



Oldham
Council

Part A - Report to CABINET

A Local Response to the National Housing Crisis

Portfolio Holder:

Cllr Elaine Taylor, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Housing, Planning and Licensing

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Date: 18 March 2024

Reason for Decision

In tackling the current housing crisis and unprecedented demand for housing services, this report highlights a number of key immediate resource asks to support a local response in Oldham to improve access to housing support for our residents, to accelerate house building so Oldham's residents have access to more social homes, and to bring online more temporary homes which are much needed for residents in emergency accommodation situations as a result of the cost of living crisis, domestic abuse, or change to family circumstances.

Executive Summary

Over 7,000 people are waiting for a social home in Oldham on the housing register, with thousands more currently applying to get on the register; while 500 households are living in temporary accommodation as there simply is not enough truly affordable properties, of the right size in the borough to move people out of their temporary lodgings. Importantly, this includes 500 children in these temporary living arrangements.

Families and households across Oldham are facing many challenges as a result of the cost of living crisis - housing is a massive factor in this due to increased rents and mortgages following a decade of high inflation and interest rates. Oldham doesn't have the enough housing to meet the changing needs of peoples circumstances; namely enough truly affordable homes. This acute shortage of housing, particularly social and genuinely affordable housing, has led to spiraling rents and house prices. Many young people and families on low to middle incomes struggle to afford to rent or buy a decent home, and therefore overcrowding, evictions, rent arrears and homelessness are all on the rise.

Cllr Shah, the Leader of the Council and Cllr Taylor, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing and Licensing held a round table discussion with housing associations, private landlords, housing developers, lettings agents and other industry experts, where they also explored the lived experiences of Oldham's residents with the Poverty Truth Commission. This insight was added to the concerns and

complaints from direct residential feedback, and it was clear that there was a need for local action, partnership and collaboration to provide a local solution to these housing challenges here in Oldham.

These challenges are part of a national housing crisis, however Government policy changes and funding programmes are not mobilising quickly enough to support communities and residents who deserve better access to housing support. This report seeks approval to provide investment for the local response to the national housing crisis and includes proposals for: redeployed staffing resources; options for improving service delivery models; and, new programmes of activity for refurbishing, leasing, purchasing, and / or building new homes for the purposes of both temporary accommodation and to ensure Oldham residents have more access to truly affordable social homes.

Recommendations

Cabinet are asked to approve the funding and delegations as set out in this report to support a local response to the national housing crisis, noting the commercial, legal and financial details set out in the part B report:

- 1) Approval and delegation to the Deputy Chief Executive (Place) in consultation with the Directors of Legal and Finance, and the Deputy Leader / Portfolio holder for Housing and Licensing for an additional revenue allocation of £2.162m to provide a dedicated response and local investment to respond to the housing crisis; detail as set out in part B report, but in summary:
 - To make fixed term grant funded posts within the Housing Options Service permanent to ensure stability and staff retention within the Services.
 - To improve customer service capacity in Access Oldham and ensure residents are supported by reducing waiting times for face to face appointments, and on the phone lines.
 - To enter into a long term leasing agreement to provide access to 47 accommodation units for Temporary Accommodation (TA) provision through a private landlord.
 - To procure and enter into a contract with an external provider to deliver the Out of Hours Emergency Homelessness Support Service for a period of 12 months.
 - To accelerate housing delivery through the recruitment of a dedicated team with funding for feasibility / business case development work.
 - To improve housing standards through dedicated and proactive enforcement.
 - To bring on-line an additional unit for emergency accommodation for rough sleepers.
- 2) Approval and delegation to the Deputy Chief Executive (Place) in consultation with the Directors of Legal and the Deputy Leader / Portfolio holder for Housing and Licensing for an additional £1m investment to provide a local response to the housing challenges will be reviewed during the first quarter of the 2024/25, with any drawdown on the additional resources reported to Cabinet in the 2024/25 Quarter 1 Revenue & Capital Monitoring Report.
- 3) Approval and delegation to the Deputy Chief Executive (Place) in consultation with the Directors of Legal and Finance, and the Leader of the Council / Portfolio holder for Reform and Regeneration and the Deputy Leader / Portfolio holder for Housing and Licensing to draw down from the Flexible Housing Fund capital allocation with the Creating a Better Place Capital Programme to a maximum value of capital investment of £10m as set out in the part B report, but in summary:
 - To purchase / acquire properties for conversion to TA units / Children's care homes as needed.
 - To purchase / acquire empty properties across the borough and bring them back into use as socially affordable homes.

