

HEALTH AND WELLBEING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

THURSDAY, 24 SEPTEMBER 2020

REPORT OF THE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR NEIGHBOURHOODS

COUNCIL RESPONSE TO COVID 19 – HOMELESSNESS & HOUSING SOLUTIONS

EXEMPT INFORMATION

None

1. PURPOSE

As requested by the Chair of Health & Well-being Scrutiny Committee – the purpose of the report is to update committee members on homelessness; specifically on

- Response during COVID - 19 to homelessness
- Challenges arising from government legislation &/or guidance ending around furlough scheme and ban on evictions
- Range of housing solutions

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- It is recommended that the Committee note and endorse the contents of the report and actions taken
- Make observations on proposed actions for the homelessness and rough sleeping strategy for wider cabinet consideration before December 2020

3. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 3.1. Preventing homelessness and helping people access suitable housing is part of Tamworth's core strategic purpose. Utilising resources effectively

and building resilient communities is integral to ensuring our most vulnerable members of the community are supported and signposted to sustainable housing solutions. This report describes the challenges during COVID – 19 and how the Council team have responded and as such are well placed to continue to meet the challenges as government restrictions and legislation is adapted around the furlough scheme and evictions.

- 3.2.** During the COVID- 19 pandemic homelessness and allocations continued to be managed in accordance with the Housing Act 1985 and 1996 as amended Part VI and Part VII.

4. RESPONSE TO HOMELESSNESS DURING COVID 19

- 4.1.** In early March the Housing Solutions team began emergency planning for its response to COVID- 19 and the global pandemic that had been announced by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on the 11th March 2020. A task and finish group was set up in which 19 core main functions were identified in services delivered of which 7 of these were identified as critical.

The UK Lockdown began on 16th March 2020 which entailed imminent action of deploying the whole team to work from home (WFH) including critical services such as the Homeless team. Since such time all staff members have adapted to remote working and have built on new ways of working through a digital agenda.

- 4.2.** In addition to the tables below, highlighting the operational and significant service delivery during the lockdown, the team also continue to deliver on key corporate projects including:-
- Completed Mutual Exchange provider tender and awarded to Clarion
 - Delivered the allocations policy corporate project on time 10th June 2020
 - Rough Sleeper and Homelessness Strategy 2020 on target- December 2020
 - Online Portal through Orchard to blend with Corporate portal on track
 - As of Friday 21st August TBC had moved on all clients for “everyone in” strategy and all back log of voids now up to date.
 - During the Recovery phase of the pandemic, we reached a target of 0 households in Bed and Breakfast accommodation

4.3. Key service area achievements within the Homelessness and Housing Solutions team:-

Housing Solutions
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Online, editable Housing Register Application e- form• Online, editable change of circumstances e- form• New digital agenda and platform for delivering services• Team mailboxes created to support demand• Supporting customers to provide digital copies of documents to the team• Virtual Video created and online for changes to our allocations policy• No back log of applications• Corporate project delivering the new allocations policy delivered on time

Homelessness
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Homeless free phone number set up for Rough sleepers to ensure the service is accessible to all• Supported partners in the third sector (Night shelter, Home start, TCHA, DV refuge)• Night shelter guests accommodated at the point the country went into lock down and the shelter was closed due to COVID - 19. In total, accommodation was sought for 7 rough sleepers. No one returned to Rough Sleeping, a bed was secured for all.• Dynamic Purchased 5 rooms in local B&B's for 16 weeks, with unoccupied and occupied nightly rates negotiated in order to save money.• All placements into B&B and Temporary Accommodation (TA) are completed remotely and virtually• Supported Housing Team from Ellerbeck and Chestnut Court provided support to those in TA stock and their own clients• Online data protection statement completed (S214 under HA 1996 Part VII)• Continuing work with key partners such as social services to support vulnerable care leavers, Ministry of Justice (MOJ); prisoners due to early release requirements and hospitals to ensure no one returns to rough sleeping.• Government strategy of "Everyone in" of which we had 16 in total of which one of these was an EU national with no recourse to public funds (NRPF).• COVID-19 secure checklist through risk assessments and offering PPE to those in B&B and having self-contained units available for those high risk clients.• Continued to provide OOH service 24/7.• Kept MHCLG regularly informed with weekly data returns through The Homelessness Case Level Information Collection (HCLIC).• Collaborative working with Staffordshire County Council (SCC) on "Everyone in" Government strategy in order to reclaim funding for those placed in temporary accommodation or receive food parcels, The team chose the revenue due to the work CIC and TBC were already completing.• Risk Assessments updated, signed off and rolling documents.• Safeguarding referrals continued to be completed

