

SUBJECT:	COVID 19 – PROPOSAL TO UTILISE GILWERN OUTDOOR EDUCATION CENTRE FOR EMERGENCY HOMELESS ACCOMMODATION
MEETING:	CABINET
DATE:	27TH MAY 2020
DIVISION/WARDS AFFECTED:	ALL

1. PURPOSE:

- 1.1 To consider and approve a proposal to temporarily utilise the Council's outdoor education facility at Gilwern – specifically the Bloreng block, to provide emergency homeless accommodation for single people, in order for the Council to meet the requirements of Welsh Government's Covid 19 homeless guidance.

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2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 To consider the current risks, pressures and challenges relating to accommodating homeless applicants.
- 2.2 To agree the temporary use until 21st August 2020 of the Bloreng block at Gilwern OEC for Covid related emergency homeless accommodation and to appoint security to help supervise the building and site.
- 2.3 To commission officers to prepare a further report that consider the medium and long-term-options and proposals for accommodating homeless applicants.
- 2.4 To work with Welsh Local Government Association and Welsh Government to ensure that Welsh Government funding is identified to meet the costs in housing additional homeless people going forward and beyond COVID-19.

3. KEY ISSUES:

- 3.1 Under the Housing (Wales) Act 2014, the Council has a legal duty to both respond to homelessness and to prevent homelessness. It has been a priority of the Council to strengthen homeless prevention activity. A key focus, therefore, has been to increase accommodation options. Although progress has been achieved it can still be difficult on occasions to accommodate some households and there is still a need to use B & B accommodation. Under normal circumstances, accommodation is generally at capacity or for applicants/households coming through to present a risk, both of which influence offers of accommodation.
- 3.2 Due to the Covid 19 circumstances, in addition to the homeless related duties, Welsh Government has issued new guidance - *Coronavirus (COVID-19): local authority support for rough sleepers*. This requires the Council to safely house and support those who are rough sleeping or displaced as a result of this emergency. This is to protect not just the individuals concerned, but the wider community. If necessary, the Council is required to secure additional accommodation. The Council is required to:
- Ensure access to facilities that enable access to facilities that enable them to adhere to public health guidance on hygiene or isolation

- mitigate their risk of infection and to ensure they are able to self-isolate as appropriate in line with public health guidance, in order to lower the risk of transmission to others
- develop an effective local response to ensure people can access sanitation, be effectively isolated and have access to medical and other support as necessary in order to limit risk of wider infection within this group

3.3 Since March 2020 and the commencement of lockdown restrictions, although there has been a small reduction in the number of actual new applications, the Council has seen a change in the profile of homeless demand in terms of applicants and the reason for homelessness. Previously, the typical issues that presented were loss of rented accommodation; rent arrears; parent/family/friend breakdown and relationship breakdown. Below is provides a broad overview of 'application' demand:

- 2018/19 – 835 applications/16 per week
- 2019/20 – 757 applications/14.5 per week
 - Q4 – 211 applications/16 per week (not validated)
- 2020/21 to 11th May 2020 – 75 applications/10.7 per week
- Since 23rd March 2020 – 101 offers of accommodation made/14 per week. (The norm is typically 4 to 5 offers per week).

3.4 Whilst the actual number of applications is lower to date than previous years, due to Welsh Government Covid 19 requirements, the need for accommodation has risen significantly. The majority of recent applicants have needed accommodation. The majority of recent applications have been from single males, many of whom have high and complex needs, including issues relating to mental health; substance abuse and offending behaviour. Some of these applications have been from rough sleepers and 16/17 year olds.

3.5 Due to the increase in numbers needing accommodation, the current ability to assist people with accommodation has become extremely challenging due to the lack of accommodation. This has been compounded by the closure of one local B & B establishment, a request from Newport City Council to move Monmouthshire applicants out of Newport to enable them to address their own accommodation demand, and the availability of social housing through the Homesearch partnership has virtually disappeared.

3.6 This is creating and exacerbating risks for the Council including meeting its statutory homeless duties and the new Covid-19 Welsh Government Guidance; safeguarding; community safety and financial risk.

3.7 Some of the key accommodation issues for the Council:

- Due to the lack of both social and private sector accommodation to move on to, homeless applicants are now bottle-necking in temporary accommodation. At the time of writing, this includes 28 applicants in B & B. This is expected to continue to increase in the short-term.
- Many residents are presenting without any possessions, including bedding. Income and food has been an issue.