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- To accelerate the development and delivery of social house building on Council land
 - To support partners to accelerate the development and delivery of social house building where viability is proven to be a challenge.
- 4) Approval in principle to accelerate property acquisition using Compulsory Purchase Powers as needed, with delegation to the Deputy Chief Executive (Place) in consultation with the Directors of Economy, Legal and Finance, and the Leader of the Council / Portfolio holder for Reform and Regeneration and the Deputy Leader / Portfolio holder for Housing and Licensing.

A Local Response to the National Housing Crisis

1 Background

- 1.1 Nationally we find ourselves in a housing crisis where demand for homes far outstrips supply. The number of households who are finding themselves in crisis due to the current economic climate; who are not able to afford their homes; or who are now finding themselves at risk of becoming homeless, is increasing.
- 1.2 In Oldham, we have seen an increase in demand for housing services that the current Council infrastructure just cannot support.
- 1.3 In tackling the current housing crisis and unprecedented demand for housing services, this report highlights a number of key immediate resource asks to support a local response in Oldham to improve access to housing support for our residents, to accelerate house building so Oldham's residents have access to more social homes, and to bring online more temporary homes which are much needed for residents in emergency accommodation situations as a result of the cost of living crisis, domestic abuse, or change to family circumstances.

2 Current Position – The Local Housing Crisis

- 2.1 Oldham's Housing Services are in crisis as the increasing demand for the service far outweighs the staffing capacity to manage this alongside a lack of suitable accommodation both temporary and longer term. The Out of Hours support being provided by the service is also at a crisis point due to an exponential increase in demand with current staffing capacity not being able to manage this and impacting on staff wellbeing.
- 2.2 Post-pandemic, when Access Oldham reopened, the volume of support needed for Oldham's residents has led to lengthy delays waiting for assistance on the phone, via email and in person, and this is in parallel with staffing recruitment challenges linked to funding availability and a scarcity of housing professionals. The volume of continued increasing demands has resulted in a significant backlog of housing applications and homelessness assessments. This level of service is unacceptable for Oldham's residents who are waiting for hours to access help and support on the phone or in person at Access Oldham. Due to the sheer volumes of email queries, some remain unanswered for prolonged periods of time and understandably, residents are frustrated by the inability to seek help and support at times of real crisis in their lives.
- 2.3 This situation has also impacted on staff health and wellbeing, who are facing unprecedented levels of demand and are continually trying to provide a service without having the resources, homes or accommodation options to support the needs of Oldham's communities: and it is very emotionally challenging when help simply cannot be provided to those in need. This has resulted in an increase in staff absences and turnover, which in turn has left the service without a full complement of staff: further impacting on a spiral of pressure and challenge on a broken system. Emergency / reactive service delivery and continual prioritization takes place at the expense of homelessness 'prevention' work – this position is unacceptable and unsustainable to both the staff in the team and more importantly the residents in Oldham's communities who are in desperate need of help, support, advice and housing accommodation.
- 2.4 The supply and demand challenges are evidenced in the performance data collated in the dashboards illustrated below;

2.4.1 Increased levels of footfall through Access Oldham:

Access Oldham	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN
Housing Options (people seen)	1103	1302	1561	1426	1546	1740	1770	1716	741	1341
% of overall footfall	32%	32%	36%	36%	37%	41%	38.8%	41.8%	32%	34%

2.4.2 Increased telephone calls to the team:

Month	Calls offered	% Answered
April	2314	63.09
May	2526	61.20
June	2739	67.61
Jul	2673	69.85
Aug	2568	66.0
Sep	2573	61.33
Oct	2573	65.73
Nov	2172	72.56
Dec	2069	82.50
Jan	3209	77.38

