

Report to CABINET

Homeless Friendly

Portfolio Holder:

Councillor Hannah Roberts, Cabinet Member for Housing

Officer Contact: Emma Barton, Director of Economy

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Officer

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Reason for Decision

A request has been made to Oldham Council that it adopts pledges to become Homeless Friendly. This involves reviewing the way services are run and making them more accessible to homeless people.

Executive Summary

Homeless Friendly is a charity, founded in 2017 as part of not-for-profit social enterprise Beacon GP Care. It asks that services examine the way they conduct their business, and pledge to make them accessible to homeless people. Their aim is to promote a cultural shift in how homeless people are viewed and treated. This report provides an overview of the pledges that they ask other organisations to make, and how this could operate in practice within Oldham Council. It also provides an overview of the benefits and implications of adopting the pledges to become a Homeless Friendly organisation.

Recommendations

It is recommended that Oldham Council pledge to become Homeless Friendly.

Homeless Friendly

1 Background

- 1.1 Homeless Friendly is a registered charity that was founded in 2017 as part of not-for-profit social enterprise Beacon GP Care. It asks that services examine the way they conduct their business, and pledge to make them accessible to homeless people. Their aim is to promote a cultural shift in how homeless people are viewed and treated; for example offering understanding and flexibility in terms of practical issues such as attending appointments.
- 1.2 A representative from Homeless Friendly approached the Chief Executive of Oldham Council in April 2019 to encourage it to formally adopt their pledges towards making services more accessible for homeless people.
- 1.3 Homeless Friendly asks participating organisations to pledge to:
- Help meet the needs of homeless people
 - Speak to homeless people with understanding and compassion
 - Examine your policies and procedures to ensure they are homeless–friendly
 - Train your staff to meet the needs of homeless people
 - Work with your partners and include and encourage them to care for the homeless
 - Act as a hub for your community in their efforts to help the homeless
- 1.4 At least three GP surgeries in Oldham have signed the Homeless Friendly pledges; practical examples of how they are putting this into practice include a commitment to register homeless patients without a fixed address, and offering flexible appointments. Other local authorities have also signed, including Bury Council.
- 1.5 Homeless Friendly will support all organisations who sign up to its pledges by:
- Accrediting the organisation as “Homeless-Friendly” and provide a logo;
 - Promoting the organisation’s involvement in the programme using social media, web and printed materials;
 - Allowing the organisation to use the Homeless Friendly logo for business activities reinforcing its social and ethical contribution;
 - Providing resources for campaigns.
- 1.6 The Housing Options (homelessness) service has as of 1st July returned in-house to Oldham Council. This presents an opportunity to review the way the service is delivered, as suggested in the pledges.
- 1.7 Pledging to become Homeless Friendly will promote positive publicity for the Council, particularly at a time when services are changing. It will provide reassurance to homeless people that they are able to access advice and support in a non-judgemental, understanding environment.
- 1.8 Homeless Friendly also supports the Council’s Corporate Plan to work with a resident focus and support thriving communities by ensuring its services and staff are responsive to the needs of homeless people. Our holistic approach is already in action with regards
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to ensuring wrap-around support for care leavers in conjunction with another report being presented.

2 **Current Position**

- 2.1 Oldham Council is responsible for the provision of local statutory homelessness services, and therefore the majority of the Homeless Friendly pledges are already embedded in service delivery. However, some work including appropriate publicity and information sharing may be required to ensure this applies to all Council services.
- 2.2 The following points consider the implications of each of the pledges in turn:
- 2.1.1 *Help meet the needs of homeless people:* given the broad scope of this pledge, and the fact that Oldham Council delivers a universal advice offer and statutory homelessness services, this pledge can easily be met. Oldham Council also has a Homelessness Strategy in place, which includes an action plan reviewed annually according to emerging trends and needs.
- 2.1.2 *Speak to homeless people with understanding and compassion:* all Oldham Council staff are expected to deal with customers in this way. Additional training is provided where needs are identified; for example, teams working with specific customers groups, or where individual issues arise. There should therefore be no difficulties in meeting this pledge.
- 2.1.3 *Examine your policies and procedures to ensure they are homeless-friendly:* the Housing Options service is in the process of reviewing its policies and procedures following the service reverting to being directly delivered by the Council. These will include flexible service delivery where required and where capacity allows; for example, outreach and partnership working.
- 2.1.4 *Train your staff in the needs of homeless people:* the Housing Strategy team already offer training to external organisations on homelessness duties and provision, and this can be extended to include internal teams.
- 2.1.5 *Work with your partners and include and encourage them to care for the homeless:* the Housing Strategy team facilitate the Oldham Homelessness Forum, a multi-agency group which convenes to share information and feed into service improvements for homeless people. Homeless Friendly can be promoted via this forum, and throughout other partnerships. In addition to this, Oldham Council includes a social value requirement in all of its tenders. Where appropriate, these can include a link to helping homeless people; for example donations, volunteer hours or work experience.
- 2.1.6 *Act as a hub for your community in their efforts to help the homeless:* this pledge applies particularly to community based organisations. However, Oldham Council is already committed to providing advice and support to members of the community throughout Oldham who enquire about helping the homeless. For example, district teams are knowledgeable about signposting homeless people, and the third sector groups that support them, to appropriate services. The aforementioned training can support this.
- 2.2 There may be some operational implications where challenges arise about the extent to which these pledges are being met, as with all commitments made by the Council. In order to ensure these are minimised, there will be appropriate promotion of pathways to
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the new Housing Options team to staff across the Council; for example via the Intranet and newsletters.