- It is known that advice agencies are advising clients that the Council has Covid 19 related responsibilities and individuals being accommodated are sharing information with friends and family, which increases demand.
- The Council has a reduced ability to flexibly and sensitively place those applicants who present a level of risk. This can potentially impact on other residents, Police and neighbouring properties.
- The ability to undertake on-site management has been restricted due to colleagues within Housing & Communities needing to self-isolate or shield due to underlying health conditions themselves or within their household.
- Locally, housing support providers have ceased providing face to face support to residents of homeless accommodation, although this is due to change
- The Council's accommodation is dispersed across the County, including some rural locations, which further impacts on day-to-day management.
- It is anticipated that the Welsh early prison release programme will create additional demand. Two referrals have now been received, one of which has been accommodated.
- In the event of a client breaching their licence of occupation the Council is able to enforce the agreement by implementing an eviction. Evictions are a last resort and avoided wherever possible. However, the current guidance is that should the Council need to undertake an eviction, alternative accommodation will need to be provided.

3.8 The following provides an overview of the Council's response and approach to mitigating against the situation:

- Sourcing new accommodation has been a priority and has been extremely successful. **See Appendix 1.** However, despite the portfolio of accommodation having increased, accommodation occupation continues to be at capacity and there is a risk that the Council will **not** be able to accommodate future short-term demand, particularly in the event of any daily spikes.
- In making accommodation placements, every effort has been made to minimise the risk of anti-social behaviour through wherever possible making sensitive placement, although this is increasingly a challenge. Housing support also helps to mitigate against anti-social behaviour.
- Some units of accommodation have needed to be kept vacant for management purposes eg security have been provided with a room; to avoid accommodating incompatible clients
- Wherever possible trying to keep applicants in their current accommodation and utilising the Council's prevention fund. The typical circumstances though of people coming through is that they are already homeless and prevention is not an option.
- The Council is participating in a Gwent Homeless Services Task Group to provide a response to homelessness demands and pressures across Gwent through the COVID 19 lockdown, considering options to address and alleviate pressures as the measures continue and to consider collective plans to exit lockdown as and when this arises.
- The Council is liaising weekly with Welsh Government through a designated liaison officer.
- Consideration is being given to factoring homeless accommodation requirements into the annual social housing development programme.

- 3.9 There, however, continues to be a risk that the Council will be unable to provide accommodation if the current demand trends continue, particularly if in the event of daily demand spikes. It is also a risk that the ability to sensitively place individuals is restricted.
- 3.10 The facilities at the Gwent Outdoor Education Centre are currently not being utilised due to service closures during the Covid-19 restrictions. At the Blorenge block lends itself well to providing hostel type accommodation due to the availability of a shared kitchen and small bedrooms, the majority of which have ensuite facilities.
- 3.11 The facility will come under the management of the Housing Options Team. In order to manage the site effectively 24 hour security would also be established to supervise the building and any residents. There will be a maximum of nine residents, who will all be required to sign a licence agreement setting out both the Council's responsibilities and the residents' responsibilities. In addition, the Housing Partnerships Team have been requested to arrange housing support for each individual. Existing contracts have temporarily been re-modelled in order that premises being used for homelessness will each come under named support officers. Food deliveries will be arranged.
- 3.12 The proposed temporary use of the centre would cease by 21st August 2020. It is acknowledged that the temporary use of the facility cannot interfere with primary use of the Education Centre. The potential availability of the resource for homeless provides a period of stability for applicants to access support and for the Council to work with individuals and support agencies to plan move on accommodation. Although at an early stage and on a general basis, these discussions have already started.
- 3.13 The Town & Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (Amendment) (Wales) Order 2020 inserts a new Part 12A (Emergency Development by Local Authorities) into Schedule 2 to the GPDO, permits local authorities to undertake any form of development as defined by Section 55 of the Town & Country Planning Act 1990 on land owned, leased, occupied or maintained by the local authority for the purposes of:
- Preventing an emergency
 - Reducing, controlling or mitigating the effects of an emergency or
 - Taking other action in connection with an emergency
- 3.14 For these purposes an emergency is an event or situation which threatens serious damage to human welfare in a place in the UK. This includes the current Covid-19 pandemic. Where a local authority proposes development in a national park, it must notify the national park authority (as local planning authority for that area) of that development as soon as reasonably practical. A further condition restricts the retention of development undertaken under this new part to a period of twelve months beginning with the date on which the development began.
- 3.12 The use of the premises will be subject to the necessary management requirements such as health and safety risk assessments.

