

STRONG AND SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE	Agenda Item No. 8
3 SEPTEMBER 2014	Public Report

Report of the Housing Needs Manager

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HOMELESSNESS REVIEW AND DRAFT STRATEGY 2013-2018

1. PURPOSE

- 1.1 To provide the committee with an update on the work of the Housing Needs service over the last 12 months, and to present the draft Homelessness Review and Strategy.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 The committee are asked to:
- Note and comment on the activity of the Housing Needs Service over the last year
 - Review and comment on the information contained in the Homelessness Review
 - Comment and agree on the broad strategic aims of the draft Homelessness Strategy and agree for the review and strategy to be taken forward to Cabinet.

3. LINKS TO THE SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY

- 3.1 Providing affordable, warm, safe and secure housing is the cornerstone of a strong society, and so the services described within this report are fundamental to the success of the Sustainable Community Strategy. The Homelessness Strategy itself supports the whole of the Sustainable Community Strategy, but particularly the priority to Create Strong and Supportive Communities.

4. BACKGROUND

- 4.1 The Housing Needs Service fulfils the council's statutory duty to provide advice and assistance to those who present to the authority as homeless or threatened with homelessness. While the council's duties vary dependant on the presenting households composition and composite needs various studies have demonstrated that homelessness prevention is the most cost effective way of tackling homelessness and reducing the damaging impact homelessness can have on individuals and families.
- 4.2 The Housing Needs services adopts a housing options approach in order to ensure that any presenting household has a full suite of advice and accommodation options when they present to us. Unfortunately the high demand for social housing means that in many cases we are unable to help the presenting household with an allocation of accommodation, but we will do our utmost to ensure that they are given the appropriate advice/assistance to enable them to remain in their current home. Where this is not possible we will seek to support them to move to alternative suitable accommodation. This may be supported accommodation, a private sector tenancy or a social housing tenancy.
- 4.3 Where we are unable to prevent homelessness we commence the statutory homelessness assessment and where required would make arrangements for emergency accommodation for the household while we assess whether a full housing duty is owed and then, depending on the outcome of the assessment, secure suitable permanent accommodation for the household.

4.4 In June 2013 we presented an updated homelessness review and action plan to the Strong and Supportive Communities Scrutiny Committee and following a review of the documents a number of improvements and suggestions were made to include more relevant comparative data and to include more information on the key successes achieved throughout the life of the previous homelessness strategy.

5. KEY ISSUES

5.1 In the year following the last review we have undertaken a comprehensive review of the Peterborough Housing Register and made a number of changes to the Peterborough Allocations Policy. These changes can be summarised as follows:

- i. Setting the entry criteria to the housing register to allow only those in the most urgent housing need to join. This includes: homeless households; those who are threatened with homelessness; those living in insanitary or unsatisfactory housing conditions; those who need to move for social/welfare reasons; or those for whom failure to assist in moving will cause particular hardship
- ii. Only accepting applications from those who have a local connection with Peterborough, demonstrated by having lived in the area for 6 of the last 12 months or 3 of the last 5 years, those who are working in the city, or those who need to move to move to the area for special reasons
- iii. Excluding applicants who own suitable accommodation or those who have sufficient financial resources to secure suitable accommodation by other means from joining the housing register. (This will not apply to those over 55 and eligible for sheltered accommodation)
- iv. Those who have behaved in an unacceptable manner will continue to be excluded from applying. This will be determined by: the Council or RSL being satisfied that the applicant or a member of their household has previously been guilty of unacceptable behaviour which would make them unsuitable to be a tenant; or the applicant or member of the household having been served with an injunction by the council or their landlord to stop them behaving in a way which causes nuisance or annoyance to others; or the applicant or a member of the household having current tenancy arrears in excess of 8 weeks rent; or the applicant or a member of the household having any outstanding former tenant arrears.

5.2 Additionally, the bedrooms standards policy that has previously been more generous was changed and brought in line with the criteria that has applied to housing benefit claims from April 2013.

5.3 In order to support the RSL's in managing the issue of the removal of the spare room subsidy the allocation policy also made provision to give band 1 priority to those who were assessed as under occupying their social housing tenancy. This has been relatively successful, but the continued demand for 1 and 2 bedroom properties has meant that many households are still unable to move into smaller accommodation.

5.4 In addition to the above changes we also included a number of additional preference categories, which gave increased priority for those who had a long standing local connection with the city (through 5 years continuous residence), those making an economic contribution to the city through employment or voluntary work in the area, and ex-servicemen and women who have been discharged from service in the last 5 years.

5.5 This has been a significant area of work, which has been completed with minimal interruptions to the provision of essential advice and homelessness services and with no additional resources.

5.6 The result of the review has been a significant reduction in the number of applications on the housing register from 9703 in January 2013 to 2688 at the end of June 2014.