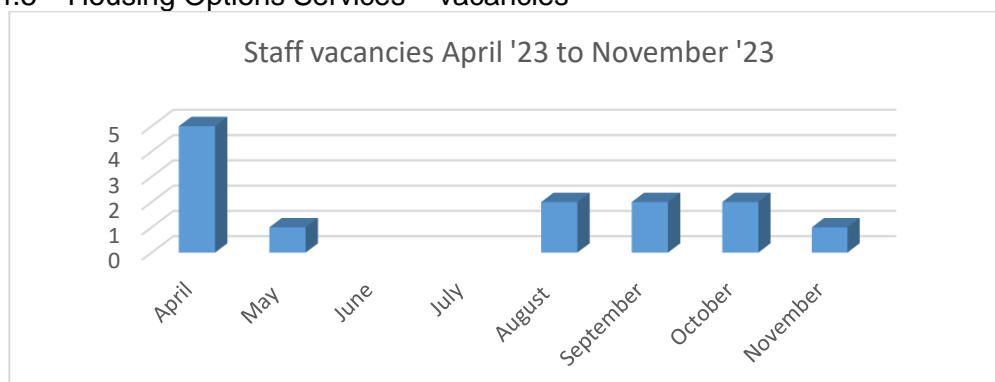
2.4.3 High volume of web referrals and email contact from customers

Month	Number of Duty to Refers Forms Received
April	679
May	737
Jun	668
Jul	767
Aug	688
Sep	680
Oct	716
Nov	668
Dec	569
Jan	881

2.4.4 High volume of homelessness presentations and households in TA:

Total Homeless cases as of 15/09/24	1,824 (averages 202 per officer)
Total households in TA as of 15/09/24	573 (averages 143 cases per officer)

2.4.5 Housing Options Services – vacancies



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- 2.5 As well as an internal review of service delivery, the Council has also looked externally at our partnerships and key stakeholders to work with us to tackle some of the issues Oldham faces with regards to the housing crisis.
- 2.6 The Council held a ‘roundtable’ event in February 2024 bringing together key partners and organisations to discuss some of the challenges within the housing market. After showcasing some of the experiences of Oldham’s residents from the Poverty Truth Commission, housing partners around the table reflected on the national crisis impact on housing standards, supply and increasing demands.
- 2.7 Partners signed up to various pledges to work in collaboration to tackle some of the issues head on and provide an integrated local response to the housing challenges Oldham is facing. Some of those pledges were:

- **Social landlords to formally sign up to the joint protocol in relation to housing standards.**
- **Private landlords to sign up to the GM Good Landlord Charter.**
- **Developers agreed to work with the Council to start building more homes.**
- **The Council committed to facilitating the building of 500 social homes within the next 5 years; and**
- **Agreement was confirmed on the importance of carrying out a stock condition survey and to step-up enforcement action to tackle disrepair issues.**

Local Response 1: Workforce capacity within the Council to meet levels of demand

- 3.1 Staff turnover has been significant over recent months, we haven’t been able to recruit to posts and the lack of permanency (due to fixed term external grant funding arrangements for parts of the housing service) has been sighted as one of the reasons why the team members have sought alternative more permanent employment elsewhere.
- 3.2 Proposal is to consider making these fixed term positions permanent and create a level of stability within the team. As the funding for these posts is external grants on a rolling basis, should the funding ever be at risk of non-reoccurrence alternative funding or staffing levels will need consideration at that time.
- 3.3 The staffing capacity within the Contact Centre and within Access Oldham is not enough to meet the current demands of local residents. As a temporary measure to respond to the needs of residents, staff have been redeployed from other service areas to ensure help and advice can be provided. Given the positive response this additional staffing capacity has had, we would like to make this permanent and therefore need additional funds to allow recruitment / backfill the seconded positions.
- 3.4 In addition the Council will be going live with a new housing system, called Locata, at the end of March 2024 which will hold Oldham’s housing register and manage the allocation of socially rented homes within the Borough. This system will support residents with their housing applications by ensuring they upload the relevant information while attaching the evidence to their application: removing the need to repeat calls / emails to chase progress.
- 3.5 Further legal and financial details relating to this local response are set out in part B of this report.

Local Response 2: Out of Hours Emergency Homelessness Support

- 4.1 The Out of Hours Emergency Homelessness Support Service is a telephone-based service that residents can contact outside of usual office hours: Monday - Friday 5pm-9am overnight support, and Saturday – Sunday 24hours support.
- 4.2 The officer who answers the telephone will undertake an assessment to ascertain if the resident and their household is without accommodation that night. If the resident has accommodation, they will be re-directed to the Housing Options Service who will provide help, advice and support the next working day. If the resident and their household does not have accommodation available to them that evening the officer will make arrangements to secure emergency accommodation for them (usually hotel / B&B accommodation). The resident will then be contacted the next working day by a member of the Housing Options Team to undertake a homelessness assessment in the usual way.
- 4.3 Given the significant increases to staff workloads, hours of working and to protect the health and wellbeing of employees; alternative arrangements have been explored to support the Out of Hours Emergency Homelessness Service.
- 4.4 The Council has a statutory obligation to ensure there is 24/7 homelessness support for residents and therefore alternative options have been explored including: the Emergency Duty Team (Adults / Childrens Out of Hours service); or utilising the MioCare Out of Hours service; however neither option was sustainable. Therefore provision of dedicated out of hours emergency homelessness support duties was commissioned on a temporary basis while a full options appraisal was undertaken.
- 4.5 A full procurement exercise is now underway with a view to appointment an external provider to cover out of hours emergency homelessness support for a period of 12months. Further details are set out in the part B report given the commercial sensitivities during an open procurement process.

