



Overview & Scrutiny Committee

All Wards

28th November 2007

8. SOCIAL OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS – OFFICER COMMENTS TENANCY SUSTAINMENT

This report is an update on the recommendations from the Social Overview and Scrutiny Committee carried out by Members on Preventing Homelessness between May 2004 - May 2006.

Each recommendation has been broken down into its component parts, as detailed within the Committee's report; these components are detailed below the main recommendations; with the corresponding Officer comments detailed alongside.

	<u>Social Overview & Scrutiny Committee Recommendations</u>	<u>Officer Comments</u>	<u>Work completed to date</u>
1.	<p>It was recommended by the Social Overview & Scrutiny Committee that there be a significant change in the focus of the Council's homelessness service towards prevention as detailed in the report and, where appropriate, partnerships with outside agencies be sought and service level agreements be negotiated.</p> <p><i>(Component parts of the recommendation are detailed below)</i></p>	Officers agree with this recommendation and provide comments below.	
1.1	<p>Stop using the term "Homelessness", instead use "in Housing Need".</p>	In order to meet this requirement, the One Stop Shop form would be changed from being titled the "Initial Homelessness Assessment Form" to the "Initial Assessment	<p>Completed</p> <p>Assessment Form renamed.</p>

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		Form". References to "Homelessness" would also be removed from the service name and job titles of staff.	Team now renamed Housing Options Team and re-launched Housing Advice Service.
1.2	Offer early advice and referrals.	With the introduction of Choice Based Lettings and the Housing Options Team, all customers will receive an in-depth interview about their housing options and be advised on the most appropriate form of housing for their circumstances.	Completed Introduced Housing Options Team on 29 January 2007. Choice Based lettings went live on 6 September 2007.
1.3	Undertake full homelessness interviews at the very start of the process; clarifying the different housing options available to the applicant.	Officers currently undertake a full homelessness interview including providing the applicant with details of the different housing options available following the completion of an initial assessment form. Officers use this form to determine whether the Council has a duty to conduct S.184 inquiries into an applicants request for assistance under homelessness legislation. A full housing options interview will be conducted by the Housing Options Team. (as per response to 1.2).	Completed Housing Advice Officers now carry out initial assessment of homeless cases.
1.4	Ensure that mediation is available; mediation should be voluntarily accessed on both sides.	The Council has access to a mediation service which is voluntary. This service is a Countywide service part funded by the six	On going Looking at new County Mediation Service with funding from

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		local authorities and the Department of Communities and Local Government. Six referrals have so far been made for mediation.	Communities and Local Government. Funding required. Completed. Night Stop are now providing a mediation service for young people aged 16 - 25, in Redditch. Officers have now negotiated a contract with Night Stop to provide a mediation service on behalf of RBC. A contract is currently being agreed.
1.5	Introduce compulsory home visits for all parental exclusion cases to filter out false claims.	Officers agree with this proposal; compulsory home visits for all parental exclusion cases could be implemented immediately.	Currently being worked on Risk assessments required for Officers. This work will also link into 1.4 the mediation service with Night Stop.
1.6	Ensure that there is a shift towards prevention with more Officers doing solely preventative work. The number of Officers working on prevention should outweigh the number of Officers processing the homelessness applications (Invert the	Officers agree and accept that over time, the balance and focus of the Council's homelessness provision needs to be on prevention. The current structure of the Homelessness Service has 3 full time equivalent (FTE) staff predominately	<u>4th Quarter 2006/07</u> 39 Accepted homeless cases. 29 Prevention Cases. Due to lack of current floor space available