5.7 The Homelessness Review 2014 document has been updated to include up to date statistics and references and now reflects a clearer picture of the demand or need for affordable housing in the city.

5.8 Housing Advice Services

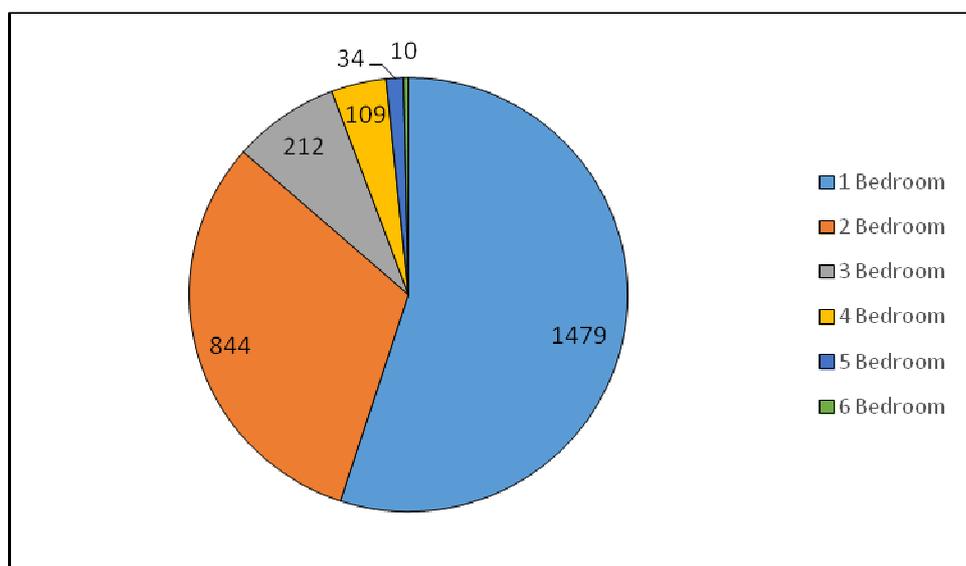
5.8.1 As well as the review of the housing register we have continued to offer advice services to those who contact the service. In the last financial year we were contacted 25,009 times by clients for advice and assistance, of which 5418 were seen face to face by an officer in the Housing Needs team. The type of enquiries dealt with by the officers in the team were wide ranging and covered a number of housing related subjects.

5.9 The Housing Register

5.9.1 As detailed previously the number of applicants who are now live on the housing register has reduced significantly, however the number of people who are approaching us for assistance is still as high as it has ever been. In the last 12 months we have seen 3517 clients face to face who have either enquired about joining the housing register, had an application processed or amended a current application.

5.9.2 In the 12 months from April 2013 to March 2014 we accepted 965 new applications onto the housing register.

5.9.3 The total number of applicants on the housing register at the end of June 2014 was 2688. The composition of these households varies, but the majority are either single applicants or couples with a one bedroom need. The chart below shows the current housing register broken down to show bedroom need.



5.10 Allocations

5.10.1 The council still maintains its nominations agreements with the Housing Associations who have accommodation available in Peterborough and these properties continue to be allocated through the council's choice based lettings scheme (Peterborough Homes).

5.10.2 Each week our partner Housing Associations advise us which properties they have available to let and we advertise them to the people on our housing register. Applicants can then choose which of the available properties they would like to be considered for.

Properties are then shortlisted by:

1. Who has expressed interest (eligible applicants)
2. Highest priority band
3. Who has been in their band longest
4. Who has been on the register longest

5.10.3 In 2013/14 we allocated 1217 properties through the choice based lettings scheme.

5.11 Homelessness Prevention

5.11.1 As detailed earlier in this report the Housing Needs Service adopts a housing options approach to clients who approach the council for assistance and will seek to prevent a household's homelessness wherever possible. We have a number of options when preventing homelessness and have been successful in a large number of cases which may have otherwise resulted in the household becoming homeless and the council having to accommodate in temporary accommodation, while seeking alternative accommodation.

5.11.2 We have done this by:

- i. Negotiating with householders/landlords to try to resolve the issues which led to the threat of homelessness
- ii. Liaising with Housing Benefit colleagues to resolve payment issues
- iii. Taking steps to improve security in the home to allow victims of domestic violence to remain in the home (Sanctuary Scheme)
- iv. Provision of the Mortgage Rescue Scheme / Mortgage debt advice
- v. Supporting households to move to alternative affordable accommodation in the private sector

5.11.3 At the end of March 2014 we had completed on 24 mortgage rescues and had a small number which were pending completion and funding had been agreed to ensure that these cases completed. We were the best performing authority in the East and South East areas and the reputation of the officer in the Housing Needs team was further enhanced by the HCA zone agent who referred a number of authorities to us for advice and guidance.

