

**audit 2000/2001**

**Reducing the cost of  
Homelessness  
Oxford City Council**

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**Summary**



**DISTRICT AUDIT**

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## Introduction

The Housing Act 1996 places a duty on housing authorities to provide accommodation for homeless people under certain conditions. The right to accommodation was limited to two years by the 1996 Act and authorities no longer have a statutory duty to find permanent housing, but in practice most authorities still aim to rehouse homeless households permanently.

If social housing were plentiful, homeless households would be permanently housed quickly and the cost of homelessness would comprise mainly expenditure on assessing applications. However, most Councils do not provide permanent housing quickly and most homeless households go into temporary accommodation to await allocation of permanent housing. For authorities with a severe homelessness problem such as Oxford the majority of expenditure on homelessness will be on temporary accommodation.

## Background

Oxford has had a severe homelessness problem for many years with expenditure levels more typical of a high housing stress London borough than a district council. Arguably, some of the main factors that contribute to this are:

- the City's exceptionally high house prices and private rents even for South-East England which results in not just low income but many average income households deciding when they face a housing crisis that there is no feasible market solution to their problem and looking to the Council to meet their housing needs
- a shrinking stock of social housing as right to buy losses exceed housing association additions in most years and limited potential for further housing development within the City boundary
- the attraction Oxford has for groups at high risk of homelessness such as disadvantaged vulnerable young people and those without secure accommodation, due to it being the only town in Oxfordshire with metropolitan attractions and significant bed and breakfast and HMO accommodation. Many of Oxfordshire's services and more informal support networks for groups at high risk of homelessness, such as ethnic minorities, offenders, the mentally ill and drug or alcohol dependent, are also concentrated in Oxford.
- the large number of households compared with other Oxfordshire district councils who can establish a local connection because of employment, relatively short duration residence or need for easy access to care or support facilities located in Oxford. In addition, the location in Oxford of the housing advice service for the whole County makes it more likely that households with a local connection with Oxford and another Oxfordshire District will choose to make their application to the City Council.

A benchmarking exercise undertaken jointly with four other predominantly urban authorities (the CWOIL group) in 1998 indicated that homelessness 'demand' as measured by acceptances per 1000 households was indeed higher in Oxford than in the other CWOIL authorities (Exhibit 1).

**Exhibit 1 CWOIL authorities: homeless acceptances per thousand households in 1997/98**

*Homeless acceptances per thousand households are between 23% and 203% higher than the other CWOIL authorities*

Authority	Cambridge <b>C</b>	Welwyn <b>W</b>	<b>OXFORD</b> <b>O</b>	Ipswich <b>I</b>	Lincoln <b>L</b>
Number of acceptances per 1000 households	3.4	5.6	<b>6.9</b>	4.4	5.5

The benchmarking exercise also indicated that even before the large increases of recent years, Oxford's expenditure on temporary accommodation for the homelessness was ten times higher than the next highest spending CWOIL authority (Exhibit 2).

**Exhibit 2 CWOIL authorities: homelessness expenditure per head of population in 1997/98**

*Even before the large increase in recent years, Oxford's expenditure on temporary accommodation was ten times higher than the next highest spending CWOIL authority*

Authority	Expenditure on Homelessness	Expenditure on Homelessness per Head of Population	Net Expenditure on Temporary Accommodation per Head of Population
Cambridge	£216,000	£1.88	£1.07
Welwyn	£65,000	£0.80	(£0.57)
<b>Oxford</b>	<b>£2,516,000</b>	<b>£18.66</b>	<b>£14.98</b>
Ipswich	£336,000	£2.94	£1.51
Lincoln	£140,000	£1.66	£1.08

The Council's much higher expenditure on temporary accommodation reflected both the much higher number of homeless households in temporary accommodation and its higher cost in Oxford (Exhibit 3). Exhibit 3 CWOIL authorities: numbers of households in temporary accommodation in 1997/98 and its cost

*The high number of households in temporary accommodation and the high price of such accommodation are the main reasons that Oxford's expenditure on homelessness is high.*

	<b>C</b>	<b>W</b>	<b>O</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>L</b>
<b>Average number of households in temporary accommodation</b>	91	57	<b>599</b>	122	14
<b>Net cost of temporary accommodation</b>	£123,000	(£46,000)	<b>£2,020,000</b>	£173,000	£91,000
<b>Average annual accommodation cost per household</b>	£1,351	(£807)	<b>£3,372</b>	£1,418	£6,500

Since the CWOIL benchmarking exercise was undertaken in 1997/98, the number of homeless households in temporary accommodation has increased by over 60% to 951 at June 2001. Expenditure on homelessness has also increased from £2.5m in 1997/98 to £3.5m in 2000/01. The approved budget for the current year is 3.3m.