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<p>staffing structure triangle as detailed in the Social Overview & Scrutiny Committee's Preventing Homelessness report).</p>	<p>investigating applications and 1 FTE working solely on prevention. Investigation Officers spend 10 - 15% of their time on preventing homelessness. During 2005/06, 75 cases were prevented from becoming homeless. The Housing Options Team will also be working to prevent homelessness. Due to the number of applicants approaching the Council for assistance under homelessness legislation, Officers consider it impractical to reduce the number of Officers investigating applications at this time but propose reviewing the structure after the Housing Options team has been in place for twelve months.</p>	<p>on the ground floor in the Town Hall, we have not been able to accommodate all the Housing Options Team together as we had previously hoped to do.</p> <p>Therefore it is proposed from December 2007 to locate all the Housing Options and Advice Officers on the first floor in the current office and locate the Housing Options Assistants on the ground floor behind the current interview desks in Housing Advice Team.</p> <p>All the Housing Options & Housing Advice Officers will cover the interviews and continue with those cases that require further investigation, rather than the current practise of a Housing Advice Officer referring the case over to a Housing Options Officer.</p> <p>The Housing</p>
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			Options Team are working with the local College to develop an education programme designed to show awareness of homelessness issues and housing options. Therefore this will meet the requirements to 'invert the staffing structure triangle'.
1.7	Offer more homelessness prevention schemes.	The Council currently has initiatives to prevent homelessness and will continue to produce other appropriate schemes. The Council has access to a mediation service and assists with Rent Deposits. In partnership with the local authorities within Worcestershire and the Supporting People Team, work is being carried out to implement a homelessness prevention service which will provide support to people who are threatened with homelessness and work to reduce repeat homelessness.	Ongoing looking at new initiatives. Redditch Borough Council working with Night Stop to develop the mediation service in Redditch which Night Stop have commenced. Rent deposits available. Talks taking place with the Prison Service.
1.8	Tackle the wider causes and symptoms of homelessness.	The Council is currently reviewing its Homelessness Strategy with Local Authorities and partners in Worcestershire and is	County Draft completed. Redditch Borough Council Officers are currently

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		in the process of developing a Countywide Strategy.	working to update the Council's action plan in the County homelessness strategy which will then be presented to Members for sign off.
1.9	Build up partnerships and working relationships with other responsible bodies, the voluntary sector and private sector landlords making sure that each organisation has a clear understanding of its role, utilising service level agreements where necessary.	<p>Through the Private Sector Renewal strategy the Council is working to establish a Private Sector Landlords Forum and an accreditation scheme with a view to improving access and standards in the private sector.</p> <p>The Council currently works with other agencies and the voluntary sector through the Homelessness Strategy Group to ensure all organisations have a shared goal in dealing with homelessness and will continue to develop its working relationships. The Council is an active participant within the County and Regional groups on homelessness. Officers will explore the use of service level agreements/partnership agreements with its partners to ensure goals are achieved.</p>	<p>Meetings have been held with 8 Private Landlords who are in agreement with the Landlords Accreditation Scheme. This is currently being progressed by the Policy Manager and Prevention Officer.</p> <p>Discussions are taking place with Supporting People to introduce a Tenancy Sustainment role for Council and private tenants.</p> <p>Joint protocols being produced between hospital and Local Authorities across the County. *Currently working on protocol with Probation.</p>
2.	It was recommended that existing finances be refocused towards	Officers agree in principle with the recommendation but	

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	<p>homelessness prevention to engage private landlords, to instigate schemes such as a “Finder’s Fee” and to build up tailored prevention programmes. <i>(Component parts of the recommendation are detailed below)</i></p>	consider that it should be assessed as part of a review of the Housing Options Team as per response 1.6.	
2.1	Ensure that existing finances can be used for homelessness prevention.	The Council currently receives £50,000 per annum from the CLG to assist in homelessness prevention. The Council uses this money to support Redditch Nightstop to provide emergency accommodation for young people, Centrepoint to implement the Worcestershire Youth Homelessness Strategy, fund the Homelessness Prevention post and the Rent Deposit Scheme.	<p>Complete</p> <p>The money is awarded each year which will be looked at to see if there are other agencies or partners who require assistance.</p>
2.2	Recognise the potential for utilising Private Sector Landlords in preventing homelessness.	Both the Homelessness Strategy and Private Sector Renewal Strategy recognise the importance of the private sector in preventing homelessness and Officers are working to improve the relationship with this sector.	<p>Completed</p> <p>Forum set up Meetings being held.</p>
2.3	Liaise with Private Sector Landlords to address the barriers preventing them from accepting tenants on Housing Benefits.	The Council is currently engaging with private landlords to set up a forum in order to improve working relationships with this	<p>Completed</p> <p>Meet and Greet Forum taken place with private landlords and</p>

