

Housing, Homelessness and Covid-19: Reflections and Lessons Learned

Report Summary

People experiencing homelessness face disproportionate rates of underlying health conditions and substance use disorders, stigma, and marginalization that often disenfranchise them from health and social service. In addition, living conditions contributed to a heightened risk of infection and adverse outcomes of COVID-19. The Housing, Homelessness and Covid-19 (HHC19) working group was set up to respond to the needs of the homeless population during the pandemic which met online on a weekly basis from March 2020 – March 2022. The working group comprised of members from housing teams across Warwickshire districts and boroughs (D&Bs) Warwickshire County Council (WCC) Public Health, WCC People Strategy & Commissioning, and South Warwickshire Foundation Trust (SWFT).

Partners in this working group had already begun working together and forming relationships from the WCC Homelessness Conference in Autumn 2018, which provided a solid foundation that grew with the work on the Preventing Homelessness in Warwickshire Strategy (PHWS). This report reveals not only the challenges the wide partnership has experienced, but also the wealth of learning opportunities that can be used to inform future provision and policy.

It has now been well-documented that, alongside the work of the voluntary sector, the rapid steps taken by national and local government helped to save lives and to reduce the potential for hospitalisations due to Covid-19 of those experiencing homelessness in England. The pandemic response resulted in more collaboration and joined up working across the sector and across local authorities and service provisions. The HHC19 partnership worked closely with a broad range of partners including voluntary and charitable sectors. Housing teams have successfully worked with a number of rough sleepers that have been entrenched for a significant period and were able to move individuals into stable accommodation and secure next step units as a result of the Everyone In initiative. In addition, there was greater recognition and visibility of the diversity amongst those experiencing or threatened with homelessness, including 'hidden' groups, such as an increase in 'sofa surfers' discovered in Rugby.

Outcomes that resulted from this partnership were commended for their health approach and being innovative and ahead of the game. When the Joint Committee on Immunisation and Vaccination agreed to expand the definition of vulnerable individuals to include people who experienced homelessness and rough sleeping, the physical health Nurse Outreach to the Homeless Service provision was already in place in Warwickshire, set up and running for several months. The partnership

also described improvements in local ways of working, with the hope that these practices would continue and develop moving forward.

Challenges during this period included data sharing between agencies. During the vaccine rollout, housing team officers were unable to determine which clients were vaccinated and which were not. Being aware of individual vaccination status for accommodation placement risk assessment would have been supportive. Moving forward, the partnership agreed to ensure data sharing agreements are in place in order to manage expectations. Similarly, challenges were experienced with the Homeless Dashboard for Warwickshire which was introduced by Public Health to assess data on the number of people accommodated under Everyone In. Housing teams in the District and Borough councils highlighted pressures and challenges in collating this data. Moving forward, a recommendation was agreed to ensure collaboration with partners to share decisions on data fields, how and where data will be collated and clear communications on how findings will be used to inform practice. These initiatives will involve Information Governance teams across partners to ensure compliance with information legislation. A further challenge experienced by the partnership was the self-funding of alcohol detox programmes. This has since been discussed as a part of the Preventing Homelessness in Warwickshire Strategy.