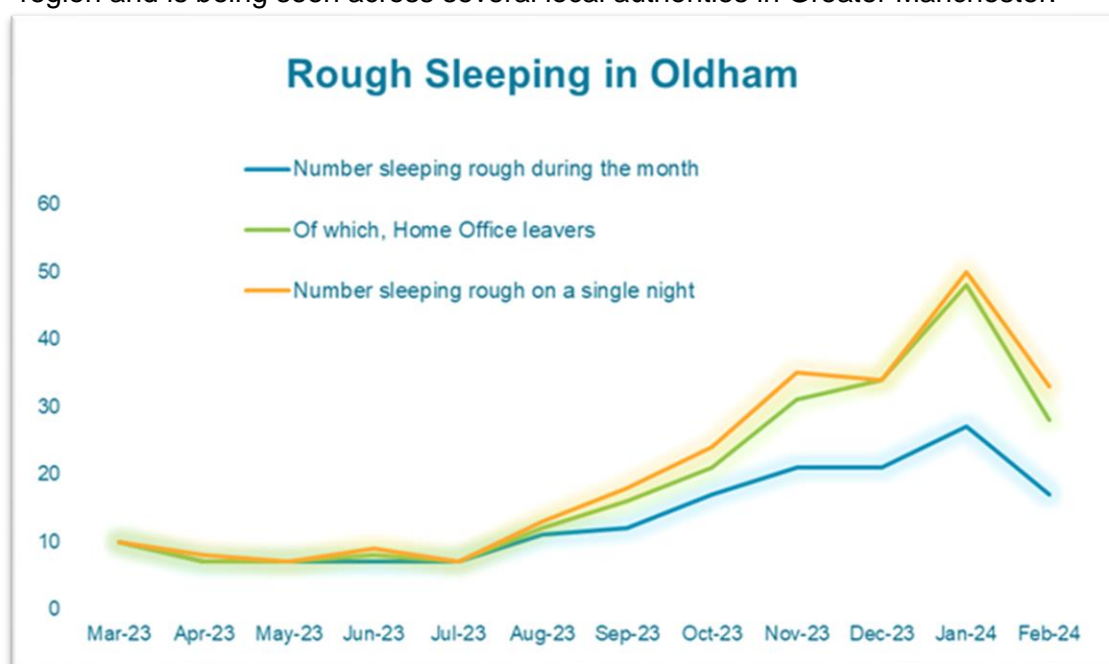
Local Response 3: Temporary Accommodation Provision – Long Term Leasing

- 5.1 The Council is experiencing acute homelessness pressures that is resulting in an unprecedented number of households accommodated in TA. Continuation of the current trend is unsustainable and would likely result in significant budgetary pressures. Moreover, it could result in potential reputational damage if the Council becomes unable to meet its statutory functions, specifically relating to its ability to provide suitable interim accommodation in accordance with the Housing Act 1996 as amended by the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.
- 5.5 Furthermore, the Council is experiencing unique pressures on TA with over 560 households residing in TA (as of Feb 24). In contrast, as at Dec 2022, the Council had 318 households in TA – this represents an over 60% increase in the number of households accommodated in TA over a 14 months' period. This annual rate of increase is unsustainable hence, the Council must proceed to deliver on its strategic priorities by utilising the full capabilities of the TA Framework.
- 5.3 In February 2023, Cabinet approved the Council's Temporary Accommodation (TA) Framework. Officers have mobilised the delivery phase and began engaging with potential providers to deliver the agreed Framework. This response seeks approval to call-off the Framework to appoint following a recent successful tender exercise, for 47 dwellings (initially) and a mixture of houses and flats ranging from 1 bedroom to 4 bedrooms. Further details are set out in the part B report for the commercial and financial details.
- 5.4 The national housing crisis/shortage has been prevalent for almost two decades – based on demographic, life expectancy and migration forecast it's reasonable to assume that the Council

would require access to some form of TA if the current homelessness trend continued. Therefore, taking this proactive approach will offset significant spend in the longer-term.

