

Scrutiny Working Group – January 2024

This report is to consider the challenges and available measures relating to homelessness prevention including the approach and suitability of out of district placements at Sevenoaks District Council.

Key Recommendations:

1. Implementing a KPI for all applicants being offered a homelessness assessment within 10 working days of an application, when an applicant has submitted all the required documentation for the assessment to be completed
2. To review whether the current staffing levels of the housing advice and support team are suitable to deliver good support to applicants and to be confident of meeting Recommendation A
3. The Council should consider extending the Corporate Satisfaction Survey, where possible, for applicants who contact the Council about housing matters
4. When monitoring the Personal Housing Plans with the applicant, SDC must ensure that the applicant understands the homeless process and SDC should seek feedback to ensure the process is as smooth as possible and to identify continuous improvements to the service
5. Reviewing the SDC HERO service, housing advice and homelessness website pages to ensure that advice and guidance is readily available and details the way people can make an application and contact the Council for urgent assistance
6. Undertake an annual review of the incentives that Sevenoaks Landlords Hub can offer (dependent on funding availability, landlord incentives are funded by the Homelessness Prevention Grant) to increase the number of private sector landlords working with the Council
7. As part of the Housing Allocations Policy review consider the viability of placing customers in permanent accommodation an hour away from their support networks, and whether this could be reduced to 45 or even just 30 minutes
8. Ensuring all staff through the Council's DAHA Accreditation process receives domestic abuse awareness training in order to further support individuals seeking council support from domestic abuse
9. A note be sent out to all Councillors of SDC by the Housing Team identifying how Councillors can make enquiries or escalate housing issues for review by the Housing Team, subject to the applicant's written consent
10. Explore all avenues to ensure the increased delivery of affordable housing within the District and include a KPI to show progress in reducing the numbers of households placed in temporary accommodation outside of the District.

Background

- There are 104 households currently placed in all types of Emergency and Temporary Accommodation in November 2023, the net cost to SDC of supporting those households was £61,560 for that month. The annual net cost of providing temporary accommodation is over £600,000 per year to SDC.
- However, the Council has negotiated the use of up to 46 properties for temporary accommodation use from West Kent Housing Association (WKHA) and Moat, which minimises the Council's overall spend. It is imperative that the District's largest housing associations retain this commitment to providing temporary accommodation, as the long-term solution lies in them committing to delivering more social housing in the District to help reduce homelessness.
- As at December 2023 there were currently 895 live housing register applications within allocated bands. It should be noted that the management of the Housing Register was transferred from West Kent Housing Association (WKHA) to Sevenoaks District Council in 2020. In 2013, WKHA oversaw an average of 2,018 live housing register applications.

1) Support to individuals experiencing homelessness

The working group explored the various support offerings available to people approaching the Council for support in relation to homelessness. This included, but was not limited to:

- Application to the Housing Register, with support to find permanent accommodation
- Work by the Council to liaise with existing landlords to understand the reasons for the eviction and explore any assistance to the tenant or landlord to allow the tenant to remain in the property
- Financial support to help find private accommodation, including a repayable loan in advance for rent or deposit scheme.
- Access to the HERO Service for 1-2-1 support and advice, and to explore benefit entitlement and support to prevent residents from becoming homeless.
- Specialist support documents for Armed Forces Veterans, Care Leavers, Victims of Domestic Abuse, and those who are undertaking substance misuse.

Whilst it was evident there is a lot of support available to people to find alternative accommodation, some members expressed concern the level of customer service was not consistent nor tailored to each application. From anecdotal and personal experience, some members expressed concern that some applicants may find the application process incredibly overwhelming and confusing.

Through personal experience of supporting residents with homelessness applications, a member also highlighted errors on the Kent Home Choice website (the online homelessness application process) which further would confuse applicants. These errors ranged from not allowing certain documents to be uploaded to the website, to repeatedly asking for documents which had already been emailed to the correct team.

It was also highlighted that some applicants are currently waiting around 3 weeks for a housing assessment, with some residents only offered an appointment to determine if the Council had a homelessness duty to support the applicant the day before. Members felt that this causes unnecessary stress and worry, particularly as applicants may not be able to make alternative plans if the Council does not owe them a homelessness duty to help. The delays in undertaking a housing assessment were attributed to staff sickness and vacancies within the team; however as it appears 2-3 weeks has been typical for a while, we would suggest reviewing the team's capacity.

Finally, it is not clear what 'turnaround' times are for homelessness applications - ie whether someone should contact the emergency duty officer by telephone if they are due to become homeless within three working days, or complete the online form. Our websites and information should clearly state this is necessary to ensure all applications are picked up in a very timely manner.

