



Homelessness Evidence Panel: Final Report

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Summary of document

To present evidence gathered as part of a study of the homelessness issues in Rutland and to make recommendations to Cabinet/Council on how to improve Rutland's offer regarding homelessness in the context of legislation and budget restraints

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1.0 BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Homelessness in Rutland has increased in recent years but it is too early to say if the cost of living crisis will significantly impact on homelessness.¹ As a result of the steady increase in homelessness, the Council's Strategic Overview and Scrutiny Committee, at its meeting in July 2022, decided to investigate the reasons for the increase and consider what options the Council had to reverse this trend.
- 1.2 Everyone has a right to adequate housing² but to achieve that, in practical terms, housing needs to be the right housing, in the right place and at the right price. Housing markets change over time through a combination of individual preference, technological advance and Government action. Government action has the biggest influence on housing development. For example; green belt legislation in the late 1930s, post-war re-building or the Right to Buy in the 1980s all impacted on availability of housing for new purchasers and tenants. Local Government can influence housing development through its Local Plan, but local government's aspirations are constrained both by central government regulation such as the National Planning Policy Framework and market forces. The availability and affordability of housing are key components in providing for and eradicating homelessness.

2.0 THE LAW AND HOMELESSNESS

- 2.1 There are various pieces of legislation which govern how Rutland County Council (RCC) manages homelessness. The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 confers duties on the Council to both prevent and relieve homelessness and the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 redefined domestic abuse (to include coercive control as abuse, for example) and clarified a local authority's duties in respect of abuse. The Council has a statutory duty to support and advise anyone that is homeless today or within the next 56 days. Officers are required to investigate the reason for someone being homeless and where possible prevent this from happening.
- 2.2 RCC contracts its housing and homeless floating support provision with the charity 'P3', to offer advice to people facing homelessness in a more preventative way and work alongside the Housing Options team to support those that are already threatened with homelessness or are

¹ Evidence from Citizens Advice Rutland (CAR)

² Under international law people have the right to be adequately housed
<https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-housing/human-right-adequate-housing>

homeless today. Citizens Advice Rutland also supports Rutland residents with the provision of independent homeless advice, financial advice for those struggling with debts and managing the Council's Crisis Fund.

- 2.3 The public perception of homelessness is of people living on the streets. Rough Sleepers, as this category of the homeless are known, is rare in Rutland. As at the last government statistical return the Council reported a figure of 'zero.' Homelessness in Rutland is driven primarily by landlords serving notice on their tenants, mainly in Private Sector Housing or the result of family breakdown.
- 2.4 Councils are also facing additional pressure from government resettlement schemes, which can lead to further demand on the housing register and those threatened with homelessness. There is pressure on the demand for temporary housing for those who are eligible for interim housing but, whilst the Council only has one self-contained flat in Rutland, the team have been able to secure additional provision through other means. Some of this is outside of the Rutland area but this means it can better manage the costs associated with having allocated accommodation units that at times will sit empty due to fluctuating demand.
- 2.5 **Table 1** gives a summary of the numbers presenting as homeless from December 2021 to July 2022 broken down by reasons for being homeless.
- 2.6 Tenants privately renting are vulnerable to rent rises and Rutland already has higher rental prices than other neighboring authorities. Private rental properties in Rutland are generally larger, family-type accommodation and there is limited affordable rental properties for younger, single residents or those wishing to live independently away from family for the first time. There is only one House of Multiple Occupation (HIMO) in Rutland which is a more affordable way for single residents to afford to live on their own.
- 2.7 There are 9 Women's Aid properties in Rutland available for women fleeing domestic violence from across the Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland region. These are not reserved for Rutland residents but are open to all and, in many cases, it is better for victims of domestic violence to move some distance from the homes they are fleeing.