Local Response 4: No Second Night Out / Emergency Accommodation

- 6.1 Rough sleeping is the most visible form of homelessness, and is defined as people sleeping, about to bed down (sitting on/in or standing next to their bedding) or actually bedded down in the open air. This could be on the streets, in tents, doorways, parks, bus shelters or encampments, in buildings or other places not designed for habitation.
- 6.2 Rough sleeping has been increasing in Oldham since September 2023, with the sharpest increase particularly attributed to new rough sleepers. A particular trend amongst new rough sleepers is that, increasingly, they are individuals who have become homeless after being given notice following a positive decision on their asylum application by the Home Office. This trend is in line with accelerated decision-making processes which has taken place across the region and is being seen across several local authorities in Greater Manchester.



- 6.3 Oldham Council has, for a significant period, followed a “No Second Night Out” (NSNO) approach towards rough sleeping, whereby when someone is found to be sleeping rough by its outreach teams, accommodation is arranged to prevent them from returning to the streets (*for a second night*). However, in line with the Government’s Ending Rough Sleeping for Good Strategy, the focus on rough sleeping has been on ensuring it is ‘Rare, Brief and Non-Recurrent’.
- 6.4 The Council has therefore focused efforts on outreach support and move-on from existing accommodation, rather than NSNO. Since December 2023 however, factors such as accelerated Home Office decision making and the Cost-of-Living crisis have placed additional pressure on Housing and other services and we have seen an unprecedented increase in the levels of rough sleeping in Oldham.
- 6.5 Oldham shares a Rough Sleeping Initiative (RSI) outreach team with Rochdale Council, which is provided by Sanctuary Trust. This team has workers who go out regularly across the borough, throughout the night, visiting reported rough sleeping sites and engaging with individuals. The Council also has its own Rough Sleeping Coordinator who holds central intelligence and referral information in relation to rough sleeping in the borough. A Homelessness Addiction Support Service Team, including a shared RSI Dual Diagnosis Service, is also commissioned by Public Health to support rough sleepers with substance misuse issues.

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- 6.6 Utilising funding from GMCA, the Council commissions an A Bed Every Night (ABEN) rough sleeping accommodation service to provide. This is comprised of 22/23 (one emergency space) beds, plus a further 6 beds for people with no recourse to public funds. The service is consistently full with a waiting list.
- 6.7 Severe Weather Emergency Protocols (SWEP) is a response to periods of extreme weather, typically when the temperature drops to zero degrees or below and is designed to prevent the deaths of people sleeping rough and has historically had positive outcomes in terms of engaging people who would not typically accept accommodation throughout the rest of the year. When this happens, the Council will facilitate emergency accommodation for people sleeping rough or at severe or imminent risk of doing so.
- 6.8 In 2022/23, Oldham made 47 placements via SWEP, an increase of 41 placements on the previous year. So far in 2023/24, Oldham has made 53 placements; some of these placements were individuals placed more than once or were later accommodated by the statutory service – overall, this constituted 45 unique placements. SWEP in 2023/24 has primarily been facilitated using spot purchase arrangements via hotels, due to existing facilities being full and having been triggered during periods of cold weather in December 2023 and January 2024.
- 6.9 As a temporary measure in response to increased demand, particularly from Home Office accelerated decision making, and to prepare for the winter period, the Council has also stood up an additional 9 emergency ‘E-Bed’ units. The E-Beds operate differently from ABEN in that they are open during the evening only, and are attached to a rough sleeping accommodation ‘Hub’ which provides support to residents each morning in finding move-on accommodation. These were full within the first two days of operation in December 2023.
- 6.10 The current E-Bed model operates on a night shelter style basis, where a 9-bedroom property has been sourced from one of the Council’s existing temporary accommodation providers and is open to residents between 6pm-9am each evening. Residents then attend a housing Hub each morning between 9.30am and 12.30pm for support to look for move-on accommodation. This process has been in place for just over two months, and 5 residents have moved on so far; three into their own accommodation, and two leaving to stay with family and friends.
- 6.11 At present due to exceptional demand the Council are looking to new suppliers to procure another property, as all existing temporary accommodation units are fully utilised. Further details are set out in the part B report due to commercial, legal and financial information being included as part of the procurement process.