In order to address these concerns, the Working Group recommends:

- Implementing a KPI for all applicants being offered a homelessness assessment within 10 working days of an application when an applicant has submitted all the required documentation for the assessment to be completed
- To review whether the current staffing levels of the housing advice and support team are suitable to deliver good support to applicants and to be confident of meeting Recommendation A
- The Council should consider extending the Corporate Satisfaction Survey, where possible, for applicants who contact the Council about housing matters.
- When monitoring the Personal Housing Plans with the applicant, SDC must ensure that the applicant understands the homeless process and SDC should seek feedback to ensure the process is as smooth as possible and to identify continuous improvements to the service
- Reviewing the SDC HERO service, housing advice and homelessness website pages to ensure that advice and guidance is readily available and details the way people in an urgent need can make an application and contact the Council for assistance

2) Working with private landlords to secure alternative accommodation for those on the housing register

Recognising the lack of available properties within Sevenoaks District, Sevenoaks District Council works with private landlords to support those on the housing register to move into.

This includes offering and managing a 'Sevenoaks Landlords Hub' to incentivise landlords to work with the Council, for example paying for gas safety certificates, property inspection, and up to £1,000 for signing up to a 12-month tenancy. Although this has had some successes, it still has not attracted the numbers of properties required to support those on the housing register, nor significantly increasing the amount of in-district emergency placements.

To address this, the Working Group recommends:

- Undertake an annual review of the incentives that Sevenoaks Landlords Hub can offer (dependent on funding availability, landlord incentives are funded by the Homelessness Prevention Grant) to increase the number of private sector landlords working with the Council

3) Suitability of temporary accommodation for families and victims of domestic abuse

The group considered the availability of temporary accommodation offered. It is noted that there is a balance to be had in ensuring not too many properties are left empty for periods of a time, with being able to provide temporary accommodation when needed. This has however led to an increase in out of District placements.

Concerns were raised about experience of Councillors whose residents had reported the unsuitability of temporary accommodation, both in terms of quality and sharing bathrooms.

It was confirmed that the Council will always seek to avoid placing families with children, pregnant women into bed and breakfast accommodation with shared facilities. In the unusual event that such a placement cannot be avoided, the household will be moved to self-contained emergency accommodation as soon as possible and within six weeks of initial placement.

All the accommodation provided by West Kent Housing Association and Moat meets their approved Void Standards. Both Housing Associations are governed by the Housing Regulator and are required to meet the decent homes standards. The Council only works with reputable providers to ensure that the necessary checks and certificates are in place.

It was confirmed that in 2022-2023 and to date for this financial year, SDC had not received any complaints regarding the quality of temporary accommodation.

It was also raised that there were concerns about the negative effect out of District placements can have on individuals' lives, particularly away from places of employment, schools and support networks. It was confirmed that SDC would always seek to place individuals in temporary accommodation within the District in the first instance. However, should this not be available, temporary accommodation within the District will try to be secured as soon as possible, even if it means the individual having to be placed some time away outside of the District. There was also concern about eventual permanent accommodation offers being allowed up to an hour away from existing support networks that also create the same problem, with refusal potentially leading to removal from the housing register. It was asked that this be reviewed, as members felt an hour per way away from schools or employment is incredibly difficult:

- As part of the Housing Allocations Policy review consider the viability of placing customers in permanent accommodation an hour away from their support networks, and whether this could be reduced to 45 or even just 30 minutes

Members enquired about support specifically for victims of domestic abuse, and how the Council aimed to support them. It was confirmed the Council would seek to place individuals or families in a refuge, where only those of the same sex would reside. Additional support and advice would be provided by the refuge to support the individual or family. It was also highlighted that the Council would also support individuals to stay in their own home through the installation of sanctuary schemes, including liaising with the police and other agencies to ensure legally binding mechanisms such as restraining orders had been secured. Members also heard about SDC's ongoing work through the DAHA Accreditation process, and the potential for frontline staff to receive domestic abuse awareness training. We therefore recommend this takes place, to ensure greater support and understanding for victims of domestic abuse:

- Ensuring all staff through the Council's DAHA Accreditation process receives domestic abuse awareness training in order to further support individuals seeking council support from domestic abuse

When discussing how individual councillors had responded to residents raising housing cases with them, it was highlighted not all Councillors may be aware who to approach within SDC or how to escalate housing issues when contacted. Therefore it is recommended:

- A note be sent out to all Councillors of SDC by the Housing Team identifying how Councillors can make enquiries or escalate housing issues for review by the Housing Team, subject to the applicant's written consent.