Table 1

Reason	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	April	May	June	July (to 17/7)	Total	%
Friends/relatives no longer able to house	1	4	5	4	4	4	4	5	31	19
End of private rent	4	8	4	6	4	10	5	5	46	28
End of Social Rent	2	1	0	5	3	1	2	0	14	8
Domestic Abuse	1	4	2	1	3	1	5	1	18	11
Relationship breakdown (non-abusive)	3	7	2	3	2	2	5	5	29	17
Other	4	3	4	10	4	0	4	0	29	17
Total	15	27	17	29	20	18	25	16	167	100

- 2.8 Many of the issues surrounding homelessness cross service boundaries and, as a unitary authority, Rutland has an advantage over district councils in that the council is responsible for, and thus in a position to provide, holistic support e.g. social care and education support to individuals and families presenting as homeless. Providing support and advice for the homeless is primarily the responsibility of the Housing Options Team which comprises of a Team Manager, a Senior Officer, two full-time Options Officers and one part-time Options Officer. In addition to this, there is a part-time Housing Options Officer that mainly manages the Housing Register and supports the team with other more generic tasks. There was a period when the roles within the team were supported by agency staff. This was due to staff within the team moving to other permanent roles within the Council or senior promotion externally but all roles within the team are now filled with permanent staff following a successful recruitment process.
- 2.9 The homeless in Rutland are varied as you would expect but a high proportion are in work and using privately rented accommodation. Private rents in Rutland are high compared with similar areas and this reflects the overall housing market. It should be noted that Rutland has a higher proportion of privately owned 4+ bedroomed houses than national or regional averages, which in turn both impacts on average house prices and enables a premium on rents for the smaller properties as there are comparatively fewer of them. For some that are deemed eligible, the Housing Options Team can support clients to access the private rental market by assisting with the deposit and first month's rent. This is more of an option for single male and females due to the lack of single accommodation in the social housing sector. However there have been examples where families have successfully secured private rented accommodation and the Council has supported them financially. It should be noted that any financial assistance through private rentals clients will be required to pay an agreed amount back to the Council based on what is deemed affordable.
- 2.10 Rental rates locally exceed the amount available in Local Housing Allowance (LHA), which is a cause of homelessness as rents rise and prompts house sales where landlords fail to find tenants thus reducing the market. The two-bedroom Local Housing Allowance for Rutland is just under £600 and, as of December 2022, the lowest priced two-bedroom house in Rutland was £725 so meaning that, for those in receipt of housing related benefits, private renting is not an option for them which puts greater pressure on the housing register. In addition, prior to the recent financial crisis, mortgage repayments were often lower than rental costs encouraging many to 'get on the property ladder.' This results in the smaller, less expensive properties, being sold to owner-

occupiers further reducing the availability of affordable rental properties. This also impacts on RCC's ability to help those presenting as homeless as the waiting list for social rented housing is long and the availability of private rented at an affordable price is shrinking.

- 2.11 The lack of suitable and appropriate housing supply impacts both on homelessness and the Council's ability to manage homelessness.

3.0 HOUSING STOCK

- 3.1 RCC, like many local authorities, transferred its housing stock under a Large Scale Voluntary Transfer (LSVT) in 2009. There are 11 social housing providers in Rutland, the largest stock provider being the Longhurst Group.
- 3.2 Rutland has just over 4,000 social properties and the waiting list for social housing is managed by the Council's Housing Options Team. Each social housing provider has a nomination agreement in place for the allocation of properties to residents of Rutland. There is 1 self-contained two-bedroom flat available in Rutland with other options available to the Housing Options Team on a spot purchase basis.
- 3.3 There has been a higher demand for temporary accommodation, including for single people during 2022/23 due to various factors. The team have access to a supported bed and breakfast provision in Leicester and other local options available within Rutland. Clients are placed in accommodation to best suit the needs of that individual where possible, however local authorities are not legally obliged to place clients in the local area. Whilst bed and breakfast accommodation is not ideal and can prove costly for a local authority, this is sometimes the better option than having clients rough sleeping or sofa surfing. Some local authorities, including those who do not own their own housing stock, are investing in units for the homeless in order to save the costs of bed and breakfast accommodation. Market Harborough is an example locally where this has been done and they expect to reduce by 50% the cost of temporary accommodation by the reduced use of bed and breakfast accommodation.
- 3.4 It should be noted that other local neighbouring authorities have a greater number of clients housed temporarily. It should also be noted that for the local authority to invest in its own units, it would need to ensure full occupancy over the year to ensure no financial loss to the Council. The numbers of single applicants needing bed and breakfast

accommodation has dropped over the years; family-type temporary accommodation is the greatest need currently.

