

Homelessness services – Flintshire County Council

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Summary report

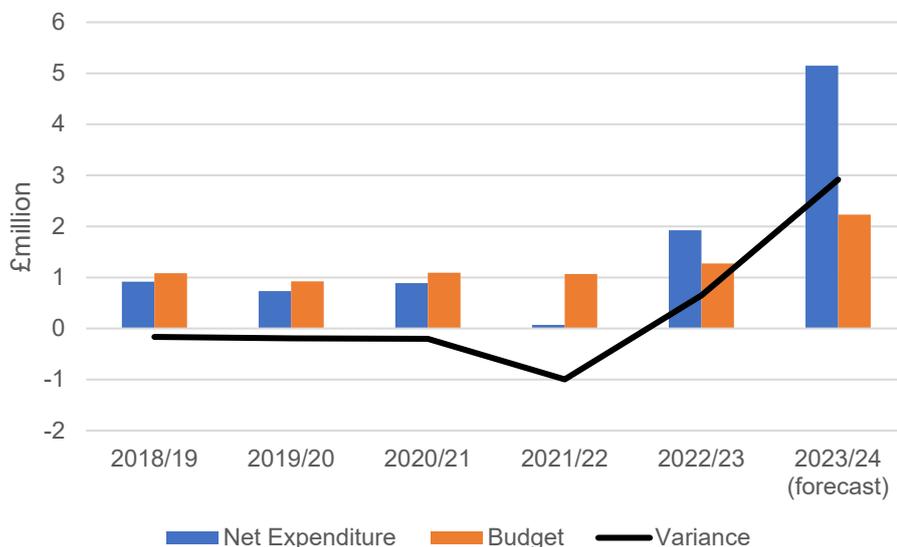
Context

- 1 The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 places a statutory duty on each Council in Wales to formulate a homelessness strategy, which should achieve the following objectives:
 - the prevention of homelessness;
 - that suitable accommodation is and will be available for people who are or may become homeless; and
 - that satisfactory support is available for who are or may become homeless.
- 2 In 2022, Flintshire County Council (the Council) approved its own Housing Support Programme Strategy, which sets out the strategic direction for homelessness prevention and housing related support services for 2022-2026
- 3 In a 2018 national report, the Auditor General reported that homelessness ‘...is more than a housing problem with much of what of what causes homelessness being outside the control and influence of a council’s homelessness services.’
- 4 One of the recommendations of the report was:
 - ‘We recommend that councils set out and agree their expectations of partners identifying how they work together to alleviate homelessness. The agreement should be reviewed regularly, and all partners’ performance reviewed to identify areas for improvement.’
- 5 Currently, the Council faces several external risks that may potentially increase the number of households seeking support from the homelessness service. Given these factors, it is timely to review the Council’s approach to homelessness prevention.
- 6 We undertook the review during the period April 2023 to October 2023.

Current situation

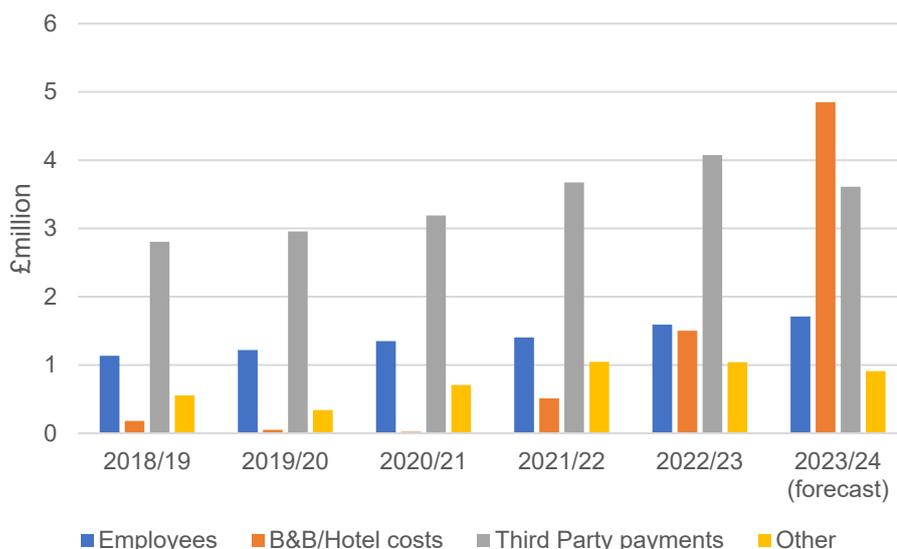
- 7 As at month 5 in the 2023-24 financial year, budget and net expenditure data for Housing Solutions showed some of the pressures facing the service currently. Although the budget has risen since COVID, the forecast net expenditure in 2023-24 is five times higher than pre-COVID levels. The forecast overspend for the service in 2023-24 at that time was £2.9 million.

Exhibit 1: Housing Solutions spend, 2018-2019 to 2023-2024 (forecast)



8 An analysis of net expenditure by area shows that the increase in overall net expenditure is almost wholly accounted for by the increase in bed & breakfast and hotel costs. As at month five of the 2023-24 financial year, the council forecasted a spend of £4.847 million on bed & breakfast / hotel accommodation in 2023-24 compared to £1.503 million in 2022-23.