- Attendance at TVP and MARAC continued
- Rough Sleeping and Homelessness Strategy work continued with HQN
- Attended homeless West Midlands partnership forum between Public Health England (PhE) and Local Authorities (LA's) to offer each other peer support

Voids and Allocations

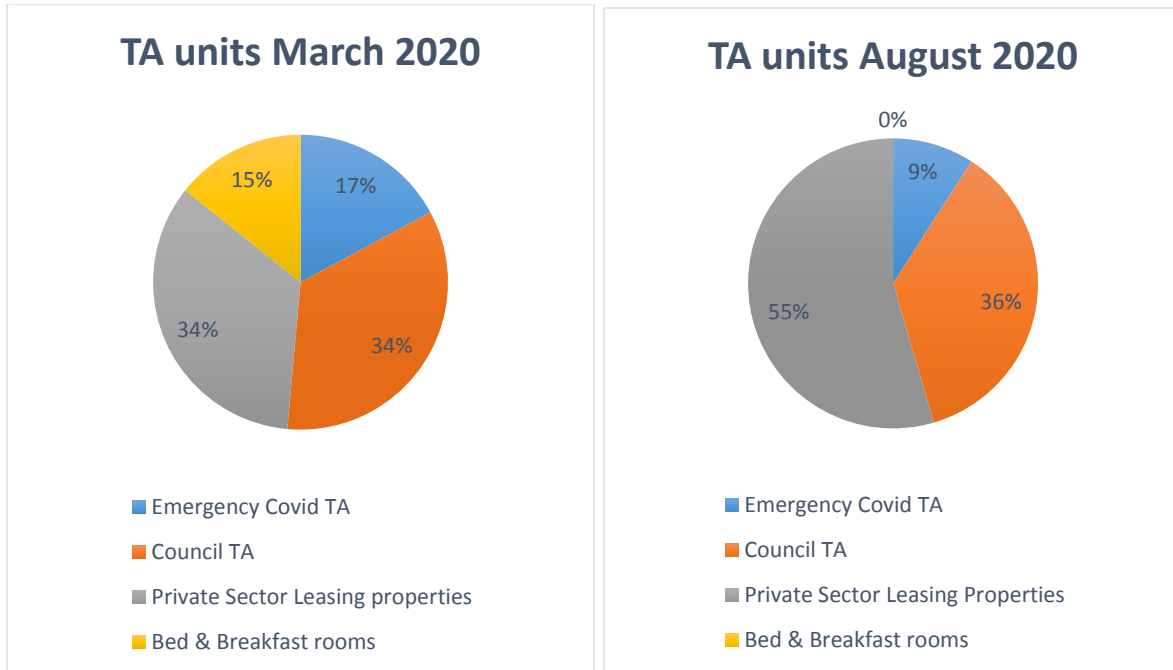
- To support additional temporary accommodation units 6 further properties were secured, these were properties with electric to ensure no turn on and test required.
- Paused Choice based lettings (CBL) between 20th April 2020 and 31st May in response to the Government's restrictions around lockdown measures on non-essential moves. Direct matches for homeless cases and essential moves continued
- All pre-COVID-19 allocations were honoured
- Ensured all comms, website and FAQ's updated regularly including finding a home site
- Key safes purchased through Engie to ensure contactless sign-up's on all properties
- All voids and allocations now completed virtually, with e-sign up's, emailed tenancy agreements and instant access to accommodation via key safes. Promoting the councils contactless and digital by default agenda
- Virtual tours of properties and Engie completing exit inspections via reports and photographs
- Risk Assessments updated and signed off
- E-decoration vouchers now being used across the service
- Continued and successfully procured new Mutual exchange provider House Exchange tendered for and awarded to Clarion Housing
- Virtual "how to move" video completed and online for tenants
- No longer have a back log of allocations from pausing CBL

5. Temporary Accommodation (TA)

Action taken	Outcome
6 additional TA units pulled from general stock accommodation on the 23 rd March	The result was that when the night shelter closed, every remaining guest was offered a bed and a positive pathway away from rough sleeping
A joint project with TBC and the third sector to provide basic furnishings in the additional TA units.	Fit for let properties ready to be moved into at short notice with furnishing's such as white goods which supported those placed at the height of the pandemic.
Dynamic purchasing Bed & Breakfast accommodation rooms	5 rooms in local B&B's for 16 weeks. A number of rooms were purchased by the housing solutions team for an initial period at the start of lockdown.
Phone support to all those in TA during Covid – 19 from supported housing team	With the uncertainty of lockdown, it was important that that team found new ways to engage with vulnerable clients. The supported housing staff took on additional duties and engaged with clients on a weekly basis by phone. Often this support was more than once a week and supported service users with invaluable points of contact and emotional support. This telephone support remains operational.
Produced a TA vulnerability list – Community Together- food parcels	By compiling a list of those with vulnerabilities in temporary accommodation during lockdown, it allowed us to target support and tailor resources.
COVID- 19 secure checklist ¹ when placing into TA	Supported by MHCLG and PhE this allowed us to ensure that those within the 'at risk' category were not placed in accommodation with any shared facilities. This was consistent with the COVID-19 secure & COVID-19 protect health guidelines
Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) distribution	The team worked closely with our B&B providers to ensure that PPE was provided to guests and staff, supporting the facility being COVID- 19 compliant.

