WMCA Board

Date	17 November 2023
Report title	WMCA Homelessness Taskforce: Update and Key Priorities
Portfolio Lead	Councillor Kerrie Carmichael - Inclusive Communities The Portfolio Lead has worked in consultation with Councillor David Welsh – Chair of the WMCA Homelessness Taskforce Members Advisory Group
Accountable Chief Executive	Laura Shoaf - WMCA The Accountable Chief Executive and Portfolio Lead have worked in consultation with Jean Templeton - Independent Chair of the WMCA Homelessness Taskforce
Accountable Employee	Ed Cox, Executive Director - Strategy, Economy & Net Zero Neelam Sunder, Senior Programme Manager - Homelessness
Report has been considered by	WMCA Executive Board - 25 October 2023 Overview & Scrutiny Committee – 6 November 2023

The WMCA Board is recommended to:

1. Note that the homelessness being experienced by vulnerable citizens across the WMCA region is actively inhibiting our ability to create a more prosperous, fairer and **IN**clusive region for all**,** and that the Homelessness Taskforce has been one of the means by which the WMCA and its partners have collaborated to address this.

2. Consider how the WMCA and its partners can align efforts to accelerate progress towards our joint aim of designing out homelessness in all its manifestations, including by continuing to embed homelessness prevention into the mainstream strategies, processes, and programmes of the WMCA through cross-directorate activity and endorsing the Taskforce's adoption of a broader focus on all forms of homelessness.

3. Endorse the Homelessness Taskforce's identified priorities for 2023/24 and beyond, including specific actions to commission a suitably experienced and qualified organisation to help investigate and articulate an evidenced based economic case; and to consider how we can jointly lobby government to improve the current Local Housing Allowance (LHA) model.

1.   Purpose

1.1   The purpose of this paper is to update and engage WMCA Board members on the current work programme and priorities of the WMCA Homelessness Taskforce.

2.   Background

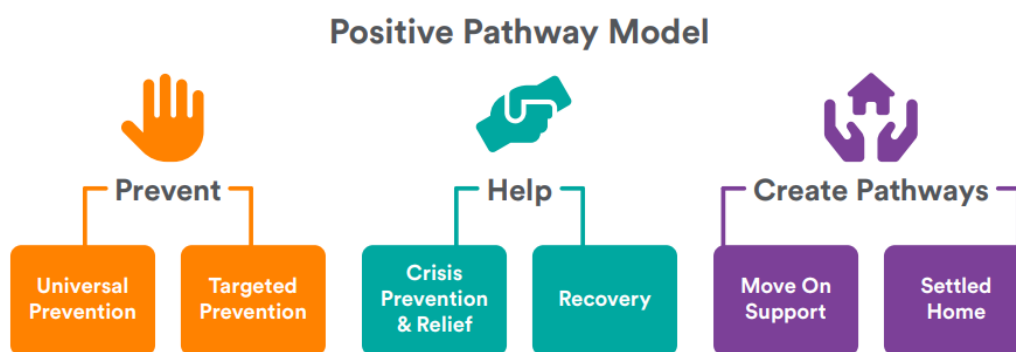### Forming the WMCA Homelessness Taskforce

2.1   Homelessness is the ultimate exclusion for citizens and has far-reaching consequences for those affected and for local communities.

2.2   Homelessness is not a devolved responsibility to the Mayor of the West Midlands or West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA), nor specifically funded. The primary responsibility and statutory duty for homelessness sits at local authority level. However, it was a key electoral issue during the first Mayoral elections due to the increase in rough sleeping at that time. This led to the Mayor setting up the Homelessness Taskforce during his first week with a commitment to bring together organisations, people and resources to support and **add value** to the work of our local authorities and other partner organisations that are involved in the prevention and relief of homelessness.