Finally, it was identified that the lack of temporary accommodation managed by WKHA, MOAT or SDC (through Quercus Housing) was a potential way of improving the situation regarding out of District placement. It was also highlighted that temporary accommodation most importantly places families away from friends, their support network, and causes stress and worry, but also can cost the Council more. It there was therefore believed that the Council should focus on reducing the amount of families in temporary accommodation outside of the District through a dedicated KPI to monitor progress:

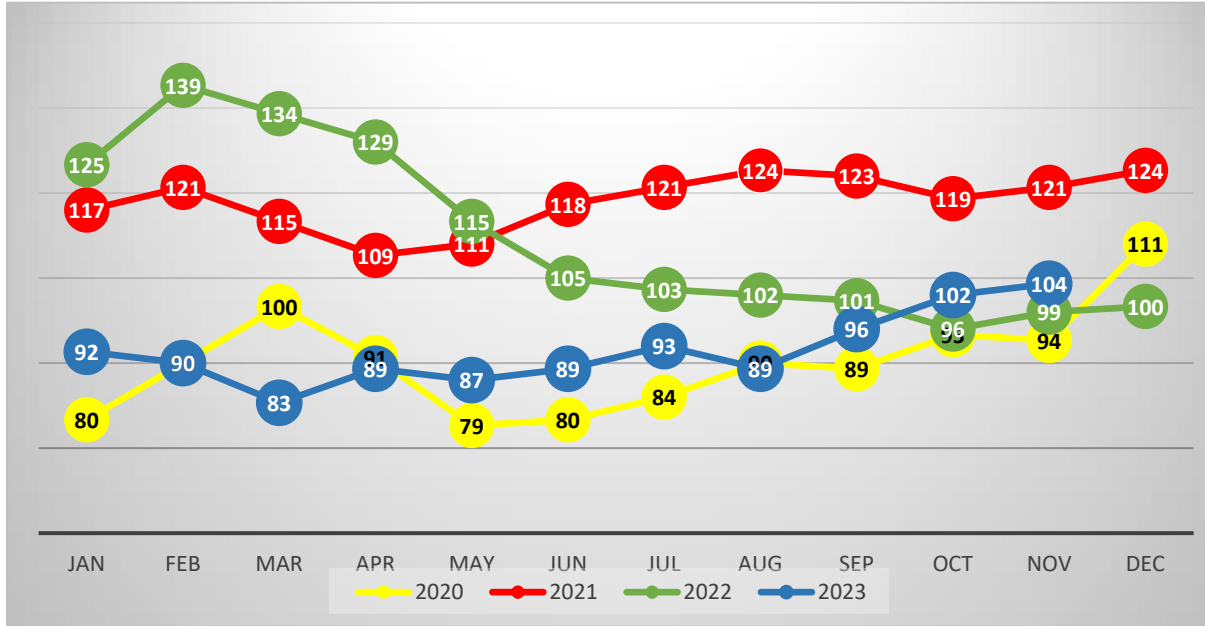
- Explore all avenues to ensure the increased delivery of affordable housing within the District and include a KPI to show progress in reducing the numbers of households placed in temporary accommodation outside of the District.

- END -

*Members of the Working Group: Cllr Michael Horwood (Chair), Cllr Nina Scott, Cllr Angela Baker,
Cllr Alan Leaman and Cllr Laura Manston*

