

Cabinet – 13th September 2006

Report of the Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services

Review of Homelessness Strategy

Purpose of Report

1. To seek Cabinet approval for the borough's Homelessness Strategy.

Background

2. The Homelessness Act 2002 imposed a duty upon local housing authorities to produce a corporate strategy analysing and forecasting demand for service, reviewing provision, and setting out an action plan for improvement. It is a further requirement that the strategy be updated every five years.
3. In Dudley, a multi-agency review group was set up to oversee the production of the first Homelessness Strategy (published in July 2003), and has continued to meet on a quarterly basis to monitor progress against the action plan, and identify any new issues arising either through changes in government policy or through changes in the local housing market and demand for service.
4. During 2005/6 an increasing number of the projects in our original action plan were being successfully concluded, and the review group recommended that the strategy should be revisited ahead of the five-year target date in order to keep it fresh and relevant to the needs of the borough. A sub group including representatives from Children's Services, Community Safety, RSLs and CAB was formed for this purpose and has completed its task in accordance with a project plan following the corporate guidelines.
5. The updated Homelessness Strategy is available in draft in the Members' Room. It has been subject to consultation through the Housing Conference on 5th July 2006 and with registered social landlords through the Dudley Housing Partnership. The views of service users have also been collected and used to inform the new action plan. The strategy includes on page 18 the full list of partners on the multi agency review group, many of whom will be leading or participating in the action plan projects.
6. One of the commitments of the first Homelessness Strategy was the introduction of an annual report on the service. The third annual report (2005/6) is attached as Appendix A to this report, in order to illustrate the service currently provided and the progress that has been made already.

Main Findings From Review

6. Homelessness in Dudley increased significantly between 1998 and 2003, but has remained steady since then with around 2000 homeless presentations each year. Acceptances of a full rehousing duty are reducing (from 602 in 2004/5 to 448 in 2005/6), with a corresponding increase in the number of cases in which housing advice intervention prevents actual homelessness occurring. The main causes of homelessness mirror the national profile, and acceptances against each have reduced to some extent.
7. A range of statutory and voluntary sector provision exists in the borough. Partnership working in the production and monitoring of the first Homelessness Strategy has led to a better understanding of the issues and a co-operative approach to identifying gaps and planning projects to address them. Several of the most successful projects are revenue funded by Supporting People Grant, for which the prevention of homelessness is a key strategic priority. Increasing capital funding in order to develop more of both general and specialist housing has been identified as a priority area for our action plan, together with a continuing imperative to make best use of existing social housing stock in a climate of increasing demand and reducing vacancies. Ensuring adequate move on accommodation from supported housing is a particular priority requiring a combination of all of these activities.
8. Since the Homelessness Strategy was first published in July 2003, the following objectives have been fully or partially achieved
 - Lye Family Centre has been remodelled to replace ten units sharing facilities, with six self contained flats
 - The Housing Advice Service has been restructured and reorganised
 - A service directory has been produced in conjunction with Sandwell and Walsall
 - A customer satisfaction monitoring process has been developed
 - The Citizens Advice Bureau has delivered a three year project to prevent homelessness amongst young tenants and people who have been homeless before
 - We have produced annual reports on homelessness, analysing demand and informing service development
 - We have introduced a family mediation service (Time2Talk)
 - We have developed a Crash Pad Scheme for young people excluded by their families
 - We have identified a gap in accommodation for people who are “serially excluded” as a result of challenging behaviour, and commissioned a new service to address it
 - We have worked with RSLs in the borough to increase the proportion of homeless families they house
 - We have reviewed our own flat designations to improve the balance of vacancies available to different age groups

9. In identifying issues for our updated action plan, we have drawn upon various sources including

- A critique of our original strategy provided by the Housing Quality Network
- Our own data, supplemented by a cross agency common monitoring project, which drew out issues the statutory data does not reveal, particularly around drug use as a factor in homelessness, and the high demand for all forms of supported housing in the borough
- A self assessment homelessness strategy toolkit produced by DCLG
- A new LGIU/Shelter guide to the scrutiny of homelessness policy and strategy
- A bank of customer feedback and constructive comment from a variety of stakeholders