- 3.5 Notwithstanding the significant number of 4+ bedroomed houses in Rutland, Citizens Advice Rutland (CAR) feel there is a dearth of these properties to rent at an affordable price. The private sector is unlikely to deliver affordable larger houses and therefore to meet need RCC's Cabinet needs to develop a strategic policy to identify need and work with the housing associations to build to meet need.
- 3.6 CAR has also identified a need for shared accommodation (i.e. shared between friends rather than family members or partners) as two can live as cheaply as one and CAR believe this would reduce the number of single people presenting as homeless. To enable sharing in social housing, RCC's policy would have to change and social housing providers would have to want to adopt this model.

4.0 ALLOCATIONS POLICY

- 4.1 RCC operates a 'points based system' for all those who apply to be on the Council's housing register so, for example, an applicant who does not currently live in Rutland but has a family connection to the county will get 10 points. If they have one or more children aged under 5 and are currently living in a first floor flat, they will be allocated a further 20 points. Homelessness attracts 500 points but only where the Council has a full homelessness duty.
- 4.2 The number of people registered on the housing register fluctuates over time. The Council has a mechanism in place for removing or suspending applicants from the housing register if they no longer meet the criteria to remain on the list or they themselves choose to be removed. Like most Council's, RCC will remove or suspend an applicant from the housing register if they refuse two offers of accommodation. Suspensions last for six months before their application is then reassessed.
- 4.3 Some Council's operate a 'Choice Based Lettings' system which can make their allocations system far more transparent for applicants, for example, by making it clear how, and by whom, assessments are made and for which type of property an applicant would be considered. However, applicants are able to see themselves the number of points their application has, the number of bedrooms they are entitled to and the areas that they wish to live in. A 'Choice Based Lettings' system was previously explored and considered by the RCC in 2010. It was ruled

out at that time but the housing markets have changed since then and a review might be timely.

- 4.4 The 'Housing Register' in Rutland is now digital and it allows applicants to view their application 24/7 and update and amend it at any time. Applicants are offered properties based on their choice of area and size in accordance with the Housing Allocations Policy. Whilst it does not allow for applicants to bid on available properties, the Housing Options Team spend time matching a property to the most eligible and suitable applicant from the register. Applicants are contacted prior to being nominated to a housing provider to discuss the suitability of the property and to ensure that their circumstances have not changed. Where appropriate, an applicant will be overlooked, removed or suspended if they are no longer wanting to move or are not in a position to move.
- 4.5 'Choice Based Lettings' can have its disadvantages in that applicants are often not aware of properties they have bid on, as the local authority will turn on 'auto bid' therefore removing choice and sending a nomination list to a social housing provider that contains applicants that are no longer in need of housing and/or their circumstances have changed and this can lead to a lot of wasted time on the side of the housing provider. However, there is no requirement to turn on the 'auto bid' function within a choice based system.
- 4.6 The Housing Options Team constantly review the 'Housing Register' and each year there is an annual review carried out where applicants, who have been on the register for more than one year, are required to update their circumstances or be removed. Access to the Rutland 'Housing Register' is considered to be in part quite lenient and often more accessible than that of other local authorities. RCC does not means test applicants to the housing register which means someone can have sold a house they owned, and benefitted from the capital that produced, yet still be approved for the housing register. There are other aspects of the policy that could be tightened up on, which would assist on the demand and acceptance to Rutland's register and would be more in line with other bordering authorities.
- 4.7 Social housing in Rutland is owned and managed by a registered social landlord and each has its own lettings policies in addition to the criteria established by RCC for its housing waiting list and this duality can cause difficulties. For example, some housing providers will not house children in flats about the ground floor, whereas Rutland's policy would allow such an allocation and awards points for children living in flats above the ground floor. At present, the over 60's cannot be allocated to 'general need type' properties as defined in the policy. This in itself is a problem

as Rutland's over 60's population continues to grow. Many 60 year olds would be happy and capable of living in flats with stairs but they are overlooked due to the policy. It is important that RCC's housing allocations policy is both clear and that its waiting list is as up to date as possible. Also, in developing any new policy, RCC should work with the housing providers to look at redesignating some of its stock.