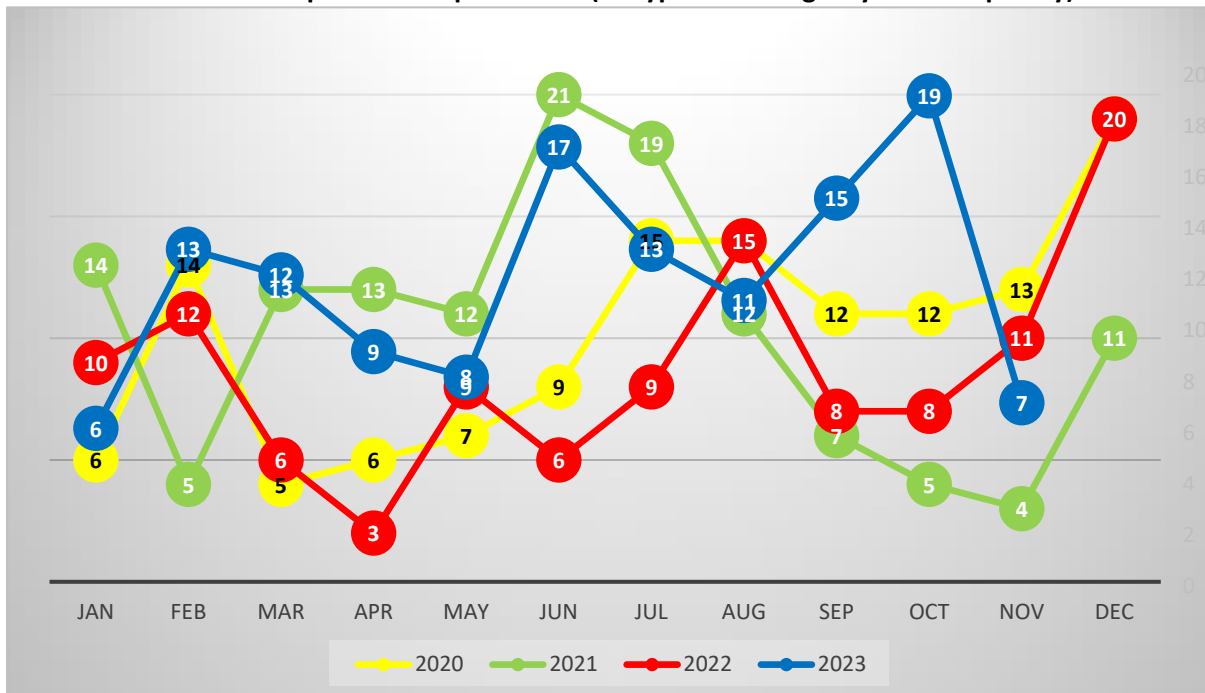
Appendix 1 - Relevant graphs

Chart 1: Number of households in all types of Emergency and Temporary Accommodation



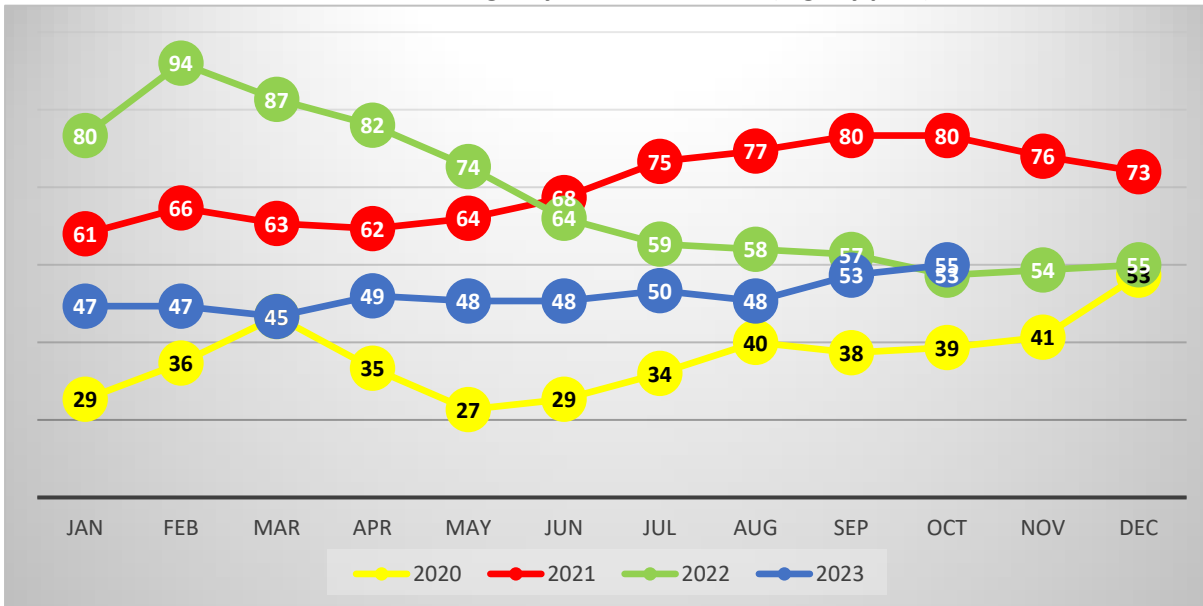
Note: There are 104 households currently placed in all types of Emergency and Temporary Accommodation in November 2023. 54 households are placed in emergency accommodation (nightly paid) and 1 household has been placed Bed and Breakfast pending a move between accommodation units. The remainder are placed in WKHA and Moat properties and these properties are cost neutral to the Council.

Chart 2: Number of new placements per month (all types of Emergency and Temporary)