¹ Appendix 1 - COVID secure checklist for B&B's

5.1 In order to support the expected increase in demand for COVID- 19 Secure temporary accommodation, prior to lockdown being announced by the Government, Housing Solutions worked to acquire six additional units of TA from the general housing stock managed by the Council. The charts below detail the numbers of TA units in March compared to most recently in August.



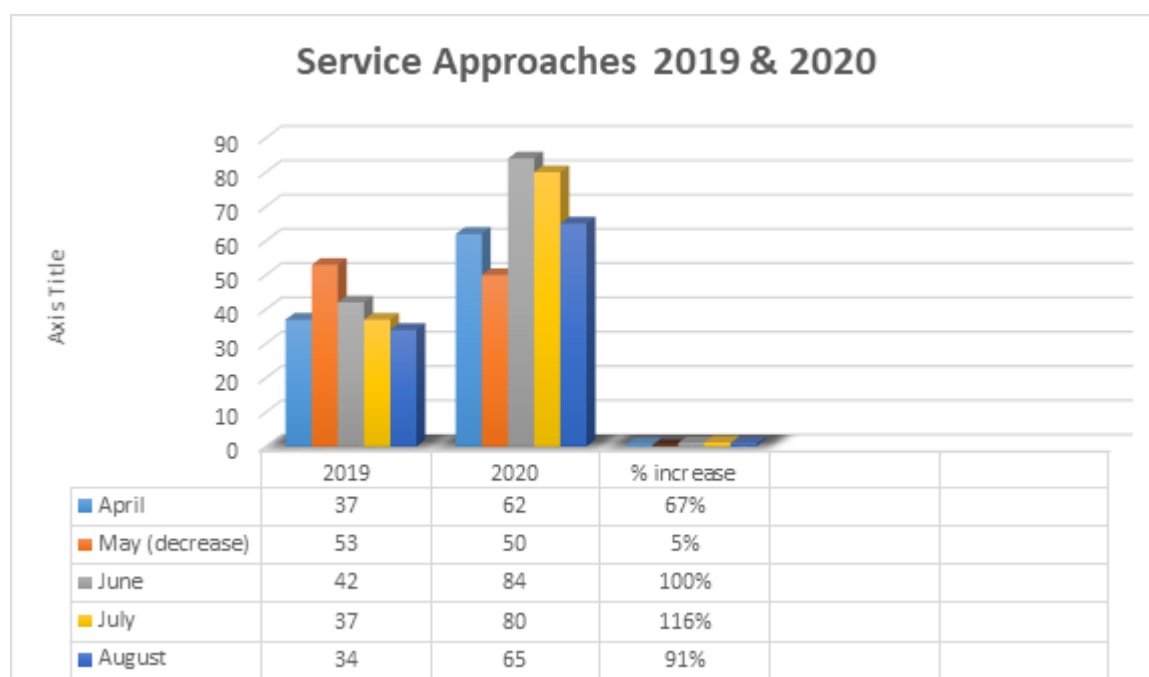
Additional units of temporary accommodation were secured in order to support the Governments ‘Everyone’s in’ scheme. At the point the night shelter closed suddenly, any guests who had not successfully been moved onto into alternative accommodation were offered a bed.

The team worked through lockdown to ensure those placed into temporary accommodation were supported and moved onto positive pathways. As of 1st September, the team have supported over 68 service users onto alternative housing either being accommodation for 6 months or more or other supported pathways such as hostels/HMO. The charts above represent the changing numbers of TA units and demonstrate the work undertaken by the team to achieve a reduction in the number of units from March- August 2020.

In summary, the Council acquired additional rooms in Bed & Breakfast accommodation through dynamic purchasing, as of August 2020 we no longer required the use of these rooms and the team recorded 0 in bed and breakfast accommodation. We have also reduced the number of Council TA units since March, with 6 emergency units being reduced to 2 currently and 12 general stock units being reduced to 8. The reduction highlights the focus on homeless prevention by the team and with a reduction in the numbers in TA since March, demonstrates the success of the toolkits available to the team and strength of partnership working.

As a stock retaining authority, should there be a spike in demand for temporary accommodation within the coming months as a result of other environmental, social or economic factors such as the furlough scheme ending, we are in a position to pull additional self-contained, COVID secure units for TA to avoid the use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation.