5.0 HOUSING REGISTER

- 5.1 Rutland currently has just over 350 applicants on its housing register. Due to the digitalisation of the register which meant all applicants had to re-register and their application reassessed, it dropped to just over 200 in 2021/22. It is now back to the normal levels for Rutland based on previous years but it is anticipated that it will increase as the cost of living starts to impact on households.
- 5.2 Rutland's Housing Options Team (who manage the housing register) works well on a day-to-day basis with the registered social landlords serving Rutland and has better strategic links with some more than others. Both Strategic Housing and Operational Housing at the Council meet regularly with the Longhurst Group due to it being the LSVT landlord. This could be an area of improvement with the other social landlords but many do not have large volumes of stock in Rutland unlike the Longhurst Group.
- 5.3 There is no cabinet member for housing, the role being divided between the portfolio holders for planning and for adults and health. This leads to the potential for a lack of co-ordination. For example, the portfolio holder for adults and health is well aware of the needs of the residents of Rutland for housing options but those needs are not necessarily feeding into the Local Plan process and considering Rutland's strategic housing needs of additional smaller properties and fewer larger ones. Officers across both portfolio areas meet and discuss the needs regularly but this is an area that possibly needs greater oversight by Cabinet.
- 5.4 The Council's understanding of the private rented sector is limited. The Council does have legal duties regarding the private sector but these are undertaken by Peterborough City Council. Peterborough's team have a detailed knowledge of the market in Peterborough but do not collect data for Rutland so we do not know, for example, how many landlords are entering or leaving the market nor, indeed, how many holiday lets there are in Rutland. This information is important for managing homelessness but also for understanding the local economy; specially

where property owners are leaving the rental market in favour of holiday letting.

- 5.5 Internally, RCC has a 'Housing Services Review – Strategy and Operations Group' to co-ordinate housing and homelessness. This group was set up in late 2011 following the transfer of housing stock to Spire Homes (now called the Longhurst Group) in 2009. Following the transfer, Spire Homes ran Rutland's housing options service (this arrangement ceased in 2011) and in 2010 a directorate re-organisation within RCC meant private sector housing, policy and development were in a separate directorate to the Housing Options 'client' role. This situation was further confused when the private sector housing services were outsourced to Peterborough City Council. The Housing Services Review – Strategy and Operations Group does not have written terms of reference but its membership includes the Leader of the Council and other cabinet members as appropriate but it is difficult for the group to have a strategic overview or provide a political steer with no cabinet lead for housing. Furthermore, whilst the Places directorate is represented at Director level, the Adults and Health directorate (within which Housing Options sits) is not so leading to an imbalance.
- 5.6 Housing and homelessness are a people issue as much as a place issue. The group meets quarterly and, amongst other things, reviews private sector housing performance information but, as has been identified elsewhere in this report, this information is scant for Rutland. The recent cost of living increases, and the increases in homelessness, suggest a review of strategy is desirable and this should include reviewing this group.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 6.1 That the Leader of the Council designates one 'Portfolio Holder' to take the lead on housing and for that person to actively engage with his/her colleagues, as appropriate, on housing matters.
- 6.2 That Cabinet (or the Portfolio Holder should one be appointed) monitors the placement of victims of domestic violence on a regular basis to ensure they are safe and their needs are met. [This is met through Children's Social Care who manage the Domestic Violence contract.]
- 6.3 That RCC explores with its registered social landlords the possibility of increasing the number of homes in Rutland available for temporary accommodation.

- 6.4 That Cabinet, as part of the Council's Asset Review, explores the options for developing new temporary accommodation in Rutland to house those who have been made homeless.
- 6.5 That RCC reconsiders the development of a 'Choice Based Lettings Policy', using learning from other councils' policies and in consultation with registered social landlords, to better meet current needs.
- 6.6 That the Housing Allocations Policy be reviewed to so that it is transparent and easy for applicants to use, with a user-friendly 'Customer Guide' and that it takes into consideration aspects highlighted in this report e.g. 'Means Testing' and the needs of the over 60's in the context of an increasing elderly population in Rutland and the type of accommodation they could be considered for.
- 6.7 That Cabinet review the contract with Peterborough City Council for the provision of services in relation to private landlords with a view to improving data collection on the private sector in Rutland.
- 6.8 That Cabinet review the 'Housing Services Review—Strategy and Operations Group' ensuring that it, or any successor group, has clear terms of reference and appropriate membership.

A large print version of this document is available on request



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