

APPENDIX 4 – HOMELESS ACCOMMODATION AND SUPPORT

BACKGROUND

1. At the beginning of March 2020 there were a significant number of homeless individuals being supported in Cardiff, including
 - The City had approximately 30 rough sleepers who, despite the good progress that had been made by the MDT outreach team (the number reducing from 84 rough sleepers in March 2019) remained entrenched on the street.
 - There were also 140 individuals in emergency accommodation, 98 of whom were sleeping in shared spaces. The emergency accommodation was located in existing hostels and most required the individuals to leave during the day (60 of these emergency accommodation units were due to close at the end of March, with the end of cold weather provision)
2. The onset of the Covid19 pandemic created a requirement to address these issues as a matter of extreme urgency. Both rough sleeping and use of emergency accommodation prevented individuals from self-isolating or shielding. The immediate concern was that it was likely that the virus would spread without control in the shared sleeping spaces and the impact of the virus on this group was likely to be very significant.
3. In addition to the emergency accommodation there were also more than 600 individuals in single person hostel and supported accommodation provision. Much of this accommodation has shared bathroom facilities and while suitable for normal use would present real difficulties where clients have symptoms.
4. There was also concern that the exceptional circumstances of the virus and the consequent lockdown would increase family breakdown and domestic violence and there was a need to ensure that there was also sufficient family accommodation available to meet this challenge.
5. Council services have responded quickly to these challenges taking swift steps to provide more appropriate accommodation for single homeless clients and to ensure continued availability of accommodation for families.

ISSUES

6. To address the immediate and urgent need to provide more suitable accommodation for single homeless individuals and couples the following action was taken using existing delegated powers:

Repurposing of Shipping Container Units as Isolation Units

7. Isolation units for homeless clients who were either in emergency accommodation or rough sleeping were set up in the shipping container developments at Greenfarm Hostel, Ely and at Cargo House in Butetown. These shipping container developments had been intended for family homelessness use. These units allow for rough sleepers, those in emergency, hostel and other shared accommodation to self-isolate until their symptoms have passed. To date spread of the virus among the homeless community has been very limited, in part due to the availability of these units.
8. While these units belong to the Council and therefore did not incur any leasing costs, considerable staffing is required to operate the Cargo House units which house the clients with more complex needs and chaotic behaviours. This requires 24 hour staff and security on site. Food is also provided in these units and across the single homeless hostel provision to ensure that residents can self-isolate effectively.

Use of Hotels as Supported Accommodation

9. Two hotels have been used to create additional supported housing provision:
 - The OYO Hotel in Riverside (41 bedrooms) has been block booked for the period 23rd March to 15th June 2020.
 - The YHA Hotel on East Tyndall Street (89 bedrooms) has been leased from 30th March to 26th June 2020.
10. Advice was sought from both Strategic Estates and Legal Services and formal agreements are in place for both buildings. Issues have arisen with the insurance for these schemes, while building insurance and employee liability insurance is in place, it has not been possible to secure public liability insurance. The Council is therefore underwriting this liability.
11. It should be noted that these projects are not operating as Hotel accommodation, rather the buildings have been used to set up supported housing provision that is capable of meeting the support needs of the clients many of whom have complex needs including substance misuse and mental health issues, often having multiple co-occurring issues. In the wrong circumstances these clients can pose a risk to themselves and to others.
12. The lack of begging opportunities and therefore availability of funds to purchase drugs has resulted in many clients growing increasingly desperate, this together with the need to encourage social distancing and self-isolation have made these projects exceptionally difficult to manage. To address the needs of this group 24 hour staffing is required with a minimum of 2 members

of staff on site at all times. Where possible this support is being provided by existing staff redeployed from elsewhere, although a significant number of relief staff are also being employed. The exceptional nature of the crisis has also required multiple security staff on site 24 hours a day, to ensure the safety of both clients and staff and to reassure the local community.

The Parade

13. The Parade was a scheme planned before the current crisis and was intended to provide accommodation and educational opportunities for homeless individuals. The accommodation at the Parade has though now been reutilised as contingency accommodation for the Covid period and is currently housing 14 individuals, it is staffed in a similar manner to the other schemes.

Countisbury House

14. Countisbury House in Llanrumney with 16 units of accommodation, was leased by the Council from 20th April 2020 to 19th April 2021. This building will operate as a half-way house to independence. This project is due to open shortly and will be staffed 24 hours a day initially.

Success to date and next steps

15. Between 23rd March and 12th April, 140 clients were moved from the street and from unsuitable emergency accommodation into the "Hotels". The shipping containers have been established as isolation units and house 20 symptomatic or potentially symptomatic clients at a time. Currently only 5 entrenched rough sleepers remain on the streets and the number in shared sleeping spaces are in single figures. Great success has been achieved to date, however the costs are high, and whilst Welsh Government have indicated the likely on-going need for funding of this provision there is currently no guarantee. The provision is also very temporary, the current arrangements with the hotels are due to end during June unless extended.