2.3   Two years after its formation, **the WMCA Board agreed in 2019 to 'mainstream' the work of the Homelessness Taskforce, taking it from being a Mayoral manifesto pledge into the core business of the WMCA.** At this stage, the Taskforce and its objectives were adopted within the mainstream structures of the WMCA.

2.4   Today, the Homelessness Taskforce membership includes all seven constituent local authorities of the WMCA, representation from non-constituent local authorities, key public sector agencies including Police, Fire, Health, DWP, Homes England; not for profit sector including West Midlands Housing Association Partnership, National Housing Federation, Crisis, Women's Aid, YMCA and representation from the Business Community. In addition, there is a Members Advisory Group made up of Cabinet Members with responsibility for homelessness from each of the seven constituent authorities, bolstering political leadership and accountability.
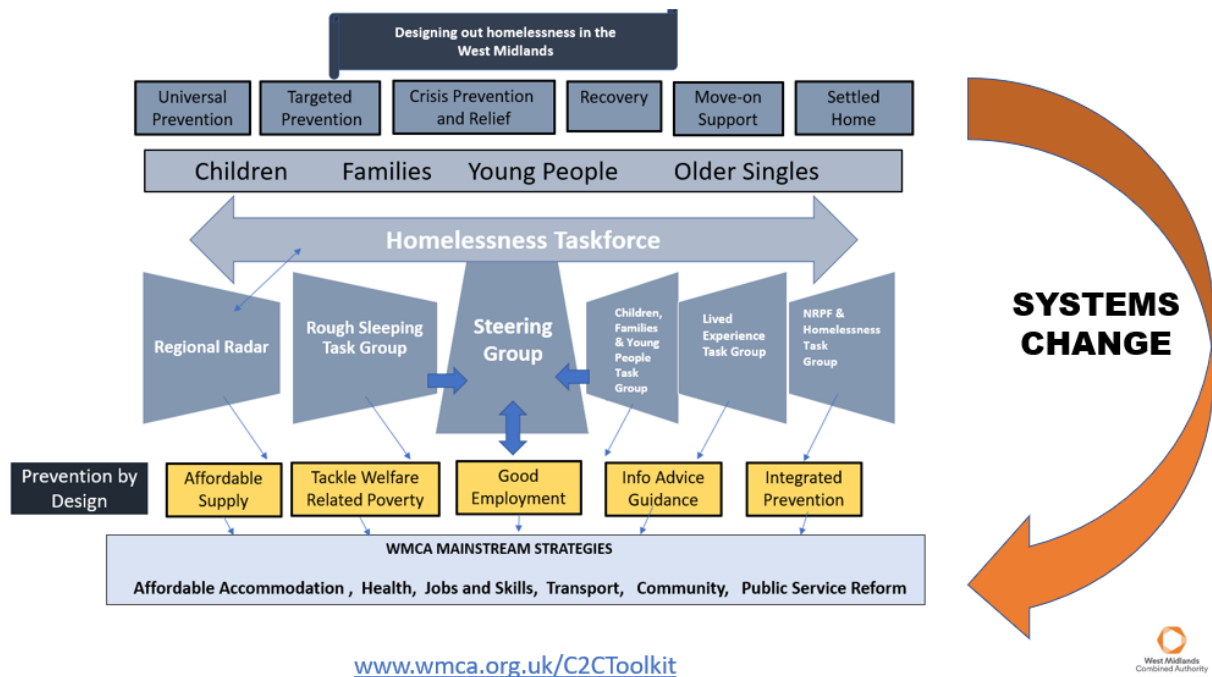
The Taskforce's ambition, aims and approach

2.5   The Homelessness Taskforce's strategic objective is to **design out homelessness** in all its forms, and to promote sustainable and meaningful **IN**clusion for all citizens of the WMCA region.

