

Redditch Borough Council

Enhanced Housing Options Strategy 2010 to 2013

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Appendix 1 – Enhanced Housing Options Action Plan (please contact Elise Hopkins, Housing Options Manager, if you wish to view the full action plan).

Forward

I am pleased to introduce Redditch Borough Council's Enhanced Housing Options Strategy for 2010 – 2013.

Since the development of our first Homelessness Strategy in 2003 there have been big changes in the way that housing and homelessness advice is delivered in Redditch. Relationships with voluntary and statutory partners have strengthened and a number of joint protocols to support vulnerable people in housing need have been developed. The Council has achieved significant reductions in the number of statutory homelessness acceptances and households in temporary accommodation. Customers are now offered a more personalised service which is focused upon Homelessness Prevention and intervention before crisis point. Communities and Local Government recognised the achievements by awarding £180,000 in grant funding as part of the Trailblazer program to fund initiatives which will be used to produce a good practice toolkit for use by all local authorities.

This Council is committed to achieving the objectives detailed in the Enhanced Housing Options Strategy. This Strategy will help both staff, Members, Stakeholders and the Public to see clear direction for the Council and assist in their understanding of their own role and responsibilities for shaping the future of housing advice and support in Redditch.

Councillor Brandon Clayton
Housing, Local Environment and Health Portfolio Holder

Executive summary

The Government's overall aim is to ensure that more households are adequately housed in permanent accommodation, with access to quality services and that, where possible, households are offered more options to prevent homelessness.

The Council published its first local Homelessness Strategy in 2003 which outlined its vision to 2009. In 2005 a Scrutiny Review was undertaken by Elected Members which highlighted that the Council needed to change its approach to Homelessness by focusing on homeless prevention, making greater use of the Private Sector, and making better use of discretionary housing benefit.

The Council undertook a review of all the homelessness and housing advice services in Redditch in 2008 and 2009 which gives detailed analysis of the levels of housing need and homelessness within the District. It gives information about current services and highlights that there have been considerable changes since 2003 which have had a significant impact on the lives of many vulnerable homeless families. Services are now more focused towards offering personalised advice which is designed to inform and encourage customers to make their own decisions and take positive action towards preventing their homelessness before reaching crisis point.

The relationships between voluntary and statutory partners have continued to strengthen with joint protocols encouraging sharing of information and resources to deliver better and more efficient services for customers. The Council is now working with a range of additional partners to enhance the housing service and encourage financial independence and promote opportunities for gaining skills and employment.

The Council has been recognised for its achievements by Communities and Local Government who awarded £180,000 in grant funding as part of the Trailblazer program to fund initiatives which will be used to produce a good practice toolkit to be rolled out for use by all local authorities.

The views of local people were sought about their priorities for service improvement and the results are listed below:-

- Priority 1: Increase the number of Housing Options Available;
- Priority 2: Improve services for those with Mental Health problems;
- Priority 3: Encourage financial independence;
- Priority 4: Improve access to housing advice and support;
- Priority 5: Promote opportunities for gaining skills and employment.

Strategy Priorities

The Homelessness and Housing Advice Review (2008 – 2009) has provided the Council with a detailed analysis of the levels of housing need and homelessness within the District and outlines the advice and support available to those seeking accommodation or trying to sustain appropriate housing. It highlights the gaps in current provision, makes recommendations for service improvements and identifies the opportunities for the Council and its partners to work together to offer an 'Enhanced Housing Options Service' so customers can consider their options regarding housing, education, employment in a coordinated way.

Aims

The overall aims of the Enhanced Housing Options Strategy 2010 – 2013 are:

1. To reduce homelessness in Redditch and provide quality services to all those in housing need or affected by homelessness.
2. To encourage financial independence and promote opportunities for gaining skills and employment

The themes from the Homelessness Strategy 2003 and Scrutiny Review 2005 have proved successful in Redditch and will continue to underpin the latest Strategy:

- Homeless Prevention
- Empowering customers to make choices and take action
- Making use of Private Sector Housing
- Working in partnership

The priorities for service improvement in the new Strategy are:

- Priority 1: Increase the number of Housing Options Available;
- Priority 2: Improve services for those with Mental Health problems;
- Priority 3: Encourage financial independence;
- Priority 4: Improve access to housing advice and support;
- Priority 5: Promote opportunities for gaining skills and employment.