4. EQUALITY AND FUTURE GENERATIONS EVALUATION (INCLUDES SOCIAL JUSTICE, SAFEGUARDING AND CORPORATE PARENTING):

4.1 There are no negative implications with this proposal. However, should it not be possible to utilise the facility it could possibly impact on the Council’s abilities to meet its safeguarding responsibilities through the implementation of homelessness. **See Appendix 2.**

5. OPTIONS APPRAISAL

5.1 The following options are available:

Option	Benefit	Risk	Comment
<p>Option 1: The <u>recommended option</u> is to agree the temporary use (up to 21st August 2020) of the Bloreng block at the Gilwern Outdoor Education Centre during the Covid restrictions for emergency homeless accommodation in order to meet the requirements of Welsh Government.</p>	<p>The Bloreng block provides potential accommodation that lends itself to hostel type accommodation.</p> <p>The Centre is currently not in use and can be quickly set up for homeless purposes.</p> <p>It’s within the ownership of the Council and, therefore, easier to control.</p> <p>The Council will charge rent.</p> <p>The facility would provide a settled period for the Council to work with individuals and plan for moves to alternative accommodation.</p>	<p>The main risk is financial risk due to additional expenditure, although the Council can claim back expenditure from Welsh Government. The main expenditure will be the proposal to have 24 hour security.</p> <p>Its rural location isn’t ideal for homeless people due to the distance from town facilities.</p> <p>There may be concerns from the local community.</p> <p>Although the Centre is within the Council’s control it creates an additional management implications eg has to be set up; needs to be managed etc</p>	<p>It is hoped that there will be no need to use this as an emergency contingency option.</p> <p>The proposal will effectively will be reviewed on a daily basis. This will include giving consideration to the level of usage (eg the need for the accommodation) and the availability of other options in the Council that would negate the need to use the facility for homeless accommodation. In addition consideration would be given to any potential issues arising from using the facility for temporary homeless accommodation, such as client behaviour, any possible detrimental impact on the local community or the building/site itself.</p> <p>The following benchmarks will be used to assess whether the decision has had a positive or negative effect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No. of applicants that are accommodated • No. of complaints or community feedback

Option	Benefit	Risk	Comment
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Breaches of licence agreement. Agency feedback Continuing with use of the Gilwern OEC beyond 21 st August is not an option due to the need to re-open in September 2020, moreover the location is not suitable as a permanent solution.
Option 2: Not to pursue with the Gilwern option and rely on the on-going action to identify accommodation through normal arrangements eg liaising with housing associations, letting agencies etc	This is an established management function for the Housing Options Team. Some options eg B & B, social housing are less resource intensive for the Council.	It is considered that on the basis of existing trends, sourcing accommodation through normal arrangements won't be adequate to meet current accommodation needs. At the time of writing MCC homeless accommodation is at capacity. The Council won't be able to meet either its duties under the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 or the additional Guidance	The on-going approach of identifying accommodation through normal arrangements.
Option 3: Do nothing and rely on existing accommodation.	There are no benefits to this option on the assumption that the need for homeless accommodation will continue to increase in the short-term.	The Council won't be able to meet either its duties under the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 or the additional Guidance	This is not considered an option

6.

REASONS:

6.1

The Council has a duty to prevent and respond to homelessness under the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 and to comply with Welsh Government Guidance - Coronavirus (COVID-19): local authority support for rough sleepers April 2020.