6.0 Homeless Approaches

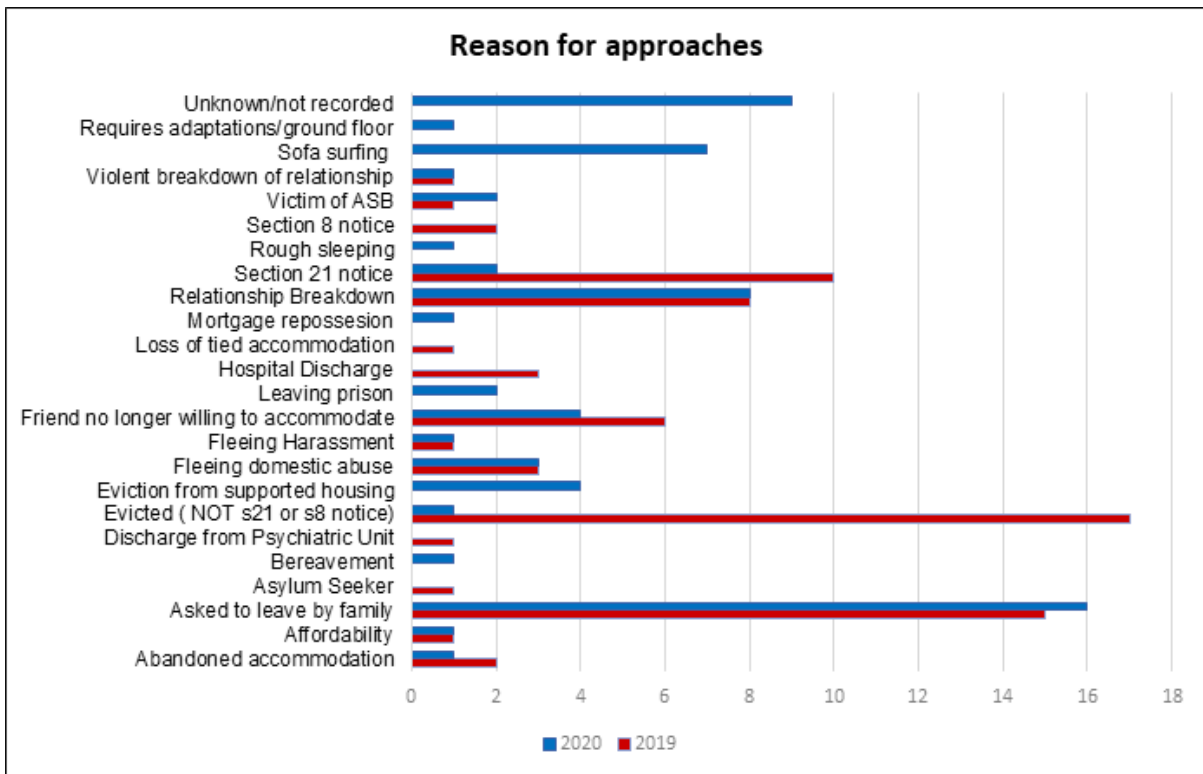


6.1 It is important to highlight the increased demand between the same periods of 2019-2020. This increase can be attributed to COVID- 19 and the increased demands placed on the service.

6.2 Reasons for homeless approaches

Whilst evictions from family and friends remain prominent reasons across both periods, relationship breakdown also feature heavily. Domestic abuse cited as a reason has also remained the same during both periods. Between the 23rd March and 1st September 2020 37 clients approached the service citing 'violent breakdown of relationship or fleeing domestic violence'

Evictions have declined from last year which would be expected given the changes in law preventing evictions during this time. Whereas evictions from supported housing and also those sofa surfing (hidden homelessness) have increased which can be expected given the nature of communal living and living with members other than your own household which has been discouraged through the pandemic due to risk of transmission of the virus.



Since lockdown was imposed, 10 customers have approached the service for assistance advising this is as a direct result of COVID-19. The main reason cited to the officer was a loss of income due to lockdown and relationship breakdown.

As a service, the Housing Solutions Team will continue to ensure homeless prevention² is at the forefront of discussions with customers. As we transcend into the recovery phase of the pandemic, the team will continue to work closely with partners to ensure that we engage with service users at the earliest opportunity in order to provide the most targeted supported through personalised housing plans. It is through this targeted intervention with key groups that the team can support services users' pre crisis³.

7.0 PREPARING FOR CHANGES TO GOVERNMENT ARRANGEMENTS ON FURLOUGH & EVICTIONS

7.1 Homeless prevention is offered as a bespoke service to each service user with the toolkit available to the team constantly expanding through partner support. Please see below some examples:

² Appendix 1 – Diagram “What is homeless prevention”

³ Appendix 2 – Diagram “Key roles and partners that Housing Solutions has and how they link services.”