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		sector (as per response 1.9). The Housing Benefit Department will be members of this forum.	<p>Officers in the Housing Options Team.</p> <p>Visits to Landlords accommodation taking place, Landlords also being invited into the Housing Options Office to meet with Officers. Further Landlords have joined the Forum.</p> <p>Draft Service Level Agreement with Housing Benefit prepared.</p>
2.4	Develop a wide range of schemes to encourage Private Sector Landlords, for example, the "Finders Fee" scheme, rent deposit schemes and deposit guarantee schemes (this list is not exhaustive).	Officers do not believe a 'Finders Fee' as operated by the London Borough of Harrow is the best use of the Council's resources. The Council currently assists applicants to whom the Council has a legal duty to assist with accommodation by providing rent deposits or deposit guarantees. Due to the level of funding available, this assistance is limited to those where the Council has a duty to assist under homelessness legislation. Eighteen applicants have been assisted with rent deposits or guarantees with the average cost of £600.	<p>Procedure and Policy drafted, waiting to be signed off.</p> <p>Rent deposits also being provided to other groups of people who do not meet the priority need level under homelessness, however are vulnerable due to being homeless.</p>

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2.5	Build up a portfolio of Private Sector Landlords.	A primary role for the Homelessness Prevention Officer is to build relationships with landlords and liaise with them to accept applicants who are homeless. The work through the Private Sector Renewal Strategy in building a landlord's forum and accreditation scheme will also assist in this.	Completed Forum meeting regularly.
3.	It was recommended that a fast track link between the Council's housing benefits and homelessness services be implemented. <i>(Component parts of the recommendation are detailed below)</i>	In theory this recommendation could be implemented relatively easily, for example an administrative code could be created for homelessness cases so that they are, in effect, skimmed off the top and dealt with before any of the other cases. The speed of processing new claims for April and May 2006 is on average 28 days. <i>However, we would first ask Members to consider whether they want homelessness cases to be given priority over all other cases.</i>	Completed Fast Track System to Housing Benefits working well. Regular meetings with Officers and Housing Benefit. Cases processed within days of all Supporting evidence and completed form being submitted.
3.1	Increase communication between the services.	This recommendation could be implemented within 2 months. Housing Strategy & Homelessness Department and	Completed Meeting taken place with Prevention Officer and Housing Benefits.

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		<p>Housing Benefit Department would enter into a Service Level Agreement (SLA) to formalise and improve current working relationships.</p> <p>The Benefit Supervisor would be a named liaison Officer in Housing Benefits and would be the first point of contact for all Homelessness cases; it would then be clear where the Homelessness Prevention Officers would have to go with their cases.</p> <p>A weekly referral sheet would be completed by the Housing Strategy and Homelessness Department for updating on respective cases by Housing Benefit staff. A bi-monthly meeting would take place to monitor the effectiveness of the SLA.</p> <p>The SLA would promote a mutual understanding between the two teams so that Housing Benefits Officers are clear of the Housing Options Team's priorities for preventing homelessness and the Housing Options Officers are aware of the other demands and</p>	<p>Agreement made.</p> <p>Officers working to this agreement.</p>
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		priorities of the Housing Benefit Team.	
3.2	Use this link as another incentive for Private Sector Landlords.	Officers will use this working relationship as an incentive to private landlords to accept referrals from Redditch Borough Council and as part of the planned accreditation scheme.	Completed Referred to in meetings with Private Landlords on 14 May 2007.
3.3	Investigate offering a guarantee that benefits will be processed within a given time period.	<p>In theory it would be relatively easy to offer a guarantee to Private Sector Landlords. We would, however be wary of offering a “guarantee” as this could mean that the Benefits Section’s other work was marginalised, particularly if there were any unforeseen staff absences.</p> <p>The Council is performing favourably against other Local Authorities nationally for the speed at which applications are processed, for example, Redditch Borough Council is in the Upper Quartile for processing applications which currently stands at 28 days.</p> <p>A guarantee that a claim would be processed <i>once all relevant information had been received</i> could be given, <i>should Members agree</i>. Benefits Officers feel that 7 days would be an appropriate timescale.</p>	Completed See 3.1.

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		<p>Private Sector Landlords would be encouraged to go through the different Benefit forms with their tenants as this guarantee would only be effective once all information had been received from the applicant.</p>	
<p>4.</p>	<p>It was recommended that the management of Discretionary Housing Payments be transferred to Housing Strategy & Homelessness.</p> <p><i>(Component parts of the recommendation are detailed below)</i></p>	<p>Officers would recommend that there be no change to the current management of DHP.</p> <p><u><i>A note on Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) and the Government's distribution formula:</i></u></p> <p>The Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) has recently changed the method it uses to calculate each Council's contribution.</p> <p>The Government now allocates a sum based on the halfway point between the previous year's DHP allocation and the overall amount that has been spent. For example, if the Council was awarded £9,000 in 2005 but only spent £7,000, the following year's contribution would be £8,000; yet, if the Council received £9,000 and spent £11,000 (by increasing</p>	<p>No Action Required</p>