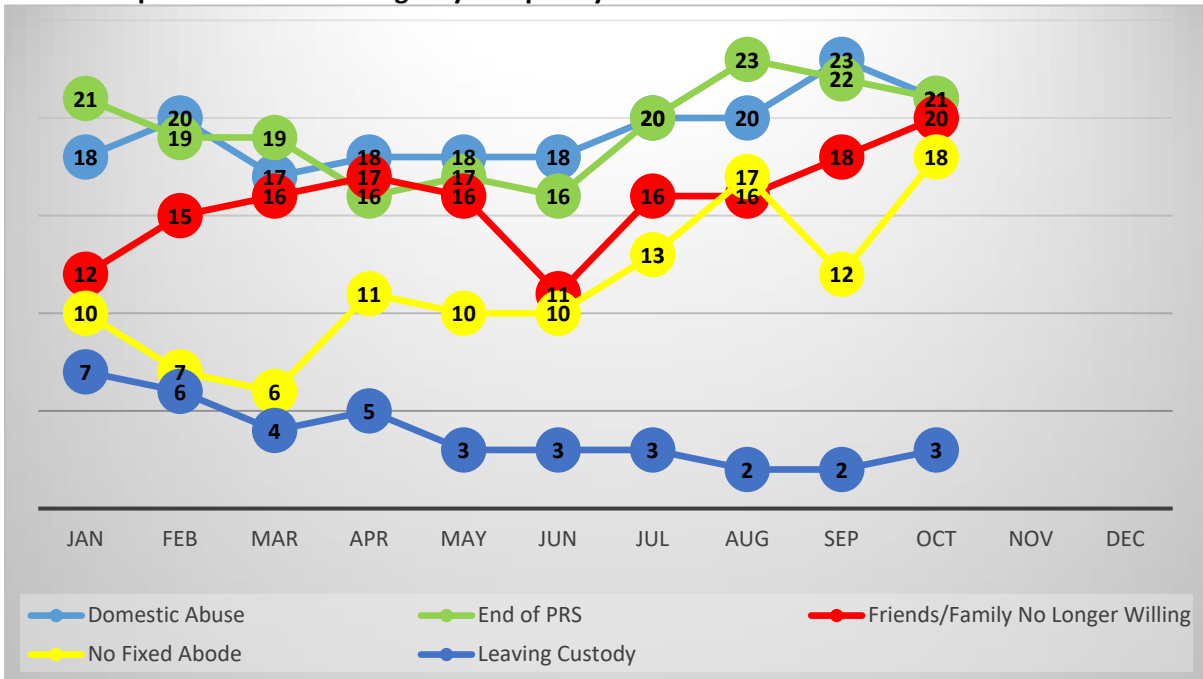
Note: 7 new temporary accommodation placements were made in November 2023.

Chart 3: Number of households in Emergency Accommodation (nightly paid)



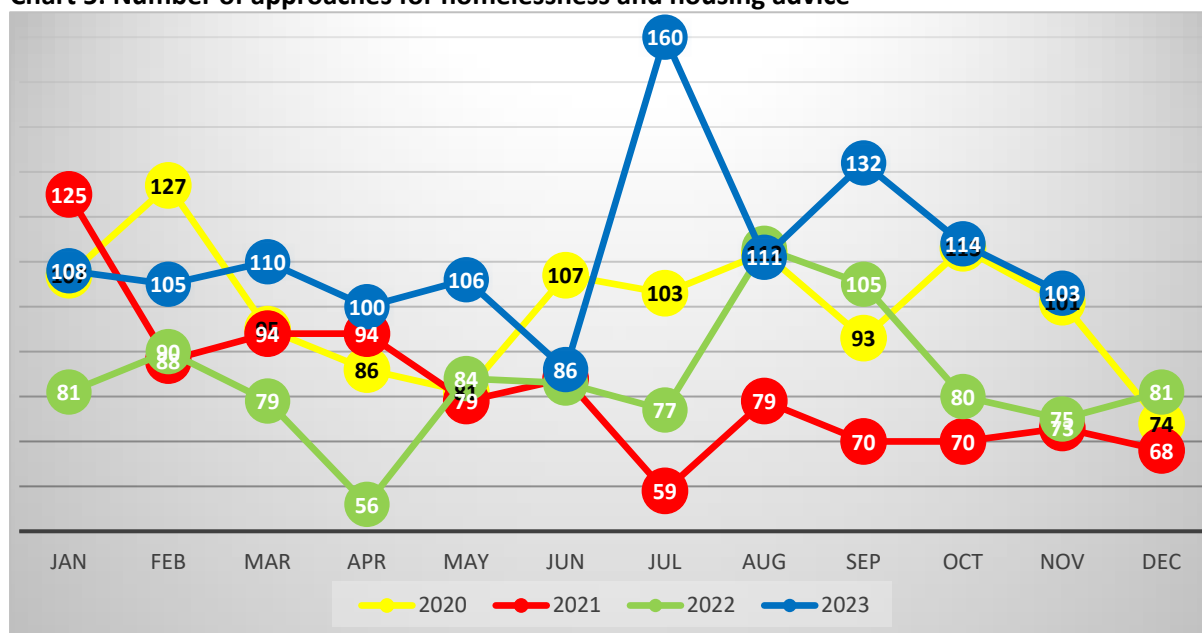
Note: There are currently 55 households placed in emergency accommodation (nightly paid) including 1 placement in Bed and Breakfast pending a move between temporary accommodation units. The team continues to be robust in their investigations and in seeking alternative solutions, rather than rely on emergency accommodation and working really hard to nominate these customers for move on into WKHA and Moat properties.

Chart 4: Top 5 Reasons for Emergency Temporary Accommodation



Note: The 5 main reasons for the provision of temporary accommodation were customers fleeing domestic abuse (21), ending of private rented sector tenancies (21), family and friends no longer willing to accommodate, no fixed abode and leaving custody. The family and friends group are often under the age of 35 and the hardest to move on due to a lower number of benefits received, the Local Housing Allowance and shortage of housing options. The Out of Area Placement Policy allows the team to source a wider pool of properties to make final offers, enabling move on from temporary accommodation and into suitable accommodation.