- TBC tenant Hardship Fund
- Housing Solutions- Homeless Prevention Fund (rent deposits/ rent arrears contribution to prevent homelessness for 6 - 24 months)
- Close links with DWP and Tamworth Job Centre- an awareness of the financial support they can provide to service users
- Internal meetings with benefit and Council Tax departments to support those suffering financial hardship and ensure a joined up approach to homeless prevention
- Reaching out to local registered providers to support them in sustaining tenancies and discouraging court action
- Council tenants have continued to also benefit from intensive recovery and earliest help through the joint working with the third sector (TAC) and DWP and debts secured through early intervention



Citizens Advice Mid Mercia provides free, independent, impartial and confidential advice. We are here to help with any issues such as debts, benefits, housing, homelessness, consumer and relationships.

In accordance with Government guidelines, Tamworth Borough Council has ceased recovery action with some debts such as Council Tax and benefit over payments.

This will not be forever and we do predict a surge of local Tamworth residents needing help and support. The county courts are planning to open very soon so your tenancy could be at risk if you do not seek help.

We are therefore working with Tamworth Borough Council, reaching out now, to let you all know that we do have trained advisers here to help you. We urge you to get in touch now.

Our Adviceline number is:

0300 330 9002

10-4pm Mon – Fri

Recovery action will start again – so please **don't ignore** and hope it goes away. It won't.

Early Intervention

Working closely with the Tamworth Advice Centre through regular full service meetings, we supported them to produce the above letter which has been sent out with all quarterly rent statements and housing solutions appointment letters- supporting early intervention

8.0 CHALLENGES AND RISKS MOVING FORWARD

Challenges /Risks	Outcome/Management
-------------------	--------------------

Furlough schemes ending, clients suffering severe financial hardship and unable to pay rent ⁴	Hard ship fund up to £250.00 off rent arrears. Use of the Council's Housing Solutions Fund to prevent and Relief homelessness
Ban on evictions proceedings until 20 th September, giving a further 6 months until March 2021	Prepare for a significant increase in cases, may need additional resources using via agency worker
Universal Credit claims increased therefore back log is 6 weeks	Continue to work alongside TAC whom service assists to commission. We also have good DWP links with the job centre
SWEP/ Winter Relief 2020/21 no shared sleeping spaces	Govt' current advice is that all shared sleeping spaces will remain closed. Make use of our own stock, use and pull some extra units in line with our TA offer, pass locks on all properties and in case of B&B, have COVID-19 secure check list and PPE provided to clients.
Local Lockdown, 2 nd spike and Rough Sleepers. People experiencing homelessness, experience challenges accessing health care services. Conditions may not have been diagnosed.	Refer to outbreak control plans and localised plans. Continue to use COVID-19 risk assessment and have targeted and tailored responses for individual clients being placed in TA and work with partners to offer peer support and in-reach/outreach services.
Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for clients and providers	The workforce supporting people experiencing rough sleeping all have access to PPE. Housing Solutions have worked with local providers on this.
Moving all Rough Sleepers on to further accommodation and not back to Rough sleeping	Code of guidance updated by MHCLG for the HA 1996 Pat VII has changed to give discretion for verified RS to be given Priority need, therefore, allowing the team to place clients in TA whilst we try to relief their homelessness.

9.0 FUTURE HOUSING SOLUTIONS

There is currently significant national and local activity around rough sleeping and homelessness including new funding for some areas and activities.

⁴ Appendix 3 – Case study

People experiencing rough sleeping and other forms of chronic homelessness are considered to be more at risk of severe illness from COVID-19. Previously, having not been identified as requiring shielding, they often face challenges accessing healthcare and other services and may be living in higher-risk settings. Therefore, local management of COVID-19 is vital to include this population of the community.

