COMMUNITY AND HOUSING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE	

Date of Meeting	Wednesday 11th October 2023
Report Subject	Temporary Accommodation Homelessness Audit – Action Plan Update
Cabinet Member	Cabinet Member for Housing and Regeneration
Report Author	Chief Officer (Housing and Communities)
Type of Report	Operational

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an update on progress with the Temporary Accommodation Audit Action Plan. The audit was presented to Communities and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee in February 2022 and Governance and Audit Committee in March 2022. The report was categorised as a red audit report and highlighted areas for improvement.

An action plan was developed in response to the internal audit and the Council's Audit Team will be commencing a follow up review of the service to assess progress against the action plan. Communities and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee requested an update in advance of this follow up audit work.

RECOMMENDATIONS	
1	That the Committee note the contents of the report ahead of the follow up audit work to be completed by the Councils Audit Team.

REPORT DETAILS

1.00	**EXPLAINING THE TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION HOMELESSNESS AUDIT RESPONSE**
1.01	**Background to Temporary Accommodation** Temporary Accommodation is 'interim housing' provided to people who are homeless (singles / couples / families) and are owed duties under the Housing Wales Act (2014) by Flintshire County Council. The service was previously delivered through the Homeless Team within the Housing and Prevention Service and had a small core team of two staff and a senior manager supporting operational delivery. The team currently report to the manager for the Housing Register, however, as part of the Housing and Prevention Service restructure, the 'interim housing' function will be managed through a newly formed Homefinder Team and the Housing Register Manager will assume the role of Homefinder Manager with responsibility for: 1) Housing Advice 2) Common Housing Register 3) Interim Housing 4) Move On The established portfolio of properties for 'interim housing' is a mix of houses of multiple occupation (HMO), self-contained flats and houses which are leased from private landlords, along with a small number of Council HRA properties. However, due to additional demands on the homeless service, and like the majority of Welsh Local Authorities, a significant number of bed and breakfast and hotel placements are now necessary to meet demand. As of August 2023, there were a total of 220 homeless households assisted with 'interim housing'. 187 of these had a 1 bed need and 33 were families. 138 households were placed in bed and breakfast and hotel settings and five households within other holidays type lets. A number of these are secured by way of block bookings but in recent months the growth in demand has required an increase in one off booking arrangements. Whilst this present challenges operationally with securing accommodation, it avoids the Council being locked into higher levels of block bookings with hoteliers as there is no commitment when rooms are not required. Hotels and holiday lets are classed as emergency housing, and occupation is via a licence agreement. At the end of August 2023 there were 17 homeless households housed within Council housing properties and 34 households within private sector leased accommodation. These properties are secured through a lease or management agreement and then licenses for occupation or occupation contracts as per the Renting Homes Wales Act 2016 are issued to those people who reside in the properties. Properties are dispersed across the county and often located within or close to larger towns in Flintshire to

	enable access to local public services and community infrastructure for homeless households. The Glanrafon Homeless Hub provides accommodation and support for 26 single people and is routinely at 100% occupancy. Residents are issued licence agreements for this accommodation. Demand for homeless accommodation has grown significantly during the calendar year. This can in part be attributed to changes in legislation with the introduction of the 11th category of 'Priority Need for Rough Sleepers' (and those at risk of rough sleeping), the cost-of-living crisis, increases in people's complexity of needs linked to the established priority needs categories and an increasingly difficult private rented sector which is unaffordable for many, and which has significantly reduced supply. Demand is likely to continue to grow in the short to medium term, and there are limited homes to meet the needs of homeless households.
1.02	**The Audit Findings** As outlined in the audit report shared with Overview and Scrutiny Committee in February 2022 the key findings of the audit were: - The service embraced the change in legislation in response to the COVID 19 pandemic to ensure no individual was homeless and sleeping on the street. - A Temporary Accommodation Policy was not in place to provide guidance on how the service objectives will be achieved. - Processes were not in place to provide guidance on how to deal with refused offers for permanent accommodation, to oversee rent income, arrears and write off, or to monitor contract agreements. - Management information is limited and does not demonstrate effective monitoring of service delivery performance. - The Open Housing System was not being utilised to manage stock, tenancies, repair work or rental income to be able to effectively deliver on service objectives. - Lack of evidence of management information being used to inform decision making and service planning. - Quality of data underpinning risk indicators may not be reliable. - Decision making controls are not documented or evidenced as operating consistently.
1.03	**Responding to the Audit Findings** A detailed service improvement plan was developed to pick up on all the actions required to deliver on the audit recommendations with a stronger focus placed on the core principles of housing management, support for those in interim housing and move on options in line with the principles of Rapid Rehousing. Policy, procedures, and systems improvements were all key elements of the response to the audit alongside a move away from single person dependency, greater transparency and accountability for decision making and the improved use of data within the day-to-day operational management of interim housing and service planning.

| | A copy of the audit action plan as updated at the end of September 2023, is attached to this report as Appendix 1.

Whilst progress has been made on all actions there have been significant challenges impacting on the delivery of the action plan and some completion dates have been pushed back. The reasons for this are listed below within the resources section of this report (Section 2). |
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| 1.04 | **Audit Follow Up Work**
Senior management have met with the Council's Internal Audit Team in recent weeks and those actions that are completed will soon be tested and evidence of completion reviewed and revised dates for completion of outstanding actions have been considered. Communities and Housing Overview and Scrutiny and Governance and Audit Committees will receive further updates. |

2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS
2.01	The following issues have impacted on the ability to respond to the audit recommendations and service improvement process and have clear resource implications:

Staff capacity and turnover
There have been several staff changes and ongoing challenges regarding staffing in the Housing and Prevention Service as reported to Overview and Scrutiny Committee in previous reports relating to homelessness. Most notably a change in management personnel in the Homeless Team, sickness absence and turnover within the service and core staff for temporary accommodation. The restructure of the Housing and Prevention Service and the creation of the new 'Homefinder Team' will address these concerns moving forward.