Exhibit 2: Housing Solutions spend by area, 2018-19 to 2023-24 (forecast)



'Other' includes: premises, transport, transfer payments and supplies and services (excluding B&B/Hotel costs)

9 A Section 62 assessment is completed for every individual or household that applies for access to homelessness services. In 2018/19, there were 1,102 applications in Flintshire. In 2021/22 and

2022-23 there were 671 and 911 respectively. Comparing the data across this period is difficult due to the impact of Covid.

What we found

- 10 Our review sought to answer the question: In seeking to address homelessness, is the Council adapting its strategic intent to deliver a long-term sustainable preventative approach?

We found that: the Council is delivering a high quality service, but this is unsustainable with its current funding

The Council has a good understanding of the current and future situation

- 11 The Council understands the factors impacting on the homelessness situation it currently faces and how these factors are changing over time. It draws on evidence from a range of internal and external sources, including:
- the use of commissioned research to understand the circumstances of households presenting to the service;
 - internal audit review of current housing stock;
 - review of the customer journey through the service to understand their perspective and experience;
 - the sharing of data with external partners; and
 - the development of a new Housing Solutions case management system (database), which will provide improved case management information.
- 12 The Council also draws on a range of evidence to understand future demand, which includes:
- mapping out the impact of increasing rent charges on the affordability of properties for residents;
 - the financial impact of tapering support from Welsh Government to help the Council support asylum seekers and refugees;
 - working with landlords to understand potential reduction in stock as landlords withdraw from the rental market; and
 - mapping the current stock of housing against demand to understand what types of properties will be required to support demand in the future.
- 13 This understanding of the factors impacting on homelessness in Flintshire allows the council to make informed decisions about service provision and identify factors that will impact on the service in the future.
- 14 Currently the Council does not regularly engage with service users to gain their perspective on services. This could lead to the Council providing services that do not meet the need of service users.

The Council collaborates well with partners but needs to improve awareness of service demands with political partners

- 15 The Homelessness service works well with partners and has communicated its strategy and objectives across service areas and with senior leaders and Members.
- 16 Internally, the service ran workshops with Members and officers to publicize the current Housing Support strategy, and the homelessness team continue to work with other service areas, for instance working with planning and housing services to identify and bring back into use empty properties not currently available to meet local housing needs.
- 17 The Homelessness service engages effectively with external partners, including:
 - Citizens Advice Flintshire
 - Shelter Cymru
 - Domestic Abuse Safety Unit
 - The Wallich; and
 - Probation service
- 18 The homelessness service has built an excellent reputation with external partners for its openness and professionalism. Partners told us that they felt that their input and professional judgement was valued and acted on by officers. The council has also run workshops with external partners to identify issues and share good practice.
- 19 The Council uses embedded staff members to improve partnership working. An officer from Shelter Cymru has worked in the Homelessness team for seven years and a Council Homelessness officer now works in the Early Help Hub. These arrangements have resulted in a low number of case reviews and improved collaboration and information sharing with external partners.
- 20 The strategic relationship with Registered Social Landlords is good. This allows the Council to understand the issues faced by landlords, and to find collaborative solutions, particularly around developing supported accommodation.
- 21 The Council interacts with a range of elected members, internal and external, who provide challenge to the service and represent constituents. However, engagement with political partners about individual cases takes up considerable resources within the homelessness service.

The Council is reviewing how it delivers its service strategically and operationally

- 22 The Homelessness service is facing an increase in demand, with presentations becoming more complex and expectations of service users higher than before.
- 23 The planned re-structure of the homelessness service shows that the Council understands the need to increase strategic and operational capacity. This re-structure is key and could provide direction for the service and provide assurance over the future of the service. The re-structure of the service will be funded through use of the Council Fund and Housing Support Grant.
- 24 Some activity carried out by the Homelessness service is aimed at reducing the risk of crisis and making savings in the long term. This activity, such as target hardening to allow families at risk of violence or abuse to stay in their existing property, aims to avoid re-housing families, minimise disruption and the risk of crisis, and reduce costs to the service. The Council currently does not

formally evaluate such projects. Without evaluating such projects, the Council cannot assure itself of the impact or value for money achieved.

The Council faces difficult decisions to ensure the service is sustainable in the future

- 25 As at month five of the 2023-24 financial year, the predicted overspend for housing solution services in 2023-24 is £2.96m. This follows a budget increase from £1.275m in 2022-23 to £2.232m in 2023-24.
- 26 Income to the service is higher than in pre-COVID years but is forecast to drop in 202-24 compared to 2022-23 (£6.285m to £5.93m). Total expenditure continues to rise and has done in every year since 2019-20. The forecast figure for 2023-24 is £11.078m, a potential increase of nearly £3m from 2022-23.
- 27 Net expenditure in 2023-24 is forecast to be £5.148m. This is an increase from the 2022-23 figure of £1.924m.
- 28 The Council is currently trying to provide a service to meet demand on a budget that does not meet this ambition.

Recommendations

- 29 To ensure the service is sustainable operationally and strategically, the Council ensures that funding is available to maintain its levels of service or make decisions on service delivery based on funds available.
- 30 The Council ensures arrangements for evaluating its homelessness activities are applied to all activities so it can provide assurance of its impact on service users and efficiencies.
- 31 To better understand the needs of residents, the Council should widen its engagement activity with residents to cover the development and evaluation of all services.



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