

Decision Report / Scrutiny Report
Committee: Adults & Health Scrutiny
Meeting or Proposed Decision Date – 21st
November 2024
Key Decision – No



Report Title: Somerset Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy and Action Plan (2025-2030)

Chair of Committee:

Executive Member(s): Cllr Sarah Wakefield

Local Member(s) and Division(s) affected: ALL

Executive Director: Mel Lock – Executive Director Adults Services & Housing

Executive Summary

It is statutory requirement for Somerset Council to have a Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy. The current strategy was adopted in January 2020, and we are required to review and adopt a new strategy every five years. The current draft strategy has been commissioned and prepared by the Somerset Homelessness Reduction Board (HRB). Public consultation occurred during Summer 2024. Scrutiny is asked to consider the consultation response, and to scrutinise the emerging draft Vision, Impact Statement, Principles, and Themes.

Recommendations

Scrutiny Committee is asked to:

Acknowledge the SHRSS consultation response

Consider and comment on the proposed draft SHRSS Vision, Impact Statement, Principles, Themes

Recommend (subject to any required amendments) the adoption of the SHRSS by the Somerset Council Executive

Reasons for Proposals

The SHRSS is a statutory requirement. The current Somerset wide strategy has an end date of 2024, and this was extended (with the permission of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities) until March 2025. This new draft strategy is expected to be approved in early 2025.

Without an adopted SHRSS, we are open to legal challenge in relation to our homelessness decisions.

Report Authors: Mark Leeman, Strategy Lead (Housing) and Jan Errington, Strategic Housing Manager

Contact Details: 01823 219486, mark.leeman@somerset.gov.uk, 07919397043, jan.errington@somerset.gov.uk

Main report and supporting information

Background and purpose of report

1. Somerset Council (as the local housing authority) has a statutory duty to prepare a Homelessness Strategy. Once adopted, review must occur within five years. The current strategy was adopted in early 2020. Given the local pressures to establish a Unitary Council, the Department of Levelling Up Housing and Communities (DLUHC) gave Somerset an extension to March 2025 to adopt a new homelessness strategy. Alongside this, there has been recent national focus on rough sleeping, with the publication of a national Rough Sleeping Strategy (Ending Rough Sleeping for Good, 2022). Somerset has specific challenges in relation to rough sleeping. It is therefore appropriate to prepare a Somerset Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy (SHRSS).

Homelessness and Rough Sleeping are 'system priorities' for Somerset. The Somerset Board (the Integrated Care Partnership/Health and Wellbeing Board) recently restated its commitment to 'Improving Health and Care Through the Home in Somerset' - a memorandum of understanding (MoU) for closer collaboration between health, care and housing services. Homelessness and rough sleeping are one of three key themes within the MoU.

Closer collaboration between health, care and housing services occurred during the Covid pandemic. The 'Everyone In' initiative required homes and support to be provided to all rough sleepers. 'Everyone In' was successful in Somerset, resulting in the loss of no rough sleepers to Covid. This was attributable to the excellent collaboration that occurred between all relevant services and providers. In response, the Somerset Health and Wellbeing Board (HWBB) determined that the excellent partnership work around homelessness/rough sleeping should be maintained and developed. To coordinate this, the HWBB agreed to the establishment of a Homelessness Reduction Board (HRB).

The Somerset HRB was established in 2021. It consists of representation of all key partners, including council and NHS services (commissioning and operational), alongside the provider sector. The HRB commissioned the review of the SHRSS and will be responsible for coordinating its delivery.

2. The draft SHRSS is provided at Appendix 1. The draft SHRSS was developed through a subgroup of the HRB, and its production involved extensive engagement and consultation. The SHRSS describes the national and local context to homelessness and rough sleeping within Somerset. Some of the key factors include:
 - Welfare reform
 - Cost of living crisis
 - Affordability gap between housing and income
 - Rurality
 - Demographic challenges
 - Hinkley Point C impacts

