

# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HOMELESSNESS IN PLYMOUTH

Update Report for Performance, Finance and Customer Focus Overview and Scrutiny Committee



## 1. Background

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, the impact on housing and homelessness has been significant; from needing to rapidly accommodate our most vulnerable rough sleepers who are at greater risk of infection, to continuing 'business as usual', creating outbreak guidance to enable support work to continue safely in a range of accommodation settings.

It is recognised that in a time of crisis, people are often more vulnerable and there is a need to ensure the right support is available at the right time to prevent homelessness wherever possible; this is true even more so at the present time.

This report will:-

- Describe what impact COVID-19 has had on homelessness in the city
- Briefly discuss the links to unemployment and homelessness
- Provide performance data around homelessness
- Outline the gap between housing benefit payment and private landlord rent
- Share our mitigation plans as a city for homelessness.

## 2. COVID-19 and homelessness

Pre-Covid, Plymouth was well placed to meet needs of those at risk of homelessness and rough sleeping. In partnership with The Plymouth Alliance and through utilising Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) Rough Sleeper Initiative (RSI) funding, the number of people placed in emergency accommodation had significantly reduced (under 20) and those rough sleeping were in the minority (8).

However, in March the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID 19 a global pandemic. It was expected that the implications of Coronavirus would have an impact on the number of households presenting as homeless for a number of reasons including:

- Those staying temporarily with friends/ sofa surfing being asked to leave
- Those refusing to abide by the parameters set out by the Government required to move out of their current home/ accommodation as a result of the homeowner wanting to protect themselves/their family from COVID 19
- An increase in relationship breakdown.

In addition to those sleeping rough, the government also announced on the 26th March that those who were vulnerably housed in shared dormitory style accommodation should be re-settled into single room facilities within a small number of days. This meant that an additional 19 people who were accommodated within our Winter Provision and Safesleep shared provision needed to be re-settled into alternative appropriate accommodation.

In response to this 'Everyone In directive', a 12 bed and a 14 bed house were leased by The Plymouth Alliance for three months in the first instance to accommodate those in Winter Provision (12 beds) and Safesleep (10 beds), as well as those rough sleeping. These houses are referred to as Houses for Homeless (H4H) and were opened on Tuesday 31st March. Winter Provision and Safesleep closed during the week commencing 23rd March and there is no longer any dormitory style accommodation within the temporary accommodation portfolio. The night staff from Winter Provision, and other staff from across the Plymouth Alliance are providing 24 hour support at the H4H houses.

Every person housed in temporary accommodation in response to COVID has an individualised assessment (which also takes into account their health needs). By August, 213 individuals had accessed accommodation under COVID and had Individual Move On Housing Health and Care Needs plans. In line with the MHCLG guidance provided:-

- 21% were assessed as high support need
- 41% were assessed as medium support need
- 38% were assessed as low support need

This data has been used to inform our accommodation response and mitigation plans.

A further 54 bed places (taking the total additional units to 81) were commissioned across Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMO) accommodation delivered by the Plymouth Alliance to meet demand. To support this, 5 additional complex needs staff were recruited for an initial 6 months to better meet need and this has enabled these additional units to be delivered.

Despite this, demand on statutory (673 approaches) and non-statutory (161) placements meant that demand was not met and B and B has increased to 74 as at 21<sup>st</sup> September.

There is limited supported move on in the City and this was bed blocked due to COVID with lack of access to Private Rented sector (PRS) or Registered provider (RP) accommodation for permanent move on. However, even with this challenge, since July we have successfully moved 69 people out of our temporary move on accommodation into more permanent homes.

## 2i. Rough Sleepers

For people who are street homeless, a multi-agency response is in place with the Rough Sleeper Outreach Team (RSOT), Community Connections and the Access to Accommodation Hub (A2A):-

- RSOT – those newly evidenced rough sleeping via early morning outreach are engaged with, given initial triage assessment by RSOT and, where relevant, given same day appointment to see Community Connections team
- RSOT supports existing rough sleepers who will not access accommodation, offering drop-in (currently outside) for access to accommodation, reconnection, specific support and access to other services
- Community Connections - triage, offer homeless application, confirm homelessness status, and arrange B and B where appropriate. (RSOT and Community Connections first look at supported accommodation.)
- The Access to Accommodation (A2A) Hub manages accommodation voids and flow into accommodation/out of B and B, i.e. aiming to move people out of B&B, even if just into more appropriate, potentially supported temporary accommodation
- Support for rough sleepers therefore transfers from RSOT on the street to support staff once accommodated. The most complex are taken on by the MARS (Multi-Agency Rough Sleeper) team, for intensive support.

As a result of 'Everyone In' it has been identified that there are a small number of rough sleepers who will not and/or cannot access supported accommodation. We are seeking to address this by providing an overnight shelter during the winter months by providing overnight sleep rooms (please see mitigation plans).