Chart 5: Number of approaches for homelessness and housing advice



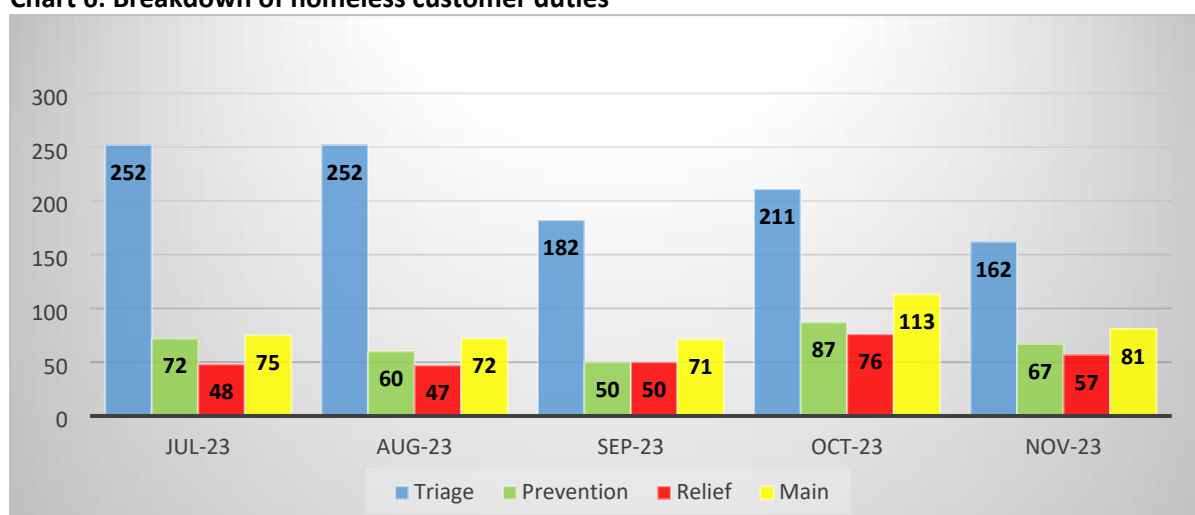
Note: The Homelessness team continues to see a considerable number of households approaching with complex needs, households experiencing domestic abuse, mental health, substance misuse or multiple complexities. Many of the approaches required multi-agency partnership working.

Due to the impact of the cost of living, we are seeing a steady approach of customers who have been evicted as they cannot afford their annual rent increases. The team currently have 367 live cases down from 487 live cases reported in October 2023.

Top 5 approaches to the Council can be broken down as follows:

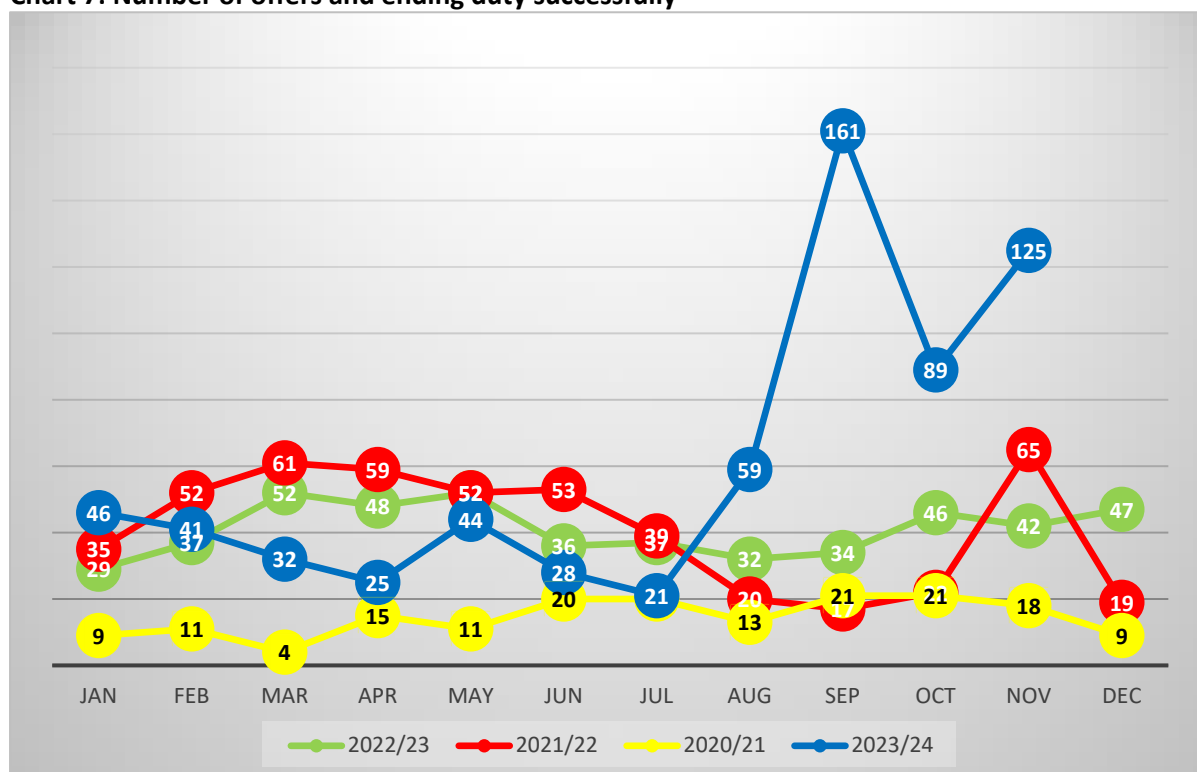
Friends and Family no longer willing to accommodate	29
Domestic abuse	18
Relationship with partner non-violent breakdown	13
End of PRS	11
No Fixed Abode	7