An increase in the number of households in temporary accommodation occurs either because more are being accepted as homeless or because they are not leaving temporary accommodation as quickly. Most leavers move to Council or housing association accommodation but a significant minority leave without the Council placing them in permanent accommodation.

An increased number of households accepted as homeless was not a factor in the rise in the number of households in temporary accommodation. Indeed, over the period 1997/98 to 2000/01 the average annual number of acceptances at 366 was about 13% less than in the mid-1990s when numbers remained stable at about 600. If the reduction in acceptances had not occurred the number in temporary accommodation might have been over 190 more at 31 March 2001 (Exhibit 4).

#### Exhibit 4 Homelessness applications and acceptances

*Over the four years 1997/98 to 2000/01 homeless acceptances fell by 13% compared with the mid-1990s.*

Year	Applications	Acceptances	Acceptance Rate
<b>Average 1994/5 – 1996/97</b>	<b>1003</b>	<b>414</b>	<b>41%</b>
1997/98	1,021	369	36%
1998/99	1,055	382	36%
1999/00	892	391	44%
2000/01	791	320	40%
<b>Average 1997/98 – 2000/01</b>	<b>940</b>	<b>366</b>	<b>39%</b>

The cause of the increase in the number of homeless households in temporary accommodation was a reduction in the rate at which homeless households were leaving it. Most households leave temporary accommodation because the Council has found them permanent social housing but a significant minority leave of their own accord ('voluntary leavers'). In the period 1997/98 – 2000/01, the Council placed fewer homeless households in permanent accommodation and there were far fewer voluntary leavers compared with the period 1994/95 – 1996/97. Exhibit 5 shows yearly averages for the two periods.

**Exhibit 5 the flow of homeless households in and of temporary accommodation 1994/95 – 2000/01**

*In the period 1997/98 – 2000/01 there was a substantial decline in both number of homeless households rehoused and in voluntary leavers*

Average annual figure	Average 1994/95 – 1996/97	Average 1997/98 – 2000/01
Acceptances	414	366
Rehoused by Council or RSL	296	243
'Voluntary leavers'	108	34
Total leaving temporary accommodation	404	277
Increase in households in temporary accommodation	10	89

The average annual number of homeless households permanently rehoused over the period 1997/98 – 2000/01 at 243 was 22% less than in the mid 1990s. There was a particularly large fall in the number of the Council's own dwellings allocated to the homeless. While the proportion of dwellings allocated to the homeless recovered to the 1996/97 level in 1999/00 and 2000/01, numbers remained well below 1996/97 levels because of a large reduction in the total number of available lettings (Exhibit 6)

**Exhibit 6 the number and proportion of Council dwellings allocated to homeless households 1996/97 to 2000/01**

*In the period 1997/98 – 2000/01 there was a substantial reduction in the number of Council dwellings allocated to homeless households compared with 1996/97*

	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
<b>Total available lettings</b>	603	607	590	481	425
<b>Number allocated to homeless households</b>	221	144	148	167	168
<b>Proportion allocated to homeless households</b>	37%	24%	25%	35%	40%

The decline in lettings to homeless households was the result of implementing the 1996 Housing Act, which no longer allowed homeless households to be regarded as a 'reasonable preference group'. The idea behind this was that the needs of both the homeless and others should be weighed together so that dwellings would be allocated to those in greatest housing need. Before April 1997 the Council had maintained separate registers for the homeless and other applicants. It was therefore possible to check an unacceptable increase in the use of temporary accommodation by simply allocating a greater share of lettings to the homeless. This was not possible after April 1997 since social housing had to be allocated in accordance with the Council's published Housing Allocation Scheme.

The scheme adopted by the Council resulted in a much lower proportion of housing allocations being made to homeless households than previously. This was neither planned nor intended by the Council. Officers believed that the 250 housing points given to

homeless households in Category 2 temporary accommodation along with other points allocated on a common basis with non-homeless applicants, would result in a similar proportion of lettings being allocated to the homeless as in the past.

The homeless were restored as a reasonable preference group in November 1997 following rising numbers of homeless in temporary accommodation nationally and representations to Government by housing authorities. Following this, the Council approved the award of 75 additional points for homeless applicants in Stage 2 temporary accommodation in March 1998. In November 1998, in the face of continuing sharp rises in the number of households in temporary accommodation, the Council set a target of allocating 70% of 'family' and 80% of 'single' lettings to homeless households. These targets were not achieved, however, particularly lettings to the single homeless (Exhibit 7).