## 2ii. Homeless day service

At the same time as implementing the 'Everyone in' directive, the decision was made to close Shekinah homeless drop in centre once all rough sleepers had an offer of accommodation as, while open, the day centre remained a place for congregation contrary to the social distancing and self-

isolation measures. An exit strategy to re-open the day centre in a COVID safe way is in development; this is likely to be a different offer to the model previously provided, as the aspiration will be to continue to support rough sleepers whether in accommodation or not. The day centre kitchen is being used to provide one hot meal per day to H4H residents. The Soup Run continues to support with food for those most in need across the City (including the H4H houses) and is operated in keeping within social distancing and hygiene measures.

### **2iii. Evictions**

The government has introduced additional legislation to support renters during this period. This has meant that:

- Emergency legislation has increased notice periods to 6 months until at least the end of March 2021
- Evictions will not be enforced in local lockdown areas and there will be a truce on enforcement over Christmas
- £180 million of government funding for Discretionary Housing Payments is available for local authorities to support vulnerable renters this year. Plymouth's allocation is £2,574,999, to be spent by the end of the financial year. Further information can be found: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/919743/COVID-19\\_Council\\_Tax\\_Hardship\\_Fund\\_Guidance.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/919743/COVID-19_Council_Tax_Hardship_Fund_Guidance.pdf)

Routine Homelessness prevention work through the Plymouth Alliance and Community Connections continues during this period. However, now the courts having started processing eviction procedures again from the 21<sup>st</sup> September we are anticipating an increase in homelessness presentations.

### **3. COVID Accommodation learning**

Appreciative enquiry carried out with those accommodated through the 'Everyone in' directive has told us that people being given accommodation was the most positive thing that had happened. The second most common response was that they felt supported and that the 'best of humanity' had been shown, highlighting that they:

- Felt safer
- Re-engaged with family and friends
- Improved their hygiene levels
- Stopped drinking

The learning from COVID has meant there is a commitment to support those brought in to move on in a supported and sustainable way (see mitigation plans) and to try to increase access to more permanent accommodation for those with complex needs.

The need to respond quickly to the 'Everyone In' directive, accommodating some of the most complex and entrenched rough sleepers has also provided valuable learning in respect of the challenges this can bring. A multi-agency approach has been employed, including the voice of the community, to ensure the residents and the community are best supported moving forwards.

### **4. Unemployment and homelessness**

The data available to us does not enable us to identify those claimants who are homeless. However, data gathered from the Office of National Statistics shows the following:

**JSA/UC - Claimant count by sex**

Date	Female	Male	Total	Monthly % Increase	Increase from Jan 2020
January 2020	2,205	3,305	5,510		
February 2020	2,345	3,530	5,875	6.6%	6.6%
March 2020	2,280	3,510	5,790	-1.4%	5.1%
April 2020	3,665	5,890	9,555	65.0%	73.4%
May 2020	4,085	6,825	10,910	14.2%	98.0%
June 2020	3,990	6,400	10,390	-4.8%	88.6%
July 2020	4,090	6,615	10,705	3.0%	94.3%
August 2020	4,290	6,730	11,020	2.9%	100%

These figures suggest that claims have doubled since pre-COVID periods in January-March 2020. It would be reasonable to assume that there are links between the increases in both homelessness and unemployment.

**5. Performance Data**

Data for the period 01/04/2020 – 31st August 2020

- HRA taken = 1178 (22% increase during same period last year)
- B&B placements arranged (please note this is not households) = 361 (29% increase on same period last year)
- Housing solutions found to end prevention and relief duties = 351 (3% decrease on same period last year) based on average outcomes so far we are forecasted to have overall 23% decrease on last year
- Devon Home Choice Application = 2940 (35% increase on same period last year)

Temporary Accommodation - As of 2nd September 2020

- 208 households in statutory temporary accommodation of which 66 households which included 134 children in total (for the same period in 2019 there were 170 households in statutory temporary accommodation of which 61 households which included 121 children in total, plus 2 pregnancies)
- 59 households provided non statutory temporary accommodation.

Rough sleeping

- Over the last three years the number of rough sleeper figures counted at the official November rough sleeper count have decreased as follows:
  - 2019: 19
  - 2018: 23
  - 2017: 26
- The next official count is due in November 2020.

- On the 21<sup>st</sup> September there were 10 people evidenced rough sleeping by the Rough Sleeper Outreach Team, broken down as follows:
  - 1 who has refused the offer of accommodation
  - 7 have lost accommodation provided due to behaviour in their accommodation
  - 2 have accommodation provided but fail to use it
- All remain supported by the Plymouth Alliance to move away from rough sleeping and into suitable accommodation.

These figures demonstrate the challenges of accommodating rough sleepers due to the complexity of need.

## 6. Housing benefit and private rented accommodation

This data has been extracted from the Office of National Statistics published data on rental figures by Local Authority area. These figures show that the Local Housing Allowance rates for 2020-21 have increased in response to COVID, although we cannot tell the extent to which local renting rates may have also increased in parallel.

Private rental market figures Plymouth			
	ONS 2019-20 Mean rental cost in Plymouth	LHA Rates 2019- 20	LHA Rates 2020- 21
Room	£95.31	71.21	73.5
Studio	£102.46	94.16	103.56
1 bed	£120.00	94.16	103.56
2 bed	£150.69	122.36	134.63
3 bed	£176.08	145.43	159.95
4 bed	£283.15	182.45	195.62

Feedback from local social landlords confirms that rent rates have risen at least in line with the increased LHA rates, however, they are still significantly below mean rental costs.