- Accommodation need – pressing needs include social and affordable housing, 1 bed units, access to the private rented sector
 - New accommodation supply
 - High numbers of rough sleepers (6th highest in England)
 - High numbers of Van Dwellers
 - Rising costs of Temporary Accommodation
 - Rising number of clients presenting with severe multiple disadvantage
 - Resourcing pressures
3. The draft SHRSS (Appendix 1) presents a strategy for addressing homelessness and rough sleeping. This is presented within a framework comprising a 'Vision', 'Impact Statement', key 'Principles' and cross-cutting 'Themes'. The draft SHRSS is not complete and requires further input and editing. The view of Scrutiny is sought on the draft content.
 4. Sitting alongside the SHRSS will be an Action Plan. This will describe activity that is to be developed within each of three key 'Principles'. The Action Plan is not for adoption by Somerset Council. The Action Plan will be owned and developed by the HRB. Somerset Council (various services) are a key partner within the remit of the HRB.
 5. Key content of the Action Plan is likely to include (among others):
 - Embedding Lived Experience in our decision making
 - Delivering more training around trauma, person centred support, executive dysfunction etc
 - Enhanced support for those with Protected Characteristics
 - Enhanced support for those leaving hospital, prison and other institutions
 - Better use of data sharing with partners (e.g. Transform)
 - Enhanced connectivity with local communities to provide early help and prevention
 - Investment in partnerships that support severe multiple disadvantage/rough sleepers
 - Introduce a procedure for Homeless Mortality Review
 - Reducing expenditure on Temporary Accommodation
 - Addressing the gaps in accommodation provision
 - Improving access to the Private Rented Sector

Links to Council Plan and Medium-Term Financial Plan

6. There is a strong fit with the Council Plan which states 'Somerset Council will build a fairer, greener, resilient, more flourishing Somerset that cares for the most vulnerable and listens to you'.
7. We are currently experiencing a national housing crisis, which is disproportionately impacting the most vulnerable in society. The SHRSS and Action Plan seeks to support those that are vulnerable to homelessness. Furthermore, some of the most vulnerable people in our society are rough sleepers, with an average life expectancy that is 30 years less than the average person. The SHRSS has been shaped and developed through the engagement of Lived Experience i.e. those with direct knowledge of homelessness and the harm that it can do. Working with our partners within the HRB, we have engaged and listened to our customers to understand how we can better improve our service delivery. This is a key feature of the SHRSS and Action Plan.

8. There are no direct impacts on the MTFP, although please note the content of the Financial and Risk Implications section below

Other options considered

9. No other options have been considered. The development of a Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy is heavily prescribed within statutory guidance. The structure of the SHRSS, its Vision, Principles and Themes, were developed through extensive engagement and consultation activity. The draft SHRSS has the approval of the HRB.

Key considerations for the Council

Consultation and feedback

10. The HRB established a project team in late 2023 that comprises Somerset Council staff (Homelessness teams and other housing services, Adults Social Care, Children's Services, Public Health) and partners such as Second Step, Homeless Link, and others
11. The HRB have been providing ongoing guidance and scrutiny through their quarterly meetings and bespoke workshop sessions. This includes specific sessions with Registered Housing Providers and Somerset Independence Plus.
12. Public Consultation took place from 29th July to 23rd September and over 600 responses were received. A large proportion of these were received from the public (just over 90%) with the remainder coming from organisations working in the sector. Many of the public respondents (over 50%) had direct lived experience of homelessness. A summary of these responses is provided at Appendix 2.
13. In addition, through Second Step, we have sought the direct input of both Lived Experience, Outreach services and Supported Housing providers. A summary is also included within Appendix 2.
14. The consultation responses have been used to inform the Equalities Impact Assessment, alongside the key thrust of the emerging Vision, Impact Statement, Principles and cross-cutting Themes. Importantly, the response is also being used to shape the content of the emerging Action Plan.

Financial and Risk Implications

11. There are no direct financial implications arising from this strategy. The strategy and emerging action plan will reflect available / reduced resources. However, we are experiencing a significant housing crisis, and the general financial situation (both locally and nationally) is challenging, and will limit the scope of possible interventions. This will be a matter of debate within the HRB as it develops the SHRSS Action Plan.
12. If this strategy is not approved, then the council has no statutory basis on which to make homelessness decisions. This will leave the council exposed to legal challenges.

13. There is a SHRSS risk register, that is updated regularly by the SHRSS project team. One of the key risks is around system resources (staff and budgets), and our ability to improve our prevention work. This is compounded by a turbulent external operating environment. The content and delivery of the SHRSS action plan will need to flex according to changing circumstances. The SHRSS contains a list of 'Somerset asks' of Central Government.

Legal and Procurement Implications

14. The adoption of the SHRSS presents no direct procurement implications. The SHRSS recommends the delivery of a range of activity (as outlined within the three Principles). This activity may have procurement implications around how we co-produce and commission homelessness services in the future.
15. Failure to adopt a homelessness strategy by March 2025 will leave us open to legal challenge regarding the validity of our homelessness decisions.