16. Additional pressures are also expected: Early release of prisoners has commenced and although numbers to date have been very low there is concern and uncertainty about numbers going forward. In addition a higher number of single people are becoming homeless than before the pandemic with 40 individuals a week being housed, compared to 25 a week during the same period last year.

Further Proposals & Medium Term Planning

17. Welsh Government are requiring Local Authorities to consider the longer term implications of the changes that Covid 19 has required in the provision of accommodation and support for homeless individuals. Work is being undertaken to consider opportunities that could deliver against this objective and details of proposals to meet this requirement will form the subject of a future report to Cabinet.

Social Housing Allocations

18. As part of the immediate response to the pandemic the council urged all social landlords to continue with vacant property works and with the allocation and letting of properties, most have responded positively to this request. Since March 2020 social housing allocations have been focused on homeless households, particularly those in hostel or other supported accommodation. This decision was made in order to reduce the reliance on shared accommodation and to prepare for the expected increase in both single and family homelessness.

19. Pre-existing allocations were honoured and individual applicants were not required to move if they chose not to at this time, their refusal would not affect any future allocations. All appropriate checks remain in place to ensure that any lettings are appropriate. Other urgent lettings are also proceeding, for example to assist with discharge from hospital. In view of current Government guidance and the likely on-going requirements for physical distancing, it is prudent that the refocusing of social housing allocations on homeless households and lettings to address emergency situations should continue, with a review after 6 months.

Housing Individuals with no Recourse to Public Funds

20. The Welsh Government were very clear that they expected local authorities to help those with no recourse to public funds during the Covid-19 pandemic. Alternative powers are available to local authorities, such as section 15 of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014. This section places local authorities under a duty to provide a range and level of services which will meet the aims set out in subsection (2). Preventing the spread of the virus is likely to fall within the purposes in subsection (2).

21. The Welsh Government has also produced written guidance confirming local authorities can use the additional funding that has been provided for emergency accommodation. 19 individuals with no recourse to public funds are currently housed.

Supporting Homeless Providers during Covid 19

22. Funding has also been made available to partner organisations providing supported accommodation for homeless clients in line with public health guidance, to ensure an effective local response is developed and services for homeless/vulnerable housed people remain operational. The financial support will ensure people can access sanitation, be effectively isolated and have access to support as necessary in order to limit risk of wider infection within this group and the wider population. Requests for financial assistance will be considered on a monthly basis and paid in arrears.

Additional Security

23. As noted above significant additional 24 hour security has had to be put in place during this period for both existing and new accommodation provision such as the Hotels to ensure the safety of service users and staff. The service has had problems sourcing and retaining security personnel to work across the different sites. The initial firm appointed from the Council's supplier list withdrew their services from mid-April. Another firm on the list was approached but was unable to help.

24. Due to the urgency of the need a new provider had to be sourced quickly. As an interim arrangement a security firm used by a partner organisations on a similar scheme was approached and has been able to meet this need. The cost of this service was lower than the original supplier. The cost of this is approximately £60k per month over 6 accommodation projects. A direct award will be made to this firm until mid June to ensure appropriate security measures are in place, a review will be carried out at that time.

RESOURCE REQUIREMENTS

25. On 20th March 2020 Julie James, Minister for Housing and Local Government announced funding of £10 million pounds for local authorities to help protect the homeless and rough sleepers during the Covid19 crisis. The additional funding was intended to enable local authorities to secure the accommodation needed to ensure those without a home could be protected, supported, and isolated if necessary. This could include the block purchase of B&B or hotel rooms, empty student accommodation and other premises to operate alongside existing provision.
26. Estimated costs to the end of June are shown below and it is anticipated that these costs will be fully recoverable from Welsh Government against the funding allocation referred to above.

Scheme	£
OYO 41 Units	£377,810
YHA 89 Units	£539,477
Cargo House/Shipping Containers 20 Units	£153,662
The Parade 17 Units	£117,990
Countisbury House 16 Units	£106,640
Partner Support including one off costs	£115,796
Total	£1,411,375

27. The Minister for Housing and Local Government also announced further funding of up to £20 million on the 28th May 2020 to help ensure that no-one in emergency shelter during the coronavirus crisis has to return to the streets or unsuitable accommodation. The Service has already begun work on looking at the longer term costs of supporting individuals and families in this regard. This will be subject to a further report (as per paragraph 17 above) but initial indications suggest that further cost implications for the Council totalling in excess of £3.5M (this does not include full details of potential housing benefit income) are likely and will need to be funded through Welsh Government support.
