility criteria have not changed this.

6.4 **A Safer Halton:** there are no direct implications for a Safer Halton arising from this Report.

6.5 **Halton's Urban Renewal:** there are no implications for Halton's urban renewal arising from this Report.

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

7.1 The financial risk of continuing with the current approach to determining eligibility for homelessness service has been described above. It is likely that there will be a considerable financial shortfall as a result of adopting this approach.

7.2 This should be balanced, however, against the impact of changing the approach on individual Halton residents, many of whom may have no options available to them for support. There are real risks that more people could become homeless and potentially may have to become rough sleepers; in itself this increases the risks to their health and the potential for them to become infected with Covid-19. The provision of a managed approach to this unique situation can potentially mitigate some of these health risks and reduce the potential for additional coronavirus infection in the borough.

8.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

Document	Place of Inspection	Contact Officer
Homelessness (Priority Need for Accommodation) (England) Order 2002	Through Contact Officer	Lindsay Smith
Letter to Local Authority Chief Executives from Luke Hall MP, May 2020	Through Contact Officer	Lindsay Smith
Letter to Local Authority Council Leaders and Chief Executives from Kelly Tolhurst MP, October 2020	Through Contact Officer	Lindsay Smith