- 9.1** The [Government's 'Everyone in' campaign](#) safeguarded nearly 15,000 people in emergency accommodation, including those who came directly from the streets, people who became vulnerable to homelessness and rough sleeping during the pandemic and people previously sleeping in communal night shelters. Tamworth reported 16 clients whom we supported due to this strategy and worked with key strategic partners at Staffordshire County Council.
- 9.2** Following 'Everyone in', the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has invited local authorities and their partners to engage with the next stage of the COVID-19 rough sleeping accommodation response. This is to ensure that as few people as possible in emergency accommodation return to the streets and that those who remain on the street are supported to access accommodation and receive continued support when in their new tenancies. The aim of all this is to end rough sleeping for good. Following on from this, Tamworth submitted a presentation to MHCLG of the localised picture in July 2020⁵.
- 9.3** The [Next Steps Accommodation Programme](#) (NSAP) makes funding available to support local authorities and their partners to do this work. It is supported by expertise from MHCLG's Rough Sleeping Initiative (RSI) and Homelessness Advice and Support (HAST) adviser teams, under the oversight of the COVID-19 Rough Sleeping Taskforce.
- 9.4** The Housing Solutions team continue to be part of the County wide leadership group which considered submitting a bid for the above to conduct collaborative working and making sure those vulnerable rough sleepers receive all services they require. Discussions with HAST have suggested it would be more prudent for the Council to submit a bid under the rough sleeping initiative rounds (RSI4) than via the NEXT STEP programme as demand is likely to be significant from City and Metropolitan boroughs.
- 9.5** HQN have drafted an evidence base supporting the production of a homelessness and rough sleeping strategy, likely to be presented to Cabinet by December 2020. The evidence base will drive the strategic objectives and include a spending and delivery plan maximising the use of flexible housing support grant and solutions funding. This delivery plan will inevitably include opportunities to explore:
- housing first models
 - mortgage rescue schemes

⁵ Appendix 4 – Rough Sleeping update to MHCLG July 2020

- targeted mental health resources (as was tested at the night shelter 2019/2020)
- links to SCC services around drug and alcohol misuse, i.e. humankind/New Era etc
- development of 'tenancy ready' and outcome based tenancy sustainability initiatives

10. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

There are non-directly arising from this briefing note, but clearly financial implications have arisen and where appropriate COVID-19 &/or alternative funding sources, for example Tamworth did secure SCC funding of £12,925 for rough sleeping which contributed to the preparations for homeless accommodation.

11. LEGAL/RISK IMPLICATIONS

Homelessness decisions are strictly controlled through legislation and therefore subject to judicial review if service users believe the Council has not adhered to guidance and this could be escalated through County Court.

12. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

All activities to give due consideration to the Councils Equality and Diversity Policy- Making Equality Real in Tamworth (MERIT)

The implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 means that the council now has additional duties to prevent homelessness and we must help to secure accommodation for all eligible households, regardless of whether they are in a 'priority need' category. This has increased the help given to single people and those without dependent children, especially single men, who were previously not in a 'priority need' category. They are still not necessarily in a priority need category, it is just that priority need is not a consideration when we are trying to prevent or relieve homelessness, except in determining eligibility for temporary accommodation.

However, it is noted that the immigration status of some households may restrict the assistance that they can be offered under the homelessness legislation, during COVID this has been set aside on request of MHCLG.

13. SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

Housing Solutions is a statutory function with the Council and is bound by the legislation of Housing Act 1996 Part VI and Part VII.

14. REPORT AUTHOR

Tina Mustafa – Assistant Director Neighbourhoods

Sarah Finnegan- Head of Homelessness and Housing Solutions

15. APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – COVID- 19 Protect Checklist (B&B)

Appendix 2 - Diagram – What is Homeless Prevention

Appendix 3 – Diagram - Key roles and partners that Housing Solutions has and how they link services.

Appendix 4 – COVID - 19 Case Study

Appendix 1

COVID protect checklist list

Covid protect aims to protect the health of those most vulnerable to severe diseases from COVID 19.

The Clinical Homeless Sector Plan describes the most vulnerable in the homeless population as:

- Those who meet the current NHS definition of Extremely Vulnerable (see appendix 1 for list)
- Those who meet the NHS COVID 19 High risk criteria, any adult instructed to get a flu jab each year on medical grounds (see appendix 1 for full list)
- Those who are aged over 55 years old

This checklist should be completed for everyone who meets the COVID Protect criteria described above.

Client Name:

GP:

Accommodation Name & Address:

Item:	Answer:
Does the individual have en-suite bathroom facilities?	
If not en-suite facilities are available can a shared bathroom be marked for single use by the individual?	
Can a shared bathroom be cleaned between each use?	
Has hand washing and respiratory hygiene been explained to all living in the accommodation? Advice on this can be found in appendix 2	
Does the individual have all food provided?	
If not is it possible for the individual to have single use of a kitchen facility?	
Are ingredients and cooking equipment provided to the individual?	
If using a shared kitchen can it be organised so that the individual has set times to use the kitchen own their own?	