HR / Workforce Implications

16. The adoption of the SHRSS presents no direct HR/Workforce implications. However, future consideration and delivery of the action plan will challenge our workforce in areas such as culture (how we do things), training (need for more training in certain areas) and deployment (can we work differently/collaboratively, and flex to changing circumstances). This relates to more than just the homelessness workforce, and will impact on partner services such as Adult Social Care, Health etc

Equalities Implications

17. A robust Equalities Impact Assessment has been developed throughout the strategy development process, aided by the support of the Council's Equalities Officer (who is a member of the SHRSS project Team). The draft EIA is available at Appendix 3.
18. There will be a final draft Equalities Impact Assessment submitted when the strategy goes to Executive for approval in January.
19. The work to support the SHRSS has identified a range of current issues and challenges that directly impact all protected characteristics. The draft EIA and associated draft EIA action plan propose mitigation measures. These are being considered within the development of the SHRSS Action Plan.

Community Safety Implications

20. Adoption of this homelessness and rough sleeping strategy is expected to have positive community safety impacts through the provision of improved services to support rough sleepers. For example, better support for rough sleepers is likely to see a reduction in town centre anti-social behaviour (note: not all rough sleepers are a cause of anti-social behaviour).

21. A key cross-cutting theme of the SHRSS is 'Improving Health and Wellbeing'. Significantly, this promotes improved access to health and wellbeing services. We have already made good progress in this area, through the Homeless Health Nursing Team (NHS). This service is making a dramatic positive impact on an individual's quality of life. The SHRSS promotes the need for further innovative service provision.

Climate Change and Sustainability Implications

22. There are no direct impacts for climate change and sustainability in this strategy however the related issue of increased provision of new-build affordable and social housing (and associated consideration of sustainable construction) will be considered within the review of the local plan.
23. Flooding can have a dramatic impact on residents and homeless service delivery. This was witnessed in the extreme during the flooding of the Summer Levels 2013/14. Such considerations (and how we respond) are built into both service planning and civil contingency arrangements
24. Extreme weather (heat, cold and flooding) can present specific difficulties for those sleeping rough. The HRB has worked with partners to develop improved Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) arrangements

Health and Safety Implications

25. A common theme of both partner engagement and public consultation is the need (wherever possible and appropriate) to provide face-to-face service delivery. The feasibility of providing enhanced face-to-face service delivery requires exploration. However, should this be achievable, then the risk implications will need to be managed through appropriate health and safety procedures.

Health and Wellbeing Implications

26. The Somerset Board has a Memorandum of Understanding concerning 'health, care and housing', recognising the need for each of these systems to collaborate more effectively in the sphere of homelessness and rough sleeping. This topic is therefore a 'system' priority'.
27. In response, the SHRSS has a focus on 'improving health and wellbeing' (this is a 'cross-cutting' theme within the strategy), seeking to improve service user access to health and care related services. The SHRSS seeks to deliver this (in part) by working towards a system that encourages co-production and the joint commissioning of service delivery
28. The three 'Principles' within the SHRSS feature prominently in the recommendations of our 2023 Homeless Health Needs Assessment ([Homeless Health Needs Assessment 2023](#)).

Social Value

29. Social Value is a factor that needs to be considered within the development and implementation of the SHRSS Action Plan. The HRB is still at an early stage of developing a programme of work. The emerging work programme will challenge the way we currently commission services, and hopefully lead the way to co-commissioning across systems, opening doors to innovation, and opportunities for a range of partners to become involved. Conversations around social value will feature strongly.

Background Papers

30. Various background documents are referenced within the SHRSS (Appendix 1)

Appendices

- Appendix 1 – Proposed Draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy 2025 – 2030
- Appendix 2 – Summary of consultation feedback
- Appendix 3 – Draft Equalities Impact Assessment (version 2)

Report assurance checklist ahead of report publication (for Audit, Executive, and Full Council)

	Officer Name	Date Completed
Legal & Governance Implications	David Clark	
Finance & Procurement	Maria Christofi / Nicola Hix	
Workforce (*)	Dawn Bettridge	
Asset Management (*)	Simon Lewis	
Executive Director	Relevant Executive Director	
Executive Lead Member	Relevant Lead Member	
Consulted:	Councillor Name	
Local Division Members	List local members	
Opposition Spokesperson(s)	Relevant Opposition Spokesperson	
Relevant Scrutiny Chair(s)	Relevant Chair	

Note:

Directors may nominate additional officers to act on their behalf

(*) – these areas only need to be consulted on proposals if the proposals have workforce or asset management implications

Reports will not be published if assurance checklist has not been adequately completed – report author to liaise with Democratic Services well ahead of publication deadline