

STRONG AND SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE	Agenda Item No. 10
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Report of the Housing Strategic Manager

Report Author: Belinda Child
Contact Details: Tel: 863769

HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION ACTION PLAN 2008-2011

1. PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to provide the Committee with an update on the progress of the Homelessness Prevention Action Plan 2008-2011 and to allow Members the opportunity to scrutinise and challenge performance and practice where necessary.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

Members are asked to scrutinise the approaches taken and progress made in relation to the Homelessness Prevention activity, to provide challenge where necessary and to suggest ideas and initiatives to support further improvements.

3. LINKS TO THE SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY AND LOCAL AREA AGREEMENT

Key Local Area Agreement indicators:

- National Indicator 141: 'Number of vulnerable people achieving independent living'
- National Indicator 142: 'Number of vulnerable people who are supported to maintain independent living'
- National Indicator 156: 'Number of households living in temporary accommodation'

Other indicators, tackled directly or indirectly by homeless services include:

- NI 6: Participation in regular volunteering
- NI 8: Adult participation in sport and active recreation
- NI 18: Adult re-offending rates for those under probation supervision
- NI 32: Repeat instances of domestic violence
- NI 39: Rate of hospital admissions for alcohol related harm per 100,000
- NI 40: Number of drug users recorded as being in effective treatment
- NI 117: Number of 16-17 year olds not in employment, education or training
- NI 130: Social care clients receiving self directed support per 1,000 inc. individualised budgets

4. BACKGROUND

4.1 Definition of Homelessness

The homelessness legislation – that is, Part 7 of *the Housing Act 1996* – provides the statutory under-pinning for action to tackle homelessness.

‘An applicant is statutorily homeless if they do not have accommodation that they have a legal right to occupy, which is accessible and physically available to them (and their household) and which it would be reasonable for them to continue to live in. It would not be reasonable for someone to continue to live in their home, for example, if that was likely to lead to violence against them (or a member of their family).’

Source: Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities

4.2 The statutory housing duty

Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 places a general duty on housing authorities to ensure that advice and information about homelessness, and preventing homelessness, is available to everyone in their district free of charge. The legislation also requires authorities to assist individuals and families who are homeless or threatened with homelessness and apply for help.

The main homelessness duty ensures that certain categories of household, such as families with children, or the elderly or those with mental health issues, or are vulnerable for some other reason have a priority need for accommodation. Housing authorities must ensure that suitable accommodation is available for people who have priority need, if they are eligible for assistance and ‘unintentionally’ homeless. An authority has such a duty to ensure the safety and welfare of its residents, as well as to reduce any negative impacts of homelessness to the local community such as anti-social behaviour arising from rough sleeping.

If settled accommodation is not immediately available, accommodation must be made available in the short term until the applicant can find a settled home, or until some other circumstance brings the duty to an end, for example, where the household voluntarily leaves the temporary accommodation provided by the housing authority.

4.3 The statutory duty to have a Homelessness Strategy

In 2002, the Government amended the homelessness legislation through *the Homelessness Act 2002* and the *Homelessness (Priority Need for Accommodation) (England) Order 2002* to ensure a more strategic approach to tackling and preventing homelessness, in particular by requiring a homelessness strategy for every housing authority district

The strategy must be based on a review of all forms of homelessness in their district. It must set out the local authority’s plans for preventing homelessness and for securing that sufficient accommodation and support is, or will be, available for those who become homeless or are at risk of becoming so.

All organisations, whose work can help to prevent homelessness, or meet the needs of homeless people in their district, must be considered in the strategy. Plans for joined up working such as this has a massive impact on reducing those who would otherwise potentially experience the negative aspects of homelessness and risks of becoming homeless.

Through the implementation of the Homelessness Strategy, the aim is to reduce the number of people in the local authority area who are homeless or threatened with homelessness.

The most effective way to achieve this is to take a preventative approach and to ensure that there are the necessary support services to act as a safety net. Access to free advice and assistance is also vital. Housing Options staff, at the Customer Service Centre at Bayard Place, have provided housing and homelessness advice to 17,257 people between January 2009 and January 2010, 1475 of these enquiries were directly concerning homelessness. The team have accepted 330 households as homeless between April and December 2009.

An example of the impact of early intervention is the Tenancy Relations Service. A full time Tenancy Relations Officer took up post in September 2009, the service receives on average 20 enquiries per week ranging from illegal evictions to general tenancy advice. Currently 86 formal cases are being investigated. Despite a 34% increase in applications for assistance due to the anticipated loss of privately rented accommodation, this service has effected a 15% reduction in homelessness acceptances for this category.

Another example of early intervention is the work being undertaken in schools to educate young people to plan their move to independent living. Workshops have been delivered to 1221 Year 11 students during 08/09 and 09/10, resulting in a reduction of homeless acceptances for this age group.

In Peterborough there are excellent referral routes between the Local Authority and its partner agencies. There continues to be generalist and specialist floating support for vulnerable client groups through the Supporting people Programme. During their interview with a Housing Options Officer areas where the applicant might benefit from support from another agency are identified. If this is the case a referral will be made in order that problems that are underlying the immediate threat of homelessness can be addressed. Referrals are made to a variety of agencies such as the Mental Health Service, Drinksense, Bridgegate and Womens Aid. Where tenancy sustainment is an issue a referral is made to the cross tenure housing support provided by Cross Keys Homes and Axiom Housing Association.