Homelessness Prevention

The aim of homelessness prevention is to assist people to stay in their existing accommodation, or where that cannot be achieved, help them to make a planned move into alternative accommodation. Homelessness Prevention resolves the uncertainty for families more quickly and reduces the financial costs from furniture removal or the emotional costs of children needing to change schools. There are a number of tools that are used to prevent homelessness for example Discretionary Housing Benefit payments, the Mortgage Rescue Scheme, the Repossession Prevention Fund, Family Mediation or the Rent Deposit Scheme. The preventative approach has already proved to be successful in reducing homelessness in Redditch and has been positively received by customers. Developing a flexible prevention service that meets the needs of all households at risk of becoming homeless will remain a key theme to future service development.

Empowering customers to make choices and take action

People in Redditch have made it clear that they want to be treated as individuals and get involved in making their own decisions regarding where they live. Providing households with information about the options available to them so that they can make their own choice about their housing has proved key to building more sustainable and vibrant communities, where people want to live and work; some people want the cheapest accommodation available, others would rather pay more to live in a house with a garden; some need to be close to family or friends, others require transport links close by to commute to work. Whatever each households' priority, people in Redditch have welcomed having more involvement in choosing where they live and being given the information which allows them to help themselves to avoid becoming homeless. The principles of Empowerment and Choice have been welcomed by people in Redditch and will continue to be themes to new service developments.

Making use of Private Sector Housing

Working with private landlords to house families in need has become increasingly important as the amount of social housing in the borough has become too small to meet demand. People in Redditch have welcomed the opportunity to access good quality Private Rented Accommodation. We have had success in encouraging more good landlords to rent properties to customers who are threatened with homeless or in housing need. The tenants that have been housed with these landlords have benefited from having better quality accommodation with landlords that act fairly and within the law. Offering both landlords and tenants support with housing benefit queries, information regarding grants, access to training and support have proved successful and will continue to be central to future service development.

Working in partnership

Many of the improvements to services outlined in the Homelessness and Housing Advice Review were the result of effective multi-agency working. The relationships between voluntary and statutory partners have continued to strengthen since 2003 with joint protocols encouraging sharing of information and resources to deliver better and more efficient services for customers. The enhancement of housing advice services to encourage financial independence and promote opportunities for people to gain skills and employment can only be delivered through building strong relationships with a range of partners.

Priority 1: Increase the number of Housing Options Available

Our customers said that they wanted to be treated as individuals and given the opportunity to choose from a range of accommodation and support providers to meet their needs. Some client groups have limited housing options available to them, so the strategy will focus on trying to increase the types and amount of accommodation that people in Redditch can choose from.

Key Initiatives

Increase the amount of good quality shared accommodation for young people
Increase provision of emergency accommodation for non-priority groups
Promote the use of the rent deposit scheme for socially excluded individuals
Support the development of more affordable accommodation in the borough

Priority 2: Improve services for those with Mental Health problems

The review of Homelessness and Housing Advice services highlighted that people with Mental Health problems often struggle to access accommodation and are also at greater risk of losing accommodation if they do find it. The strategy will look at how we can deliver more accommodation, better housing related support and improved access to benefits and housing advice for people with complex needs.

Key Initiatives

Consider the provision of a training flat for individuals being discharged from hospital
Carryout a strategic review with partners to identify areas for service improvement
Develop a fast-track housing benefit service for vulnerable clients
Consider the development of a specialist supported housing scheme in the Borough

Priority 3: Encourage financial independence

The review highlighted that homelessness can often be prevented by access to money and debt advice. The economic recession has increased the numbers of customers in financial difficulties, so we need to look at ways in which money advice provision can be increased or become more efficient, so that the needs of more people can be met. Tackling the root causes of housing need and encouraging financial independence will assist more people to sustain their accommodation and reduce homelessness.