2.6   The reality however for some of our citizens is that they experience the exact opposite of **IN**clusion. Life circumstances for people with fewer social networks and resources, on lower incomes, in unstable accommodation, with physical and/or mental ill-health can put their lives into crisis, where circumstances and systems responses to those circumstances create a cycle of exclusion that results in citizens being further and further away from creating and sustaining a meaningful and safe life - in many instances leading to citizens losing their home and facing the ultimate exclusion that is homelessness.

2.7   The Taskforce's ambition to design out homelessness is based on the principle that we need a shared regional approach to tackling structural inequalities, which cuts across sectors and disciplines, focussing on how service systems respond to people's needs and how service systems inter-relate with each other so that they are inclusive of everyone, irregardless of life circumstances.

2.8   To help make sense of this critical challenge, the Taskforce has taken a life-course approach using an adapted version of the Positive Pathway Model, examining what we have in place and where the gaps exist, for children and families, young people, and older people, paying particular attention to those who are serially excluded.

Positive Pathway Model

Prevent — Universal Prevention — Targeted Prevention

Help — Crisis Prevention & Relief — Recovery

Create Pathways — Move On Support — Settled Home

2.9   Most homelessness or homelessness-related service systems are focused on the 'help' space of the model, when people are either already homeless or at immediate risk of being so. Therefore, in designing out homelessness, the purpose of the Taskforce has been to identify conditions for systems change which prevent homelessness at the earliest possible opportunity, deliberately considering what more can be done in the 'prevention' and 'create pathways' spaces to keep people **IN**cluded. If we can keep people in our systems, the less likely they are to become homeless.

2.10   This approach is encapsulated by the 'plan on a page' below, which sets out the work programme and **five objectives** which underpin all of the Taskforce's activity and resolve to embed the designing out of homelessness into the mainstream strategies of the WMCA.

Designing out homelessness in the West Midlands

Universal Prevention | Targeted Prevention | Crisis Prevention and Relief | Recovery | Move-on Support | Settled Home

Children   Families   Young People   Older Singles

Homelessness Taskforce

Regional Radar | Rough Sleeping Task Group | Steering Group | Children, Families & Young People Task Group | Lived Experience Task Group | NRPF & Homelessness Task Group

SYSTEMS CHANGE

Prevention by Design | Affordable Supply | Tackle Welfare Related Poverty | Good Employment | Info Advice Guidance | Integrated Prevention

WMCA MAINSTREAM STRATEGIES
Affordable Accommodation , Health, Jobs and Skills, Transport, Community, Public Service Reform

www.wmca.org.uk/C2CToolkit

2.11   The Homelessness Taskforce has sought to undertake activities with its local authority partners that are relevant and complementary to local strategies and commissioned services. When there has been added value to be gained, the Taskforce has played a pivotal role in convening, commissioning and coordinating activity right across the region.

2.12   This activity has included organising joint bids for example, to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) to secure additional investment through programmes such as the National Housing First Pilots, Rough Sleeping Accommodation Programme and Rough Sleeping Initiative that have allowed us to work with our local authorities and their partners to:

Test out innovation

Build resilience and capacity

Generate economies of scale and effort

Produce learning and knowledge that can be shared across the region

2.13   The 'litmus' test for all that we do includes:

- First and foremost, that we should add value to the work of our partners and not add work to already stretched services and organisations
- That our activity should not duplicate what others are already doing
- That our activity is always focused on ultimately designing out homelessness

2.14   An important part of the Taskforce's collaborative approach is the Members Advisory Group (MAG). The MAG meets each quarter where Members receive briefings, provide advice to workstreams and contribute relevant local knowledge and insight into policy issues impacting on homelessness across the region. The MAG critically acts as a conduit for embedding the work of the Homelessness Taskforce within local authority areas, taking responsibility for unblocking barriers to change. The MAG takes a bipartisan approach and as such has demonstrated its effectiveness as a lobbying group with central government, and other national bodies, providing a cross party and cross authority perspective on often complex issues spanning homelessness and housing; employment and skills; and health and communities.