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		<p>its DHP budget with £2,000 of its own money), the following year's contribution from the Government would be £10,000. In addition to the above distribution formula, the DHP funds need to balance out nationally and so the figure alluded to above could be increased or decreased slightly depending on the national average.</p> <p><i>Therefore, Members should be aware that in order to increase the level of funding received from the Government, Redditch Borough Council must put some of its own money into the DHP fund.</i></p> <p>(N.B. Each Authority is limited to contributing no more than 2.5 times the contribution from the Government.)</p>	
4.1	<p>Use Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) as a tool for preventing homelessness.</p>	<p>The Council currently utilises DHP for a variety of reasons, with the majority to assist in applicants to remain in their current accommodation and therefore preventing homelessness. The Council received £9,030 from DWP for DHP in 2005/06 and spent £18,893 on DHP in total.</p>	

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		<p>Detailed below are some examples of where the DHP fund has been put to use under the management of Housing Benefits:-</p> <p>i) Mr and Mrs A's marriage has recently broken down. Mr A is waiting for a Court order for the custody of his four children. Mr A rents a three-bedroom house so that he is able to accommodate his children once the outcome of his case is decided; Mr A's rent has been restricted because as a single person he is over accommodated. Mr A has been awarded DHP to meet the shortfall between the contractual and restricted rent until custody has been granted and his Housing Benefit allowance reviewed.</p> <p>ii) Ms B is a private tenant whose rent has been put up by £2.50 per week. The increased rent cannot be referred back to the Rent Officer because 12</p>	
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		<p>months have not elapsed since the previous decision was made. DHP has been awarded to meet the shortfall in rent until the annual review can be done by the Rent Officer.</p> <p>iii) Ms C works full-time whilst her partner, Mr D is a full-time student. Because they are both out of the house all day they have childcare costs. Had Mr D been in full time employment an element of their child care costs would have been disregarded. The Housing Benefits team did not feel that this distinction was fair and so DHP has been awarded until Mr D has completed his course.</p> <p>iv) Mr E used to be in receipt of JSA (IB), that is, Job Seekers Allowance (Income Based). Mr E has since been moved onto Incapacity Benefit, where although he now receives a higher level of benefit, he is in a worse situation as</p>	
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		<p>he is no longer eligible for maximum Housing and Council Tax Benefit, nor is he exempt from paying for his NHS prescriptions. DHP has been awarded to Mr E to meet the difference in his rent and Council Tax until he moved to long term Incapacity Benefit and would again be entitled to maximum Housing and Council Tax Benefit.</p>	
4.2	<p>Raise awareness of DHP.</p>	<p>Leaflets have been produced and are available from the One Stop Shops and on the Council's website; in addition, Housing Benefit letters make reference to DHP. All Housing Benefit, Tenancy Team, Rent & Welfare, One Stop Shop and Homelessness Staff are aware of DHP and advise and assist applicants in applying for DHP. Redditch Borough Council is one of the few Councils nationally whose Benefits Team promotes the DHP fund on its website.</p>	
4.3	<p>Encourage applications for DHP.</p>	<p>Council Officers from the Benefits, Rent and Welfare, Homelessness, OSS Teams and external</p>	<p>DHP money being spent in full.</p>

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		organisations like the CAB all promote and encourage applications for the DHP where they feel it would be of benefit.	
4.4	Transfer the management of DHP to Housing Strategy and Homelessness so that the fund is more accessible for those at risk of homelessness.	Homelessness staff have a good working relationship with Housing Benefit staff, which will be enhanced by the SLA. DHP is currently used for the prevention of homelessness in the majority of cases. Officers do not see any added value in moving the management of DHP from the Housing Benefit Staff to Housing Strategy and Homelessness Staff.	DHP money being spent in full.
5.	It was recommended that the Council receive a peer assessment from a Regional Champion for Homelessness at the earliest opportunity.	Officers support this recommendation and would advise this should be completed as part of the review of the service when the Housing Options Team has been in place for twelve months.	Due February 2008.

Note:

Consultation with Officers has taken place.

Author of Report

The author of this report is Liz Tompkin (Head of Housing Services), who can be contacted on extension 3304 (e-mail: liz.tompkin@redditchbc.gov.uk) for more information.

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