7

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

7.1

There will be resource implications associated with this proposal which are estimated below:

Item of Expenditure	Estimated Cost
	Approx 3 month
	£

Up-Front Costs (eg lock changes, bedding etc)		1,500
Recurring Costs:		
- Rates		980
- Refuse		64
- Security		68,000
- Utilities		1,237
- Ad-hoc running costs and repairs		1000
Estimated Total Expenditure		72,781

- 7.2 Such costs can be claimed back from Welsh Government who have confirmed that there is £10m available to support Welsh Local Authorities in respect of Covid-19 related homeless expenditure in order to protect those at the most acute end of homelessness. The Council, however, has not been given an individual allocation of funding and is required to make monthly claims.
- 7.3 Should for any reason some or all of these costs not be met by Welsh Government, the Council would need to manage these within the existing resources of Housing & Communities.
- 7.4 In the event that the Council indeed has no other option and needs to use the facility, any residents will be charged rent of £75.95 per week. It is expected that most residents will be eligible for full housing benefit. At full occupancy of 9 residents, this would generate rental income of **£10,936**. It is, however, not expected that full occupancy will be likely.
- 7.5 In terms of context it is relevant to this report that the above costs aren't considered in isolation. The Council is incurring other costs relating to the Covid-19 homeless responsibilities. This includes or may potentially include:
- The cost of employing security for some of the Council's accommodation
 - For management purposes keeping some units of shared housing empty to reduce occupation densities.
 - Additional B & B costs (Although wherever possible housing benefit will help to offset some of this cost).
 - Ancillary costs such as purchasing bedding, cleaning materials for shared housing and taxi costs.
 - Homeless prevention costs
 - Costs to facilitate people to move on to alternative accommodation. (This will be considered and reflected in a future homeless report to Cabinet).
- 8. CONSULTEES:**
- 8.1 Cabinet; Senior Leadership Team; Head of Placemaking, Housing, Highways Housing & Place Shaping; Chief Officer Enterprise; Chief Officer MonLife; Brecon Beacons National Park Authority; Supported Housing Policy Manager, Welsh Government
- 8.2 Residents living near the Centre have been informed.
- 8.3 Ward Member Councillor Jane Pratt: Fully appreciates the urgent need for additional accommodation during the COVID-19 crisis on a temporary basis. Considers this location to be too remote to provide a permanent source of

accommodation for homeless people but is reassured by the temporary proposal until late August 2020 with the building then returning to its education use. Raised queries regarding the number of people to be accommodated in the building, likely timescales for using the building, and measures to ensure behaviour of occupants is appropriately managed and community notification, which have been answered in the report.

Ward Member Councillor Simon Howarth: Queried whether the Council had contacted owners of hotels in the main towns as this would be more suited to accommodating people due to the availability of town centre facilities and may be a more attractive options for individuals that need assistance. It was also queried whether any hotels receiving grants to subsidise closure may be required to provide emergency accommodation as grant condition.

Response:

- It has been a priority of the Housing Options Team to try and secure new sources of accommodation including B & B establishments. This has included a public appeal for accommodation going out through the Councils Communications Team and establishments being contacted directly.
- The Council isn't aware of any business grants to hotels that require establishments to provide emergency accommodation.

10. **BACKGROUND PAPERS:** Welsh Government; Coronavirus (COVID-19): local authority support for rough sleepers
11. **AUTHOR:** Ian Bakewell, Housing & Communities Manager
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Appendix 1

Overview of Current Homeless Accommodation

Social Housing

The local housing associations have facilitated a number of move ons and have agreed to support homelessness and hospital discharge. The level of vacancies, however, has been limited.

Family Hostel

At the start of the crisis the Council was able to move on families and a decision was made to use the hostel for higher risk single males. There has been a need to acquire security to keep residents and neighbours safe. This initially started at 12 hours per day but has since been increased to 24 hours. This provision has been very successful and has been at capacity since the conversion. However, there is still a necessity to place complex need cases, which is proving more and more of a challenge.

B & B

Historically the Council has struggled with Monmouthshire based B & B. Pre Covid the Council was using a B & B in Abertillery; three in Newport plus two in Monmouthshire.

Since Covid:

- One of the Monmouthshire B & B's has closed.
- Five new B & B's have come forward providing a total of six B & B establishments
- The expectation is that after the crisis that owners will want to revert back to their normal use, typically tourism.

Private Leased

The Council has secured two additional units of leased accommodation. One from a private landlord and one from Melin Homes.

Shared Housing

The Council has secured an additional shared property from Monmouthshire Housing Association providing 5 units of accommodation. This is in the process of being let.

Monmouth Market Hall

This office space has been earmarked to provide night-shelter accommodation equipped with camp-beds as a contingency measure. This is currently in use for one applicant under the supervision of 24 hour security.