Achievements

2.15   In the 6 years since its inception in 2017, the Homelessness Taskforce and its partners have continued delivering the Taskforce's 'plan on a page', making significant contributions to our ambition of designing out homelessness across the region. A few examples of what our joint work has achieved includes:

- Attracting additional funding in excess of £20 million for the region to tackle homelessness through the Rough Sleeping Initiative, Rough Sleeping Accommodation Programme and Housing First
- Agreeing and implementing a West Midlands definition of what affordable housing is - one that reflects local incomes both from work and benefits to maximise the level of affordable housing within developments
- Using Adult Education Budget flexibilities to run sector-based work academies specifically for roles in homelessness, focusing on transferable skills for available jobs
- Publishing IAG resources for veterans, faith and community organisations, and businesses to maximise their impact in designing out homelessness
- Rolling out Change into Action in 6 local authority areas, supporting circa 700 individuals to move away from rough sleeping
- Investing in Street Support Network across the region to provide a directory of homelessness and housing related services for people looking to find and give help
- Support to cross sector organisations to use the Commitment to Collaborate (C2C) Toolkit

Homelessness in the WMCA

2.16   The top three headline reasons for homelessness presentations at local authorities have remained consistent since the inception of the Homelessness Taskforce:

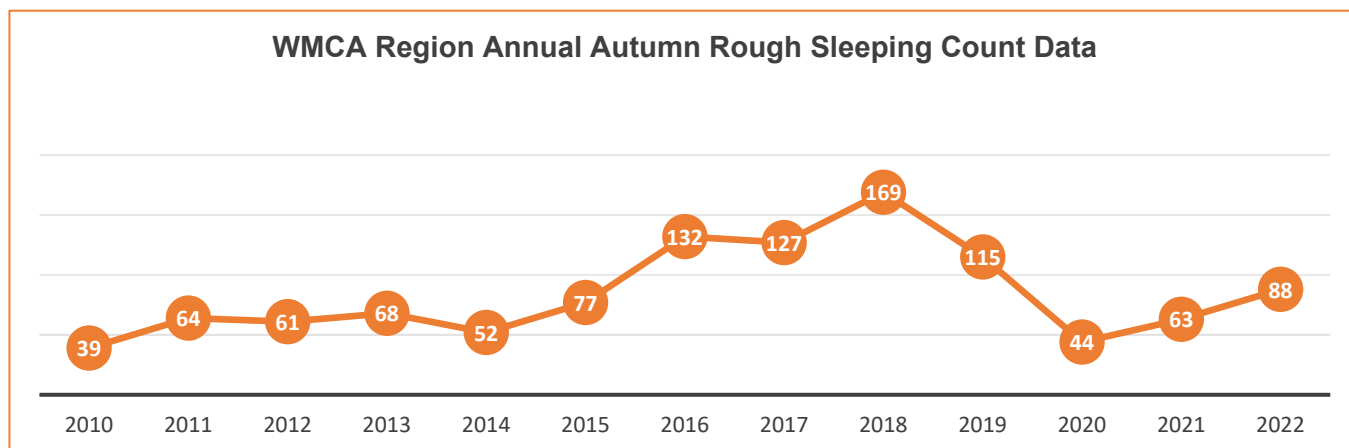Family or friends can no longer accommodate

Ending of assured short hold tenancies

Relationship breakdown

2.17   A minority of people who become homeless end up sleeping rough. For most of the last decade, the headline trends for the WMCA area have showed an increase in rough sleeping from 39 in 2010, rising to 132 in 2016, and peaking at 169 in 2018. However, numbers of affected people declined significantly in 2019 and 2020. The figures for the WMCA region in the 2020 rough sleeping count showed a decrease in the number of people found to be rough sleeping from 115 to 44; the lowest number in 10 years.