Chart 6: Breakdown of homeless customer duties



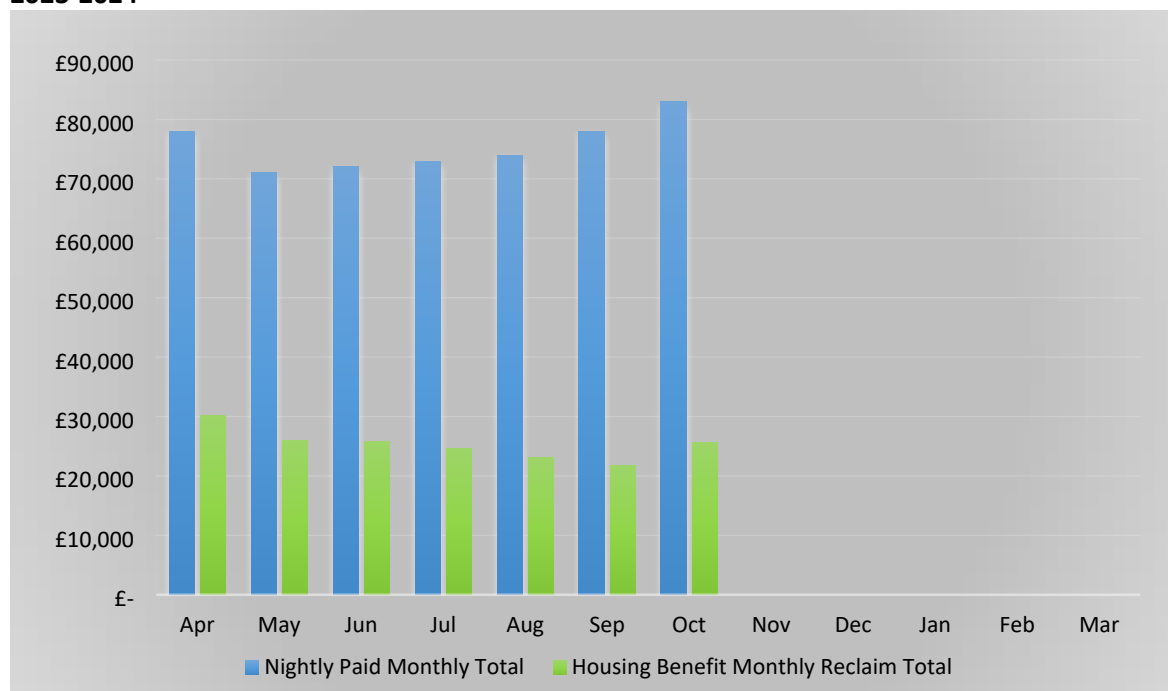
Note: Triage duty is made up of those customers who have applied, set to pending enquiries and receiving advice prior to transition to a Housing Advice Officer to complete a Homelessness Assessment and be placed into a duty if owed.

Chart 7: Number of offers and ending duty successfully



Note: There were 125 successful prevention and accommodation offers in November 2023, resulting in households either not having to be placed into temporary or emergency accommodation or being moved on. To break this down further: 100 were closed at triage for no response, 8 accepted offers via the housing register, 8 accepted accommodation in the Private Rented Sector, 5 were closed with no further action taken after the 56 days prevention duty expired, 3 were prevented and could stay at home, 1 lost contact and is believed to be staying with friends.