10. As a result of this process, the draft action plan includes the following tasks

- Developing second stage group or cluster accommodation for people with alcohol issues who do not want to live in a hostel but are not ready for independent living
- Further developing access to housing and support for people with drug issues
- Examining policies on rent arrears and rehousing, and linking these to engagement with money management and debt services
- Reviewing the service in the light of the Respect agenda, in order to develop appropriate access to housing and support as part of an holistic approach to reducing anti social behaviour in communities
- Improving partnership arrangements with local health service providers to promote holistic service delivery, particularly around mental health needs and discharge from hospital
- Establishing a project team to provide an accommodation based or dispersed foyer scheme within the borough to provide housing, training and employment opportunities for young people
- Improving the number and quality of furnished lettings within the borough
- Increasing the supply of appropriate housing and support for homeless women
- Continuing to improve the recording and reporting of homelessness data and the use to which it is put, for example :
 - further enhancing the annual report produced each year since 2003
 - providing background reports for service development, member briefings and public information
 - introducing formal elected member scrutiny of the service
- Reviewing working protocols and provision for refugees, for people without recourse to public funds, for young people including those who have been Looked After, and for families who may be excluded from services
- Implementing recommendations from a formal review of our Housing Advice Service including developing a Housing Options Service and pathways of provision for each main cause of homelessness
- Improving housing provision for homeless women, including working

with the council's Domestic Violence Co-ordinator to develop new accommodation and support services, a sanctuary scheme, and to plan for the improvement of existing schemes

- Developing a community based housing and homelessness advice service for people from the black and minority ethnic communities
- Establishing from the returns of our satisfaction monitoring system a user group to help shape future service delivery
- Working with partners at local and regional levels to provide information and assistance to prisoners and priority offenders
- Continuing to improve our performance against Best Value Performance Indicators
- Mainstreaming the successful Dudley District Citizens Advice Bureau/Dudley MBC 'Homelessness and Debt Prevention Project', in order to target help to those who need it and develop the skills of our housing managers
- Maintaining low levels of repeat homelessness, including improving the advice and support provided to those who are in temporary accommodation and/or identified as at risk of repeat homelessness
- Improving the effectiveness of existing advice services in preventing homelessness where owner occupied homes are at risk through relationship breakdown and/or financial problems
- Researching the need for, and availability within the borough of, schemes which enable owner occupiers to release equity in their homes and/or remain in their homes as tenants
- Working with landlords and their agents to improve private renting as a secure long-term housing option and one that is more affordable for more people
- Improving information and education services on housing and homelessness so that young people are encouraged to plan for their future housing needs
- Taking action to improve the supply of affordable housing, by ensuring that the target for affordable housing as a proportion of all new development is met, that start up and ongoing costs are within customers' reach, and that there is an appropriate property mix
- Fundamentally reviewing our lettings and nominations policy whilst introducing Choice Based Lettings to make the best use of vacancies, give fair treatment to all who are homeless or threatened with homelessness, and avoid perverse incentives to claim homelessness
- Reviewing at least annually supply and demand for different households (e.g. young single people) and take action to address any imbalances
- Reviewing the performance of our borough in the light of the Housing Corporation paper Tackling Homelessness and incorporate our findings into our action plan
- Building upon the work of this strategy and discussing key themes with neighbouring local authorities to assess where cross authority/regional working is possible to achieve common objectives

Finance

11. This report has no direct financial implications, although some of the projects described in the action plan will have financial implications and will be individually reported in due course.

Law

12. The Council is required by the Homelessness Act 2002 to produce a Homelessness Strategy, monitor its implementation, and thoroughly review it every five years.

Equality Impact

13. A race equality impact assessment has been carried out and considered by the Review Group. The action plan includes developing community based services for BME customers, and there has been some interest from partners in assisting with this project. The impact of the 2003 Strategy has been examined, and no adverse effects have been found. Over that period, the proportion of people taking up DMBC tenancies who are from BME backgrounds has increased slightly each year, whilst the proportion of homeless applicants housed in council tenancies accurately corresponds to the proportion of homeless acceptances from BME backgrounds.
14. The action plan contains a number of projects designed to improve provision for people who are vulnerable to disadvantage and exclusion, in particular for women, for offenders, and for people with poor mental health. Young people's needs are addressed, and the cross agency monitoring carried out for the review was particularly effective in establishing these.

Recommendation

14. Cabinet is asked to adopt the updated Homelessness Strategy for the borough.



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List of Background Papers

Homelessness Strategy 2003

Draft Homelessness Strategy 2006, Project Plan & Race Impact Assessment

Annual Reports

DCLG and other Best Practice publications