WMCA Region Annual Autumn Rough Sleeping Count Data

2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
39	64	61	68	52	77	132	127	169	115	44	63	88

2.18   Conversely data from the autumn 2021 and 2022 rough sleeping snapshot showed an increase. This reflects the exceptional circumstances of lockdowns in 2020 which had been lifted in 2021 making the environment more challenging. It is our analysis that it is too early to ascertain whether we have reached a peak in the numbers of people rough sleeping in the region, the autumn 2023 snapshot counts will provide a clearer picture.

2.19   It is important to acknowledge that homelessness and the risk of homelessness is not confined to rough sleeping. This **visible** form of homelessness is just the tip of the iceberg, which is why the Homelessness Taskforce is concerned with all forms of homelessness. The reality of homelessness is much broader than rough sleeping and there are many **hidden** forms of homelessness that are harder to see and affect many more citizens including:

- 'Homeless at home' e.g. overcrowding, unfit habitation
- Squatting
- Families with children in temporary accommodation, refuge, hotels and B&B
- Individuals staying in night shelters, hostels and supported accommodation
- Sofa surfing (sleeping on friend's sofas) and other unstable solutions including intermittent hospital and prison stays

2.20   Whilst many people in the above situations may have a roof over their head, that is not the same as having a secure and stable home.

2.21   Recent statutory homelessness data published by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) showed that between September 2022 and March 2023 there was a 24% increase in the number of households assessed as being owed a homelessness duty across the WMCA region, compared to a 7% increase across England. This suggests that the pressures being experienced in the region are disproportionate and significantly higher than the national average. In March 2023 the same dataset showed that there were 5,576 homeless households, including 11,076 children, across the WMCA region living in Temporary Accommodation (TA); equating to a 7% increase compared to data for September 2022. This continuing rise of households having nowhere permanent to live is of great concern.

2.22   While TA for all household types is an integral part of homelessness provision, it presents real challenges to households using it. Research commissioned by the Homelessness Taskforce in 2021 to better understand the experience of families in TA showed that living in unsettled housing, the uncertainty, not being able to put down roots, with no permanent address can lead to a sense of 'living in limbo'. Unsurprisingly, the toll on the mental health of family members living in TA was reported by many of those interviewed as part of this research. For example, restrictions on the use of gardens in family units, and no privacy for parents or children, affected the wellbeing of the whole family.

2.23   Furthermore, families often have to move out of their local area to access TA which can take them away from friends and support networks. The research pointed to specific impacts on children around schooling. We heard examples from families and stakeholders of families being moved to TA far away from their children's schools, which had had a detrimental effect on attendance and performance.

2.24   There are many factors contributing to the rise in homelessness presentations and use of TA, but one critical factor identified by all of our Local Authorities is the level of Local Housing Allowance (LHA). The contextual evidence from our Local Authorities and wider partners indicates that low LHA rates are connected with increased levels of homelessness and is making the prevention and relief of homelessness even more difficult. Whether that be in initial prevention of homelessness or helping families in TA to move on to secure housing quickly.

2.25   LHA was originally designed to help make the private rented sector accessible and sustainable for households on benefits and low incomes. The LHA rate was set with the aim that the rent element of benefits would cover the full rental cost of 30% of private sector properties in any given area.

2.26   Data provided by Crisis and Zoopla clearly demonstrates that for all regions of England this aim is not being achieved. The most recent data for the WMCA region, as at the end of March 2023, shows that only 3% of private rented properties are currently affordable at LHA rates, falling significantly short of the intended 30%.

2.27   The assumptions that underpin the work of the Homelessness Taskforce, for example the logic chain on which the Positive Pathway Model is built, would suggest that households having affordable access to a higher percentage of the private rented sector is important for promoting household stability and preventing homelessness. Having accessible affordable secure housing is one of the most important protective factors for families and other households.