- 2.3 Homeless Friendly will request that Oldham Council publicise their agreement to pledge; this will require a time commitment from senior representatives such as the Council Leader and/or Portfolio Holder. The Housing Strategy team will liaise with the Communications Team to ensure the Homeless Friendly pledge is appropriately promoted, including a 'signing' event with appropriate Council representatives.

3 Options/Alternatives

- 3.1 Option 1: Pledge that Oldham Council becomes Homeless Friendly: This option will help to ensure that homeless people receive an inclusive service from the Council and promote positive engagement from this group. It will also promote the Council as an inclusive organisation that is responsive to the needs of some of its most vulnerable residents. Whilst it may also mean the Council is held to greater account, this will present an opportunity to strive for continuous improvements in service delivery.
- 3.2 Option 2: Do not pledge that Oldham Council becomes Homeless Friendly: This option would not reflect positively upon the Council in terms of reputation or its commitment to working with a resident focus.

4 Preferred Option

- 4.1 It is recommended that Oldham Council pledges to become Homeless Friendly and demonstrates its commitment to delivering inclusive services to homeless residents.
- 4.2 This action will require correspondence with Homeless Friendly representatives from an officer of appropriate seniority at the Council to confirm its decision. It is suggested that this should be the Leader of the Council, and/or the Cabinet Member for Housing. It is also suggested that a meeting is organised between both parties where the Homeless Friendly pledges can be signed with appropriate publicity in order to highlight the important focus that Oldham Council is giving to this agenda.
- 4.3 This decision does not fall outside of the existing budget and policy framework.

5 Consultation

- 5.1 Consultation has been undertaken with the Cabinet Member for Housing, who has supported this decision being taken to Cabinet.

6 Financial Implications

- 6.1 The Council currently carries out its duties and responsibilities using the policies recommended by The Homeless Friendly charity. It is not expected, therefore, that it will substantially change the way the Council provides its services. As such it is not anticipated that there will be any additional financial implication in adopting these policies.
- 6.2 If in the event it is decided that some publicity is given to this initiative than any expenditure, which would be expected to be minimal, would be met from within existing budgets. (David Leach / John Hoskins)
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7 **Legal Services Comments**

7.1 The council has its statutory Homelessness functions and is currently very aware of its obligations to provide a high service of support to those suffering from homelessness. By agreeing to the Homelessness friendly pledge a benchmark is set that will further help the Council and its staff attain higher standards and competencies in tackling homelessness. Although there are no legislative constraints upon the council to compel it to the pledge, it would have reputational repercussions should it not, therefore option 1 is recommended. (Alex Bougatef)

8. **Co-operative Agenda**

8.1 Developing Fairness: Homeless Friendly encourages an understanding and compassionate approach to homeless people.

8.2 Working together: Homeless Friendly encourages organisations to work with partners and care for the homeless.

9 **Human Resources Comments**

9.1 None.

10 **Risk Assessments**

10.1 Not applicable.

11 **IT Implications**

11.1 None.

12 **Property Implications**

12.1 None.

13 **Procurement Implications**

13.1 None.

14 **Environmental and Health & Safety Implications**

14.1 None.

15 **Equality, community cohesion and crime implications**

15.1 None.

16 **Equality Impact Assessment Completed?**

16.1 No.

17 **Key Decision**

17.1 No.

18 **Key Decision Reference**

18.1 N/A.

19 **Background Papers**

19.1 None.

20 **Appendices**

20.1 None.