Key Initiatives

Promote the income maximisation service
Promoted the Council's Credit Crunch Pack
Provide those in Council Tax arrears with information about the Mortgage Rescue Scheme and Repossession Prevention Fund
Investigate opportunities for increasing money advice provision in the Borough

Priority 4: Improve access to housing advice and support

The review highlighted that people in Redditch would like a greater amount of choice about how and when they access homelessness and housing advice services so that it can fit in with their individual needs and lifestyles. They also said that they would like to see the statutory agencies working together more effectively by sharing information and resources to become more efficient.

Key Initiatives

Work with Housing Benefits to develop a joint housing benefit / housing application
Use mobile technology to deliver housing options advice at community events
Develop information packs for Non-English speakers accessing emergency accommodation.
Produce a Redditch Service Directory

Priority 5: Promote opportunities for gaining skills and employment

Many people in Redditch want to be given opportunities to expand their skills and access employment which will allow them to purchase their own homes. By promoting opportunities for people to gain skills and encouraging the development of employment opportunities in Redditch, we will assist more people to become financially independent and tackle the root causes of Homelessness. The enhanced housing options approach will be key to the new strategy and will provide the framework for housing and homelessness services to work in greater partnership with employment, education and benefits providers to improve the services for people in Redditch.

Key Initiatives

Develop a budgeting / life skills course to support new tenants
Promote the Housing Options Link worker employment / education advice service
Develop an on-line forum for agencies in Redditch to share information / best practice
Arrange joint training between agencies to raise awareness about benefits / opportunities for education and employment

Arrangements for Monitoring

In order to ensure that all of the actions identified through this review are implemented a clear and SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic & Time bound) action plan has been produced (Appendix1).

Government guidance requires that all the actions identified through the review are set out in an action plan which identifies who will be responsible to delivering each action; states which partners are involved; the resources required and a target date for each individual action. Setting all of the actions out in this format will ensure that progress can be easily monitored and that the impact of the actions can be measured.

The delivery of the Enhanced Housing Options Strategy 2010 will be managed by the Housing Options Manager and monitored by the Head of Housing Services through status meetings and the Housing Advisory Panel via an annual report.

Local policy drivers and links to other Strategies

Worcestershire Sustainable Community Strategy and Worcestershire Local Area Agreement (LAA)

The Worcestershire Partnership brings together local government, public services such as health, learning providers, police and probation, voluntary and community organisations and local businesses within Worcestershire. The work of the Partnership is based on a shared common purpose and good will.

Its vision is for "a county with safe, cohesive, healthy and inclusive communities, a strong and diverse economy and a valued and cherished environment".

Redditch Local Strategic Partnership (LSP)

The vision of Redditch Partnership is for:

Redditch to be successful and vibrant with sustainable communities built on partnership and shared responsibility. We want people to be proud that they live or work in Redditch...

Redditch Partnership brings together representatives from public, private, community and voluntary agencies to work together effectively to deliver a range of local projects, services and initiatives. Redditch Partnership aims to provide a leadership and governing role through sharing information, resources and effort to efficiently and effectively meet the needs and aspirations of local communities.

Redditch Partnership is responsible for producing and delivering the **Redditch Sustainable Community Strategy (2008)**. It has core themes, built around the same core themes of the LAA that are:



Communities that are safe and feel safe



A better environment – for today and tomorrow



Economic success that is shared by all



Improved health and wellbeing



Meeting the needs of children and young people



Stronger communities

The priorities in the Enhanced Housing Options Strategy will contribute to the delivery of the Redditch Sustainable Community Strategy 2008.

RBC Corporate Plan 2009-2012

The Council's Corporate Plan has established a new vision for the development of Redditch which is:

Our vision is for Redditch to be an enterprising community which is safe, clean and green.