The following must be fully completed in all cases:

Completed by (Housing Solutions Officer):

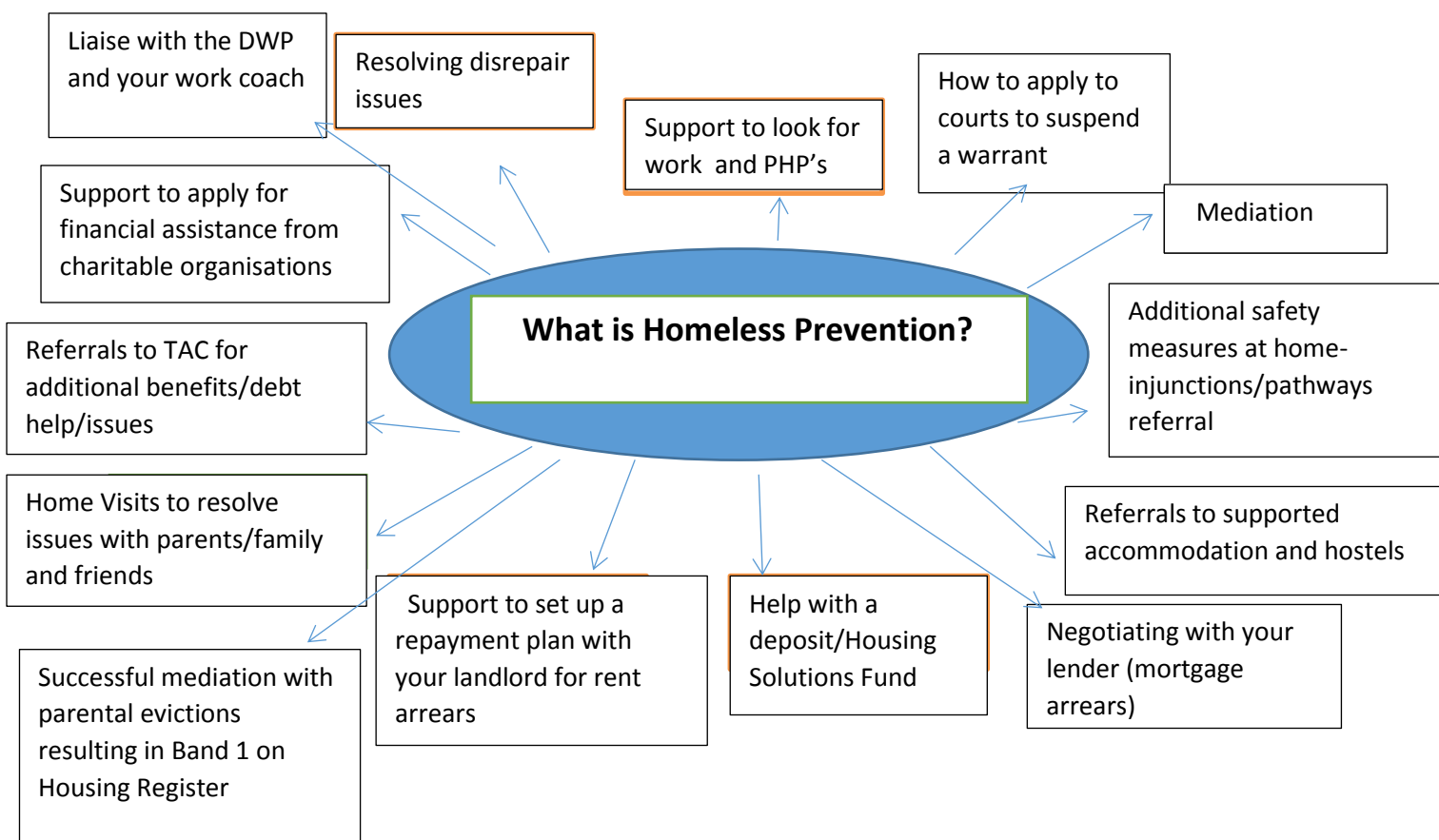
Date:

Date customer date into TA:

Date customer to be notified by:

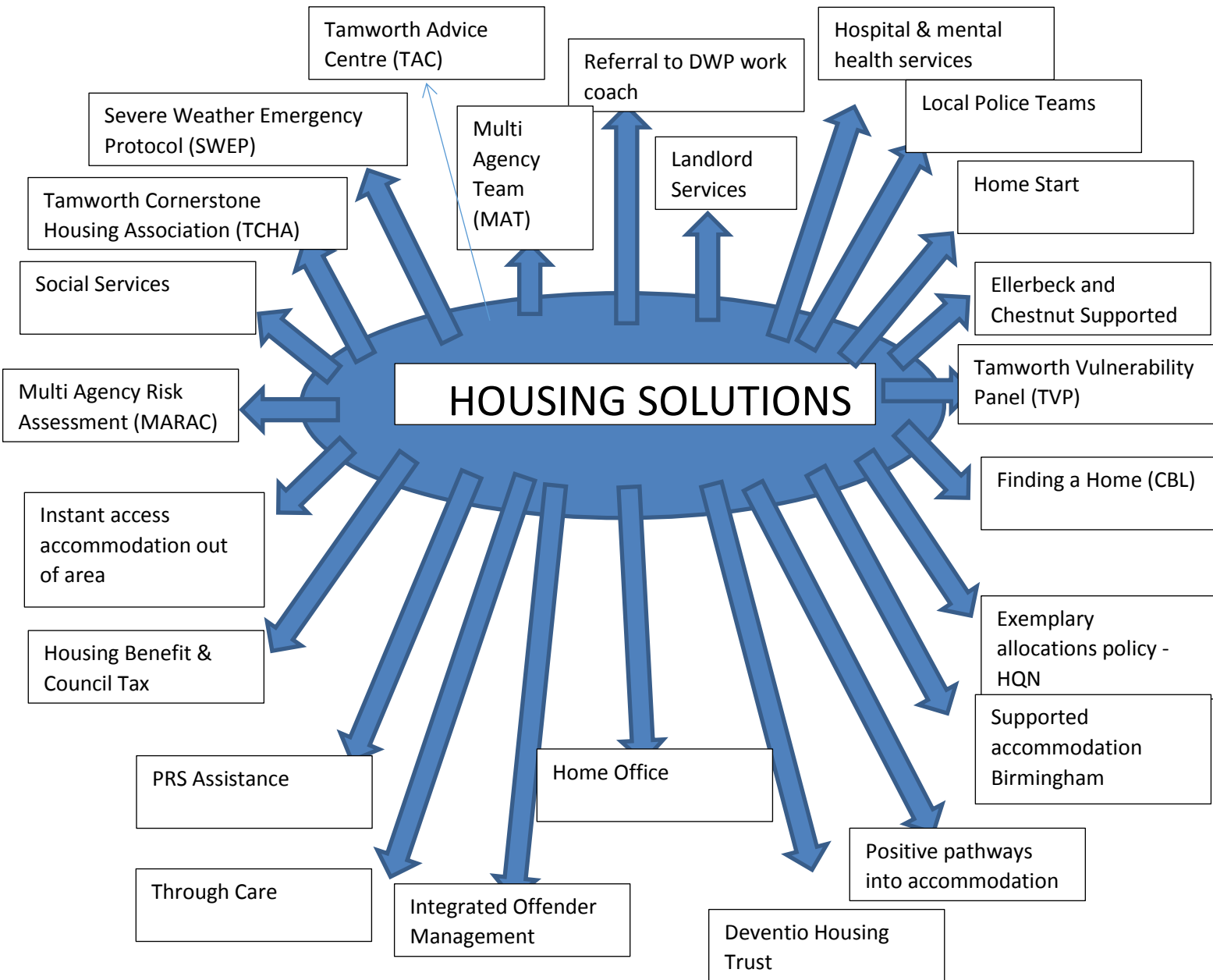
Please see next page below for back office regard for risk management.

Appendix 2 - Homelessness Prevention:



Appendix 3

Diagram of all the key roles and partners that the Housing Solutions Service has and how they link services.



Appendix 4

COVID- 19 Case Study- July 2020

“Mr Y is a 19 year old male who had been living in a private rented tenancy for 11 month; he approached the service as he has been served notice by his landlord due to rent arrears, the rent arrears amounted to £1350.00. There had been no issues with the tenancy since he had been there and there were no rent arrears on the tenancy until the Covid-19 pandemic and lock down restrictions began. The Housing Solutions Officer confirmed with the letting agent that prior to COVID- 19 there had been no issues with the tenancy, no rent arrears or ASB. His rent was always paid on time and in full.

Prior to lockdown Mr Y was working two jobs in order to pay the rent on the property, at McDonalds in the day and in a bar at night. Due to the lockdown measures imposed, both her employments had ended at short notice and she had a sudden loss of income and therefore the rent arrears had accrued. Mr Y did receive furlough pay from McDonalds, however this was not enough to cover all his bills and daily living expenses. At the point of approaching the service Mr Y had been contacted by both his employers who had confirmed he could return to work once lockdown had lifted, therefore, meaning his current address would return to be affordable.

It was agreed that as Mr Y was threatened with homelessness and following a financial assessment, it was deemed that it was affordable for him to continue to rent following his return to work. It was agreed after further checks and investigation to pay the £1350.00 rent arrears using the housing solutions fund in order to prevent him from losing his accommodation and being homeless. The payment was made by the team, Mr Y returned to work and was re-issued a new 12 month tenancy agreement which he is currently occupying and paying full rent on. This case study highlights the importance of early intervention and how as a service, Housing Solutions can work flexibly to the needs of those who are homeless or at threat of homelessness in order to sustain tenancies where it possible. In this case, Mr Y did not require emergency accommodation by the Council as a result of being street homeless, he remaining in her current accommodation.