5.11.4 Unfortunately the Government's Mortgage Rescue scheme closed down on the 31 March 2014. However we still have a number of tools available to us to support households who find themselves in financial difficulty and where we are unable to keep them in their home, including being able to support them to exit home ownership and move to alternative accommodation.

5.11.5 We continue to support both tenants and landlords in the private sector through our tenancy relations officer. We have now assisted 592 households and have been successful in the prosecution of 3 landlords who have been found guilty of illegal eviction and have 4 cases pending.

5.11.6 The Housing Needs Service continues to offer a Rent Deposit Scheme which enables persons to access an interest free loan to be used for the up-front costs associated with securing a property in the private rented sector. This continues to be a successful option for the prevention and relief of homelessness and also increased access to permanent accommodation. In 2013/2014 a total of 232 households were assisted into private rented sector accommodation through this scheme totalling £100,521.

5.11.7 In addition the increased Discretionary Housing Payments fund (DHP) made available to all local authorities has been used to support households who were in receipt of housing benefits and may be at risk of homelessness to move to alternative private sector accommodation by paying up front fees such as deposits, rent in advance and reasonable administration fees. In 2013/2014 a total of 196 households were assisted into private rented sector accommodation through this scheme totalling £168,127.

5.11.8 Last year we reported to the Department of Communities and Local Government that we were successful in preventing homelessness in 413 cases.

5.12 Homelessness

5.12.1 As well as the advice services offered by Housing Needs, where a household approaches us for assistance and we are satisfied that the applicant is homeless or threatened with homelessness within the 28 days we are under a duty to accept a homeless declaration and commence an investigation into whether the applicant is considered 'statutorily homeless' and therefore owed a full housing duty.

5.12.2 In 2013/14 we accepted homelessness applications from 1095 households. This is marginally less than the previous 2 years, but remains considerably less than 4 years ago (1326). Of the 1095 applications, 250 were accepted as 'statutorily homeless' and owed a full housing duty compared to a high of 395 in 2009/10. This is in contrast to the national picture, which has seen slight increases in homelessness acceptances since 2010.

5.13 Rough Sleeping

5.13.1 2013/14 has been a challenging year in terms of dealing with rough sleeping in the city. We continue to offer support services to rough sleepers and the No Second Night Out scheme, which was piloted in the city in partnership with Axiom Housing Association and Peterborough Streets, was successful in supporting those new to the streets into accommodation before they became entrenched. This resulted in the number of rough sleepers who were identified in Peterborough at the time of our annual rough sleeper count being lower than previous years.

5.13.2 The pilot has now drawn to a close and has been integrated into the daily work of Axiom's New Haven hostel and the Housing Needs team. Unfortunately the recent closure of Peterborough Streets has meant that the council has had to pick up some additional work, but clients should not be adversely affected.

5.13.3 Most recently there has been an apparent increase in street based activity, such as begging and rough sleeping, which we continue to address as and when it arises. Unfortunately some of the more recent arrivals to the streets of Peterborough have migrated from other cities and do not have connections with Peterborough so are unable to access services here. While we continue to support rough sleepers by offering reconnections to the area from which they travelled many refuse our assistance as they are able to maintain their lifestyle from donations from members of the public. We will continue our work with the Police and anti-social behaviour teams in order to address the issue with begging and rough sleeping in the city centre.

5.14 Homelessness Review 2014 and Homelessness Strategy 2013 - 2018

5.14.1 The committee are asked to review and comment on the attached appendices and give approval for the documents to be taken forward to Cabinet for further approval on to full council for adoption.

6. IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The Homelessness strategy will have implications for all sections of society and all wards of the local authority area.

The Homelessness Strategy will provide the necessary framework for partnership working and the delivery of effective joined up services for homeless persons and persons at risk of homelessness.

7. CONSULTATION

- 7.1 The revised action plan was compiled in consultation with the Homeless Strategy Steering Group's focus groups held in November and December 2012. These focussed on the prevention of homelessness, increasing access to accommodation, rough sleeping and promoting settled lifestyles and sustainable communities. In addition the previous review document was presented to the scrutiny committee and recommendations/amendments were made as a result.

8. NEXT STEPS

- 8.1 Approval is sought from the committee to take the review document and strategy forward to Cabinet and then to Full Council for approval and adoption.

9. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Used to prepare this report, in accordance with the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985

- 9.1 Housing Act 1996 (as amended by Homelessness Act 2002)
Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities
Local Authorities' Homelessness Strategies, Evaluation and Good Practice

10. APPENDICES

- 10.1 Appendix 1 - Homelessness Review 2014
Appendix 2 - Homelessness Strategy Action Plan