Homelessness Taskforce Priorities for 2023/24 and beyond

2.28   The analysis above suggests the continuing need for both strategic and practical action across the region. The following areas of focus have been identified by the Taskforce as being our contribution to the current strategic and practical challenges as well as continuing to help progress our longer term aim to design out homelessness across the region:

- **Systemic Change** - homelessness comes about through a combination of structural and personal 'risk' factors, and the (in)ability of services and systems to come together to prevent and relieve homelessness well before a crisis occurs. To design out homelessness, is to affect change in service systems so that homelessness is prevented at the earliest opportunity – this is the hardest challenge. The Homelessness Taskforce is actively working with the WMCA Executive Board and Leadership Centre on further embedding the principles of designing out homelessness in all the work of the WMCA, so that the WMCA exemplify the Taskforce's ambition, and help enhance our ability to influence and support structural and systemic change across the region.

- **Equalities & Diversity** – linked to the Children, Families and Young People priority below, we are undertaking some joint work with the West Midlands Race Equalities Taskforce to generate a better understanding of the issues related to race equality, potential discrimination in service systems and the underlying reasons behind the disproportionate representation of some groups in homelessness services e.g. TA. We have secured commitment from Herriot Watt and the Oak Foundation to undertake a deep dive into our region. Linked to the systems change priority above, and the work being led by the WMCA Executive Board we are working with the WMCA Equalities & Diversity team to include an increased focus on homelessness impacts and opportunities for homelessness prevention as part of the WMCA Health and Equity Impact Assessment process.

- **WMCA Trailblazer Deeper Devolution Deal 2023** – the Taskforce is working in partnership with DLUHC & DWP on expanding the Live and Work model and piloting a Rent Simplification scheme for the region. DWP have secured £4.57m for the latter initiative. We have jointly developed a Proof of Concept project with DWP that will test financial support and simplification of the benefits system for 18-24 year olds living in supported housing who move into work or increase their working hours. This will help them to build their employment prospects further and work towards becoming financially independent and progress into move on accommodation in a planned way. In addition, we are also actively working across WMCA directorates to make the 'weave' across other Deal commitments related to Affordable Housing, Skills and Health.

- **Rough Sleeping** - until recently data to track rough sleeping has come primarily from the annual rough sleeping 'snapshot', which uses annual street counts to estimate the number of people sleeping out on a single night each autumn. While the snapshot is helpful in pointing out trends over time, we know that rough sleeping is complex - some people spend a single night out, others are rough sleeping for long periods of time and some have returned to rough sleeping after a period away. The single night count cannot adequately capture this complexity, and means we lack the insight needed to systematically ensure that rough sleeping is prevented wherever possible or, if it does occur, ensure that it is rare, brief and non-recurring. As early adopters of the government's new national data-led definition and rough sleeping framework, we have started to take a targeted data collection approach to tackling rough sleeping. The new set of indicators central to this approach will enable us to

better capture and understand the extent and nature of rough sleeping in each local authority area, and to use this information to target interventions more effectively.

- **Children, Families and Young People** – as a region we critically need to increase housing supply, making a robust case on how we can tackle barriers linked to accessibility and affordability. The Members Advisory Group asked the WMCA to commit resources to help the region demonstrate the economics of improving the LHA model, to help make the case to government. The Taskforce intends to shortly go out to tender to commission a suitable organisation to help us investigate and articulate the economic case for improving the current LHA model. Our assessment is that to maximise the chances of at least marginal reform of LHA rates we need to be able to articulate an evidence based economic case for change. To be impactful any such articulation would need to be both methodologically robust and include serious attention to the economics and cost benefits of the case for improving LHA rates. In short, we need to demonstrate that investing in raising LHA expenditure will contribute to the prevention of homelessness which in turn will help to reduce expenditure and upward pressure on related budgets. This work will deliver an up to date evidence based case that is methodologically sound and includes robust evidence of the cost benefits or return on investment of increasing LHA rates.