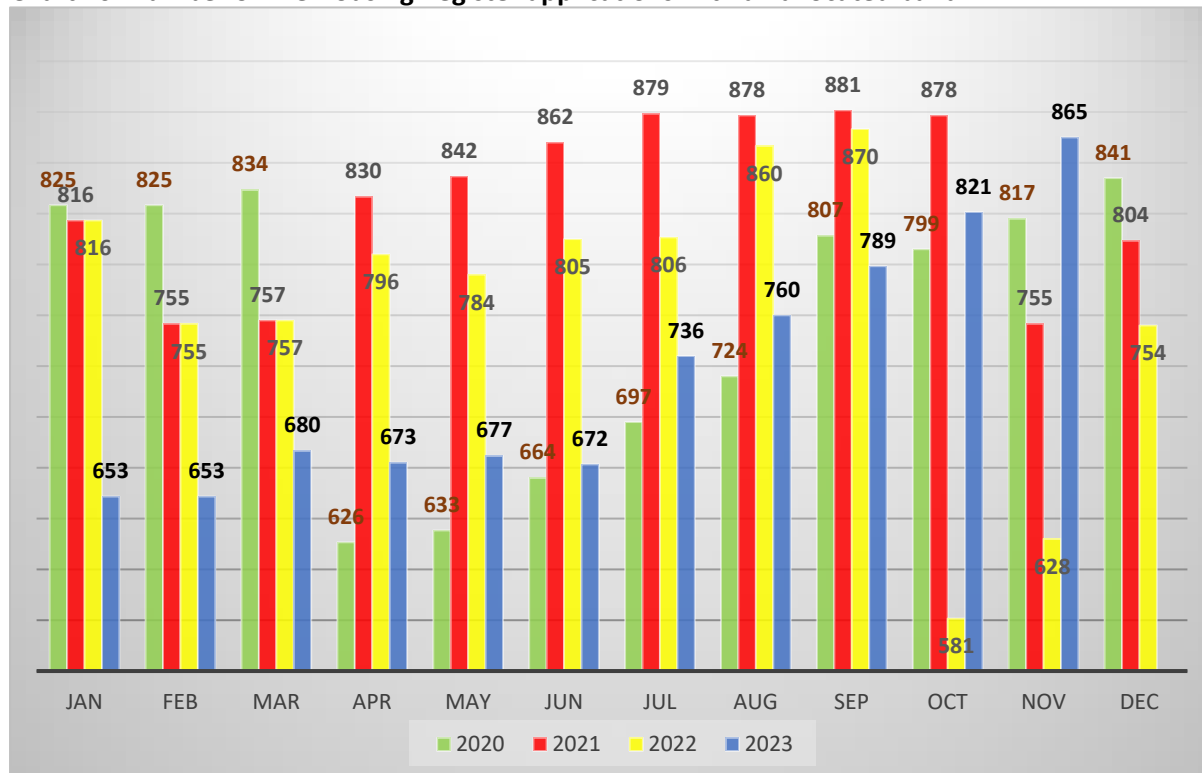
Chart 8: Emergency Accommodation (nightly paid) expenditure and Income (housing benefit) 2023-2024



Note: Total monthly expenditure for November was £90,000, total Housing Benefit income reclaimed (paid in arrears) is £28,440, showing a shortfall of £61,560. It should be noted that Housing Benefit is set at 90% of 2011 Local Housing Allowance rates. The Council can reclaim approximately 38% in Housing Benefit to offset the overall nightly paid costs. If the customer is already in receipt of Universal Credit, there is a delay for

Universal Credit to cancel the housing element so that the Housing Benefit can be reclaimed if the customer is working or not entitled to benefits.


Chart 10: Number of live Housing Register applications with an allocated band



Note: There were 206 applications made to the Housing Register with 63 applications being made live in November 2023. There are currently 865 live housing register applications within allocated bands.

Appendix 2:

Domestic Abuse training (mandatory for all staff)

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Domestic Abuse (Mandatory)

E-Learning ENGLISH

Course Description

Course Description
Domestic abuse is a serious and widespread problem which affects nearly 10% of women and 5% of men every year. In this revealing course you will learn who is at risk and how the law can help. You will be able to understand domestic abuse from the perspective of both the victim and the perpetrator.

This course will enable you to:

- Know what domestic abuse or violence is
- Understand the nature of domestic abuse
- Know who is affected
- Learn how the law can help victims of abuse
- Know what the police can do
- Learn about the range of situations victims might experience
- Understand the effect the abuse can have
- Learn how victims think about their abuse and the abuser
- Know the effect it can have on the children living in abusive households
- Understand why victims sometimes don't leave
- Know what victims need to feel so they can leave abusive relationships
- Learn how you should deal with victims of domestic abuse
- Know the risk assessment tools available to help you make decisions about managing risk and increasing safety
- Learn about the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference
- Learn about the role of the Independent Domestic Violence Advisor
- Learn about what abuser's think
- Learn how the abuser sees the world
- Learn who is responsible for abuse
- Know what treatment is available to abusers
- Learn how abuse can be prevented

Who is this course for?
This course is intended for anyone who needs to learn about domestic abuse.
Note: This course can form part of an induction programme for new starters, it is also intended for all people who want to improve their knowledge and continue their professional development.

Course Duration
90 minutes

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