## 7. Mitigation plans

The Plymouth Plan is our overarching strategic plan for the city which sets the shared strategic direction of the city for the long-term future. It outlines our Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping in Plymouth 2019 - 2024 strategy which confirms our commitment to reduce rough sleeping in Plymouth.

Following the outbreak of Covid-19, Plymouth City Council has developed its plan for the City's recovery. Our Resurgam programme prioritises a recovery that will 'minimise inequality and support individuals and communities' and includes the reset ambition: 'homeless people are housed in appropriate accommodation, have their needs fully met and as few people return to the streets as possible'

In addition, the Plymouth Alliance has a COVID Accommodation Strategy and a broader Alliance wide Reset Strategy which makes the following commitments:

- Nobody will return to rough sleeping following the pandemic (and we will no longer use dormitory style accommodation)

- We will continually strive to reach the point of no longer using bed and breakfast as emergency accommodation
- Everyone in will receive an offer of accommodation and appropriate support
- There will be no return to business as usual (health & homelessness elements continue as interdependencies).

## 7i. Next Steps Accommodation Programme

In support of these commitments, Plymouth bid for £491,780 funding from the revenue stream of the MHCLG Next Steps Accommodation Programme. As a result, we have been awarded £381,780 revenue funding until March 2021. The plans contained within the bid align with the Plymouth Alliance revised accommodation strategy and action plan to acquire more quality homes as individual units for move on; and bringing on new smaller units for those requiring immediate housing and support. The wider support that the Plymouth Alliance provides, working in partnership with Plymouth City Council, will supplement this accommodation and the additional support hours required are critical to ensuring we have the right level of support for this group of people who have traditionally been furthest away from our services.

### Revenue funding

The funding will enable us to support 132 people through:

- Addressing financial bad debt accrued from damage and non-payment of rent/service charge on the additional properties
- Creating 47 bed spaces until March 2020 by:
  - Extending our H4H properties model with funding for 6 fte staff providing 24 hr support to our most vulnerable rough sleeping cohort
  - Leasing 2 additional 6 bed HMO properties totalling 12 units. This will be to meet the need of some of the high support needs group similar to our H4H provision. Alongside this there are additional self-contained properties identified for continued market engagement (2 x 7 bed properties) in 2021/22 which could run parallel to these properties until transition to/works are completed for self-contained units (see capital funding)
  - Appointing an additional fte complex needs worker to support these two properties
  - Reconfiguring the Winter provision space from 2019 into 8 COVID secure sleeping areas with 2 night staff 8pm-8am
- Enhancing move on from emergency and temporary accommodation through an additional Complex Needs Move On officer for 12 months
- Better co-ordinate accommodation placements and move on support through a p/t administrator for 12 months
- Improve how we meet the healthcare needs of this cohort through recruiting 1 x Registered Practitioner (nurse) and 1 x Health Care Assistant to engage and support the most vulnerable in our emergency accommodation, winter shelter and other temp accommodation for 12 months

In addition, from October 2020 we will provide 10 x 1 bed properties as direct matches with Plymouth Community Homes as a rolling programme with support delivered through the Plymouth Alliance. This will enable us to move people out of emergency and temporary accommodation and into more appropriate housing, in particular those we have assessed as medium or low needs which is approximately 79% of this group of people.

This model will continue beyond March 2021 with the realignment of the Plymouth Alliance budget and staffing to ensure this value for money model is able to continue to support some of those whom

otherwise would be unable to access self-contained supported housing with an opportunity for this to become a tenancy/home.

### Capital funding

We are also awaiting the outcome of the capital funding element from the same bid which may provide:

- Acquisition of 12 x 1 bed units with support to these properties of 1 fte complex needs worker and 0.33fte admin coordination (through Bournemouth Churches Housing Association)
- Acquisition of 3 x 1 bed self-contained properties with buy back of right to buy with support of 0.4fte complex needs worker and 0.33fte admin and coordination (through Plymouth Community Homes).

## **8. Budget pressures**

Despite additional funding and accommodation provision, pressure on the accommodation budget remains high and meeting the demand on homelessness as a result of COVID-19 has resulted in a forecasted overspend.

Pressure on the system has created additional costs of approx. £1.178 million through increased numbers in Bed and Breakfast and additional accommodation and support provided by the Alliance. To offset this the Community Connections service has worked hard to maximise grant income and has managed to find savings of approx. £326k which leaves a forecasted overspend of over £850,000 this financial year.

## **9. Conclusion**

Following the recent changes as a result of the Homelessness Reduction Act, we have seen an increased demand on front line services, resulting in capacity within the housing support sector being reduced. COVID has now further impacted this with increased demand on services. The full extent of the impact is not yet understood and it is crucial that services continue to be supported to ensure effective delivery in preventing and relieving homelessness. The financial impact and recovery will be a medium-long term plan, before we can return to a pre-COVID 19 position.