- **No Recourse or Restricted Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)** - lobbying and influencing decisions regarding national responses and sharing good practice across service systems. This work includes working at a strategic level with partners across the region, such as the West Midlands Strategic Migration Partnership, as well as ensuring that organisations providing support to affected groups are well informed and are being heard, for example working with the plethora of Faith and Community Groups working in this space.

- **Lived Experience Task Group** – we have resolved to explore how we can better embed learning from lived experience across systems and within the work programmes of the Taskforce. We have formed a new Task Group that will actively seek to include the voice of lived experience to inform and add value to our work.

3.   Strategic Aims and Objectives

3.1   The key driver of the region's homelessness prevention work is framed by the Homelessness Taskforce and the Inclusive Growth Framework. Designing out homelessness is an agreed strategic objective for the WMCA, identified within and aligned to Aims 2.2, 2.3, 5.1 and 5.2:

- To work with partners to identify and address the different barriers faced by our diverse communities
- To support social innovation to tackle complex and longstanding challenges facing our communities, where mutually agreed with partners
- To work with partners to understand their priorities, convene around shared opportunities, and deliver together
- To work with central government to gain new powers and resources for the region, including double devolution

4. **Financial Implications**

4.1 There are no immediate financial implications within this paper. A Senior Programme Manager and Associate to the Homelessness Taskforce is currently funded by the WMCA from the Inclusive Communities portfolio budget to support this work programme. The WMCA has also secured an additional £1.5m funding from DLUHC for the 3-year Rough Sleeping Initiative Programme through to March 2025, with another 3 roles directly supporting this programme.

4.2 Future work on progressing the 5 objectives and the specific priorities identified within this report may require further investment; this will be sourced through a variety of routes, including central government, grant providers, pro bono support, local authorities and WMCA. This will be considered and agreed on a case by case basis.

5. **Legal Implications**

5.1 The WMCA does not have specific statutory duties in relation to homelessness. These powers and duties remain with and are discharged by the constituent and non-constituent Local Authorities. No immediate legal implications have been identified. It is recognised however that this is a challenge which transcends individual authority boundaries and the issues identified touch upon a number of the powers of the Mayoral Combined Authority. The functions of employment, skills, health and communities, transport, strategy and economy, and facilitating the delivery of housing (including both market and affordable homes) across the region are all affected by, and in turn can have an influence over the causes and incidence of homelessness in the region.

6. **Single Assurance Framework Implications**

6.1 None.

7. **Equalities Implications**

7.1 The work of the Homelessness Taskforce targets some of the most vulnerable individuals in our communities and seeks to prevent homelessness in all of its forms. It has taken a person-centred life course approach to homelessness taking account of the demographics and equalities impacts for children and families, young people and older singles as well as those sleeping rough. We know that homelessness disproportionally affects some groups such as women and children, as well as those from some racialised communities. The Taskforce has specific workstreams aimed at better understanding the underlying reasons behind this disproportionate representation and how we can prevent and relieve homelessness for these groups.

8. **Inclusive Growth Implications**

8.1 The WMCA Board agreed in 2019 to 'mainstream' the work of the Homelessness Taskforce, taking it from a Mayoral manifesto pledge into business as usual. At this stage, the Taskforce and its objectives were adopted within the mainstream structures of the WMCA, including as one of the eight fundamentals of inclusive growth: affordable and safe places.

8.2 The work of the Homelessness Taskforce as a whole also addresses several of the indicators on the Inclusive Growth Framework, notably Education and Learning; Health and Wellbeing; Equality; and Inclusive Economy. Its overall purpose is to strengthen the region's ability to support some of the most vulnerable people within the region and ensure that inclusive growth means inclusive for all, including those experiencing severe and multiple disadvantage.

9.   Geographical Area of Report's Implications

9.1 The work of the Homelessness Taskforce spans across all seven constituent authorities of the WMCA. In addition, the non-constituent authorities are represented on the Homelessness Taskforce.

10.   Other Implications

10.1 There are no other implications.

11.   Schedule of Background Papers

11.1 None.