To underpin the delivery of the Council's priorities it is recognised that the Council needs to be:

- *A well managed organisation that uses its resources effectively in order to achieve its priorities and values and delivers high quality services that meet the need of its residents and provide value for money.*

Redditch's corporate plan has priorities that fit into the themes of the Sustainable Community Strategy, the Private Sector Housing Strategy and the Enhanced Housing Options Strategy which will assist the Council to fulfil the objectives of the Corporate Plan.

Redditch Housing Strategy Statement 2005 – 2009

The Councils' Housing Strategy Statement identifies four strategic priorities for the further development of housing. This includes:

- **Improving conditions in the private sector:**
 - Carry out enforcement activity against landlords and householders to maintain housing conditions;
 - Develop an Empty Homes Strategy;
 - Improve financial assistance given based on hierarchy of assistance;
 - Improved communication with private landlords.

The Housing Strategy identifies the need to engage with private landlords to promote greater understanding of Housing Benefit regulations, increase the uptake of energy efficiency grants, identify issues of concern, help develop our policies regarding the private sector and to raise standards in the sector. The Enhanced Housing Options Strategy will contribute to the delivery of the Housing Strategy Statement.

Homelessness Strategy – Working together to change lives 2008

In 2005 work began on the Worcestershire Homelessness Strategy "Working Together to Change Lives" which sets out the key priorities for housing advice and homelessness services across Worcestershire. Redditch Borough Council contributed to the review and strategy which took a long time to develop. The draft

strategy was endorsed by the Chief Officers Group in December 2007 and approved by Redditch Borough Council in 2008. The findings of the Housing Advice and Homelessness review, along with the priorities from the Enhanced Housing Options Strategy will be fed into the County Homelessness Strategy when it is updated in 2010.

Empty Homes Strategy May 2009

Redditch Borough Council's Empty Homes Strategy launched in May 2009 aims to reduce the number of empty homes that are having a detrimental impact on the communities in which they are situated, and can potentially contribute to increasing the level of affordable housing in the Borough.

Housing Assistance Policy 2005

Redditch Borough Council offers discretionary Lifetime Loans to homeowners and landlords.

- Grants for owner occupiers are limited up to a maximum of £10,000 per dwelling over a three year period;
- Interest free loans for landlords of HMOs are available up to the value of 50% of the work, subject to a maximum of £3,000 per unit of accommodation.

Worcestershire Home Improvement Agency (HIA) Review

Redditch Borough Council in conjunction with the local authorities within the County are reviewing the Home Improvement Agency (HIA) as part of a move to have a countywide HIA. The HIA will look to join West Midlands Kick Start. Currently North Worcestershire Care and Repair Agency provide lifetime loans to the private sector to improve standards for vulnerable households and undertake Disabled Facility Grant (DFG) work on behalf of the Council.

The Rugg review recommended that more support is needed for good landlords and this strategy recognises there is further room to develop in this area. The Rugg review also recommends that local authorities commit to promoting tenants rights, and this strategies' action plan sets out ways we can achieve this.

Older Persons Strategy – My Home, My Future, My Choice 2009

The strategy highlights the key priorities for older person's accommodation and support in Redditch over the next twenty years. This strategy links to the Enhanced Housing Options Strategy by setting out how the Council will meet the needs of its older residents.

Economic Development Strategy – 2009 to 2018.

This strategy aims to encourage a thriving local economy with diverse successful businesses supported by a skilled local workforce and to ensure that Redditch's economic interests are always effectively represented.

The strategic objectives are:

Business

- Encourage businesses to seize market opportunities, improve competitiveness and harness knowledge.

People

- Raise economic aspirations and encourage residents to obtain the skills needed to realise those aspirations.

Place

- Optimise the benefits for the Borough of being located adjacent to the economic powerhouse of Birmingham City.
- Ensure appropriate infrastructure is in place to create a thriving business environment.
- Deliver the economic aspirations today without significantly affecting the aspirations of future generations.

Powerful Voice

- Ensure that Redditch's economic interests are effectively represented at all levels.

The delivery of the Economic Development Strategy will be key if we are to deliver the priorities in the Enhanced Housing Options Strategy.