Where a person is threatened with homelessness due to domestic violence the Housing Options Team works closely with the Domestic Violence Advocacy Service. If the victim wishes to stay in their home a 'Sanctuary Scheme' is in operation whereby additional security measures are installed, usually backed up by an injunction or a non-molestation order.

5. KEY ISSUES

Repossessions:

The credit crunch is having far reaching implications, some of which have not yet been fully realised. Housing Options has seen a 72% increase in people seeking advice regarding mortgage arrears and a 59% increase in relationship breakdowns resulting in the threat of homelessness.

The mortgage rescue scheme was introduced in January 2009 in response to rising mortgage repossessions and the associated increased risk of homelessness. The scheme is a targeted and specific homelessness prevention tool for vulnerable households.

Clients being considered under the scheme may be offered either:

- A shared equity option, which enables the homeowner's monthly mortgage payments to be reduced

Or

- Government mortgage to rent, which enables the homeowner to remain in the property as a Housing Association tenant on an assured shorthold tenancy, paying an intermediate rent (80% of current market valuation)

When the scheme was launched it was restrictive in that applicants in negative equity would not be eligible. It was apparent that there would be a small number of eligible applicants. This restriction was consequently lifted later in the year which made the scheme much more accessible. In addition a funding allocation was provided to assist applicants at risk of homelessness due to financial difficulties. We are able to use this fund imaginatively; however it is likely that we would be looking to assist applicants with interest free loans to clear arrears which would trigger repossession action.

A housing options officer has been trained to specialise in mortgage and debt advice and is currently dealing with around 30 clients a month. In addition we have entered into partnership with Compass Step One who are providing one to one debt management and are able to accommodate up to 30 referrals a month. We have recently referred our first suitable rescue case and have many more to be referred soon. We are working with the Job Centre to promote the scheme so we are able to identify potential homelessness at an early stage. It is important that we continue to promote the scheme and advise potential clients to visit us for advice at an early stage rather than waiting until crisis point.

Private Rented Sector:

Better regulation of the Private Rented Sector is enabling more people to access this accommodation, enabled by the Local Authority's Rent Deposit Scheme, and the Landlord Accreditation Scheme. Since 1st April 2008 523 rent deposits have been issued for tenancies in the private rented sector, preventing homelessness for these clients. Since the launch of the Landlord Accreditation Scheme in December 2008 37 landlords and letting agents have been accredited with a combined property portfolio of 2662 properties across the city.

Rough Sleeping:

The National Relocation Pilot (NRP) was commissioned by DCLG in Peterborough commencing in June 2009. The service was commissioned due to the high numbers of A8/A2 Nationals rough sleeping in the city. The NRP offers this client group reconnection to their country of origin, or assistance with obtaining identification documents to enable them to seek employment. This pilot has been undertaken by a voluntary sector organisation, CRI, and the project is due to end in March 2010. The Project has successfully carried out 56 assessments, of which 23 wished to be reconnected with their country of origin. A total of 18 of the clients have been successfully reconnected and the remaining 24 have been issued with documents to enable them to seek employment. The NRP will cease in March and the service will be re-launched through the Housing Options Service utilizing funding made available through the DCLG.

The Migration Impact Fund (MIF) has provided funding to enable the Rough Sleeper Outreach service to offer severe weather provision in the form of bed and breakfast to A8/A2 rough sleepers and provide re-connection beds to rough sleepers who have been successful in gaining employment. During December 2009 a total of 23 rough sleepers were placed in bed and breakfast when the temperature dropped below 0 degrees Celsius for one or more nights. Since then the cold weather provision has been activated on a number of occasions. The main aim of this service is to minimise loss of life during periods of cold weather and enable persons to connect with appropriate services while stabilised in accommodation. One person has successfully gained employment as a Bilingual Assistant and has been provided with a reconnection bed in the form of temporary accommodation until his employment commences. The MIF has also provided funds for a web based database to enable meaningful data collection with reference to numbers of migrants rough sleeping and the services that they are accessing. This will be an invaluable tool in informing future service delivery.

Choice Based Lettings:

In 2005 the Peterborough Homes Partnership was formed between the City Council, Cross Keys Homes and the majority of the Housing Associations operating within the city. A common Housing Register was introduced and Housing Options took responsibility for maintaining this and operating the Choice Based Lettings scheme on behalf of the partnership.

Over the past 12 months a review of the Housing Register has been carried out which has resulted in a reduction in the overall numbers on the list from around 10,500 to approximately 4700. This now represents a more accurate picture of the number of households actively seeking social housing in the city. The number of new applications received currently averages at around 100 per week. The average number of properties that are advertised through choice based lettings each week is 40.

6. IMPLICATIONS

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

Financial Implications: There are financial implications with regard to hostel and bed and breakfast accommodation for homeless clients and cold weather provision for rough sleepers.

7. CONSULTATION

Extensive consultation was conducted prior to the adoption of the strategy. It is also a requirement of the Supporting People funding programme that service users are regularly surveyed to ensure that the services they receive are fit for purpose.

8. EXPECTED OUTCOMES

It is anticipated that the consideration of this report coupled with a question and answer session at the panel meeting will result in Members fully understanding the issue of Homelessness in Peterborough.

9. NEXT STEPS

It is recommended that a further update be brought to the Strong and Supportive Communities Scrutiny Committee in March 2011 to again review progress and identify issues.

10. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

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

Not applicable

11. APPENDICES

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