Management capacity (including project management)
Due to a significant period of sustained growth in demand for homelessness services and other strategic pieces of work, management capacity to address some of the issues within the audit plan has been limited.

Demands on the temporary accommodation service
In the months January 2023 through to August 2023 (8 months) the need for emergency accommodation placements (hotels and bed and breakfasts) has increased by 134% (61 in January 2023 to 143 in August 2023) and the resources required to manage these operational pressures has been a significant pressure for the service. Ensuring service delivery, officer support and management, guidance for front line workers to sustain support for people in homeless accommodation and securing additional emergency housing has been a huge challenge.

ICT support service capacity |

	Whilst the initial audit action plan focussed on the implementation of the Open Housing Private Sector Module for the ICT system improvements needed for managing temporary accommodation, other portfolio projects has meant limited ICT resources have been available. Further consideration was given to how the existing homeless case management system could be utilised to integrate homelessness systems functionality to seamlessly link with the management of temporary accommodation. Significant work has been done to the 'back office' to enable the functionality required by front line staff and to enable case work, management reporting and oversight but further work is required.

3.00	**IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT**
3.01	As previously reported, by way of additional context to the audit, the following risks and mitigations were identified as part of the planned response to the temporary accommodation audit findings.

Risk: The initial audit identified a number of risks associated with the previous ways of working and operating practices

Mitigation: Successful delivery of the service improvement plan has addressed several significant areas of risk and strengthened service delivery and management oversight. Increasing demand for homeless support and accommodation continue to be a risk area as outlined in the Corporate Risk Register, but greater visibility of management information is enabling far more robust planning and oversight of budgetary pressures as reported to Communities and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 13th September 2023.

Risk: Historic poor management practices and control measures relating to the temporary accommodation portfolio mean opportunities such as joining the Welsh Government Private Sector Leasing Scheme will be too high risk and potentially missed.

Mitigation: Successful delivery of the service improvement plan has addressed several significant areas of risk and strengthened service delivery providing opportunity for Flintshire to have confidence to engage in the roll out of the Welsh Government Private Sector Leasing Scheme and this will be revisited later in 2023/2024. Significant work is already under way to take on more properties to the existing Flintshire Lease Scheme for use as Temporary Accommodation via lease arrangements and additional properties such as The Swan Inn (Connahs Quay) and Duke Street flats (Flint) have already been brought into use as temporary accommodation with a further four flats in Park Lane due for completion in August 2023. In addition, a number of long-term leases are being explored with private landlords across the county.

Two further risks have been identified in relation to successfully delivering the audit action plan and enabling the long-term desired outcomes for the accommodation needs of the Homeless Service. |

Risk: Failure to embed the positive practices delivered so far by not resourcing the service appropriately following significant increases in demand for interim housing within the last nine months.

Mitigation: The restructure of the Housing and Prevention Service has been reviewed with consideration given to additional core temporary accommodation staff and the use of existing wider service support staff to compliment support service delivery. Additional funding and changes to the restructure will enable an increase in staffing capacity. There is also an additional focus on Housing Support Grant (HSG) funded staff and financial resources supporting delivery of temporary accommodation services through a 'whole service' approach to ease the financial burden on the Council Fund. Completing the audit action plan and enabling time to embed positive practice on the back of this work will improve service delivery further over time.

Risk: Failure to respond to the significant increased pressures on homeless accommodation through a lack of move on plans and access to housing to support households to exit homelessness through social housing and private sector housing options.

Mitigation: Delivery of the Rapid Rehousing Plan and continued commitment to initiatives such as the 50% homeless direct lets approach for the Common Housing Register and the sheltered housing review, along with other responses to the supply challenge, will ensure Flintshire's social housing stock better meets the needs of homeless households across the county and that the local private rented sector remains a viable housing option for those who experience homelessness.

4.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED / CARRIED OUT
4.01	None.

5.00	APPENDICES
5.01	Appendix 1: Temporary accommodation service improvement plan including progress to date (as at end Sept 2023).

6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
6.01	Not applicable.

7.00	**CONTACT OFFICER DETAILS**
7.01	**Contact Officer:** Martin Cooil – Housing & Prevention Service Manager **Telephone:** 07880 423234 **E-mail:** martin.cooil@flintshire.gov.uk

8.00	**GLOSSARY OF TERMS**
8.01	**Housing (Wales) Act 2014** The legislation the underpins the homelessness system within Wales including peoples' statutory rights and Local Authorities duties and responsibilities. **Rapid Rehousing** Rapid rehousing is an approach for people whose first and most important need is to access housing; with a lack of it often the main reason why they are homeless. Rapid rehousing helps people settle quickly back with family or friends, into private rented, social housing or other affordable and safe long-term housing options. **Housing Support Grant (HSG)** The HSG programme brings the historic funding streams for Supporting People, Homelessness Prevention and Rent Smart Wales grants into one single funding stream. **Open Housing** The Capita based system used for Housing Management and Housing Applications by Flintshire County Council for HRA housing and property management as well as for applications for the Common Housing Register. **Back Office** This in-house ICT system linked to the Council's Customer Relationship Management (CRM) solution is used to manage housing triages, homelessness case management and now temporary accommodation. This bespoke in-house IT solution enables a seamless integration of client data when residents are accessing multiple services within the Housing and Prevention Service.