Local Response 5: Additional Resources to Accelerate Housing Delivery

- 7.1 The housing supply work identified as a key part of Oldham’s local response to the housing crisis will require a resource investment by the Council into a Housing Delivery Team. This is to help accelerate the delivery of the housing pipeline with a focus on TA, empty properties, leasing, HRA/PFI, acquisitions and new build.
- 7.2 There is also a proposal being developed with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) and Tameside to provide a Team Leader Housing (Town Centre) resource shared 50/50 by the two LA’s (Oldham costs 25% of post, Tameside 25% and GMCA 50%) to add additional capacity in the team.
- 7.3 This new house building / supply work programme will require draw down from the Flexible Housing Fund capital allocation with the Creating a Better Place Capital Programme; as follows
- a. To purchase / acquire properties for conversion to TA units / Children’s care homes as needed.

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- b. To purchase / acquire empty properties across the borough and bring them back into use as socially affordable homes.
 - c. To accelerate the development and delivery of social house building on Council land
 - d. To work with partners to accelerate the development and delivery of social house building where viability is proven to be a challenge.

7.4 To ensure best value and use of public funds, this work programme will require some feasibility investment funding to kickstart the necessary surveys and evidence needed ahead of properties being bought, refurbished, redevelopment or built.

7.5 Finally, and in addition to acquiring more homes for Oldham's residents, we want to ensure they are a suitable quality and standard. Therefore, the Housing Standards and Enforcement work as part of Oldham's local response will require a resource investment to add capacity to the existing Team but to also increase focus on proactively supporting enforcement work against empty homes, unregistered premises and Shared Accommodation / Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs).

8 Financial Implications

8.1 Financial comments are included in the part B report.
(Lee Walsh, Assistant Director Finance)

9 Legal Implications

9.1 Legal comments are included in the part B report.
(Alex Bougatef, Interim Assistant Director of Legal Services)

10 Co-operative Implications

10.1 As a Co-operative Council, we are committed to finding new and innovative ways to support our most vulnerable residents. The proposals in this paper aim to increase capacity within the Housing Options service to meet demand, providing a better quality of service to residents. The proposals also aim to increase access to much needed temporary accommodation, helping stop vulnerable residents falling into further crisis.
(Jonathan Downs, Corporate Policy Lead)

11 Human Resource Implications

11.1 HR comments are included in the part B report.
(Vikki Morris, Assistant Director of HR&OD)

12. IT Implications

12.1 None.

13. Property Implications

- 13.1 Property comments are included in the part B report.
(Katy Webster, AD Property)

14. Procurement Implications

- 14.1 The report details several local responses to help tackle the housing crisis, some of which have procurement implications. Detailed comments are provided in the part B report.

(Emily Molden, Procurement)

15 Risk Assessments

- 15.1 It is understood that the Housing service is facing serious challenges in terms of the demand for the service and the number of homelessness cases and temporary accommodation cases across the borough. Financial, legal and procurement risks are detailed in the part B report.

(Victoria Gallacher, Head of Insurance and Information Governance)

16 Environmental and Health & Safety Implications

- 16.1 Health & Safety - As an employer/duty holder, Oldham Council has a statutory duty to ensure so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of all its employees, and persons not in its employment who may be affected by their work, are not exposed to risks to their health or safety. Oldham Council's Health and Safety Team have no objections to the content of this report. Specific risk assessments and other safety documentation will still need to be checked on the options selected to take forward ensuring any health and safety risks are mitigated.

(Neil Crabtree, Head of Public Protection)

17 Community cohesion, including crime and disorder implications in accordance with Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998

- 17.1 The report seeks resources to support the current housing crisis and unprecedented demand for housing services. In doing so will mean Oldham's residents will have more access to social housing supporting more cohesive communities.

(Neil Consterdine, AD Youth, Leisure and Communities)

18 Oldham Equality Impact Assessment, including the implications for Children and Young People

- 18.1 The responses within this report seek to improve delivery of services to residents by improving Housing Services. The report also seeks permission to bring online more suitable self-contained accommodation for households who find themselves as homeless. This accommodation is more suitable than the current offer of nightly paid. Therefore there is no negative impacts on residents as a result of this report. There is also no need for completion of an EIA.

(Victoria Wood, Head of Housing Needs)

19 Key Decision Reference - HL-01-23

20 Background papers - none

21 **Appendices**

Technical appendices contained within the part B of this report provide information relating to the commercial, legal and financial aspects of the local responses.