**Exhibit 7 performance against homeless households target in 1999/00 and 2000/01**

*The Council's targets for allocating dwellings to the homeless were not achieved in either 1999/00 or 2000/01*

	Proportion of family and non-elderly single person lettings allocated to homeless households (Note 1)		
	1999/00 Actual proportion	2000/01 Actual proportion	Target proportion
<b>Lettings to families</b>	56%	62%	70%
<b>Lettings to Single People</b>	32%	46%	80%

**Note 1** - In measuring achievement of its targets the Council excludes lettings to the 'elderly' and childless couples since homeless households rarely fall into these categories

If the Council had achieved its allocation targets an additional 93 dwellings would have been allocated to homeless households in 1999/00 and 41 in 2000/01.

In June 2001 the Council reduced the target for family homeless households to 55%, which is below what was achieved in both 1999/00 and 2000/01. It maintained the target for single homeless households at 80%, which is well above what was achieved in both 1999/00 and 2000/01. If these targets had been achieved an additional 58 dwellings would have been allocated to homeless households in 1999/00 and 8 more in 2000/01. The analysis below suggests that the Council's current targets would be unlikely to be compatible with achieving an overall reduction in the number of homeless households in temporary accommodation. While achievement of the targets might result in a reduction in the number of single homeless in temporary accommodation, it might be outweighed by an increase in the number of *families* in temporary accommodation (Exhibit 8)

**Exhibit 8 Estimated of what the effect would have been on the numbers of homeless households in temporary accommodation at 31 March 2001 of achieving the Council's current allocation targets in 1999/2000 and 2000/01**

*84 less single homeless households and 18 more family homeless households would have been in temporary accommodation at 31 March 2001 if the Council's current allocation targets had been achieved*

<b>Homeless households in temporary accommodation at 31 March 1999</b>	770
<b>Increase in numbers in temporary accommodation in the period 1999/2000 – 2000/01</b>	174
<b>Homeless households in temporary accommodation at 31 March 2001</b>	<b>944</b>
<b>Change in the number of Council dwellings that would have been allocated to homeless <i>families</i> if the current allocation target of 55% had been achieved over the period 1999/00 – 2000/01</b>	18 less
<b>Change in the number of Council dwellings that would have been allocated to the <i>single</i> homeless if the current allocation target of 80% had been achieved over the period 1999/00 – 2000/01.</b>	84 more
<b>Number of homeless households that would have been in temporary accommodation at 31 March 2001 if the Council had achieved its current target allocations to the homeless</b>	<b>878</b>

Turning to the question of the much lower numbers in recent years of homeless households leaving temporary accommodation without being permanently rehoused, two factors may have contributed to this:

- higher house prices
- improvements in the quality of temporary accommodation.

In the mid-1990s house prices were lower in real terms and so owner occupation may have been feasible for larger number of households than now. Often, perhaps, by moving from Oxford to lower housing cost areas.

Probably a more important factor, however, has been the steady improvement in the quality of temporary accommodation. No use is now made of Bed and Breakfast accommodation and 'first stage' accommodation is now usually of a fair quality. Families, in particular, now progress quickly to category 2 accommodation, which is usually of good quality and typically as good or better than the Council's permanent housing stock. Households therefore now have much less reason than formerly to consider any course of action other than waiting in their temporary accommodation until they are allocated permanent accommodation.

In a sense, the Council's Category 2 accommodation has become a large semi-permanent, if albeit expensive, part of Oxford's stock of social housing.

## Objectives

Our objectives are to help the Council to identify the key issues and options and find solutions that reduce the financial impact of homelessness while allowing the Council to meet its statutory duty.

## Audit approach

Text This audit involved:

- interviews with key members of staff across the housing service at strategic and front line level
- interviews with outside interests such as Oxfordshire County Council Social Services, neighbouring district councils' Directors of Housing, registered social landlords
- examination of case files for individual homelessness applications
- comparing costs and performance data with other CWOIL authorities and other relevant comparators.

## Main conclusions

Our main conclusions are:

- expenditure on homelessness at Oxford is much higher than in other non-metropolitan authorities and has been for many years. While there are valid reasons why it could be expected to be higher than a typical district council, expenditure has increased to the point where it is putting at risk the financial health of the Council
- the reason for the rapid increase in the number of homeless households since 1998 was not an increase in the number accepted as homeless but a reduction in the numbers being permanently rehoused and the much lower numbers leaving temporary accommodation without being found permanent accommodation by the Council
- the Council's attempt to increase the proportion of lettings made to homeless households by setting targets has only been partially successful. While the proportion increased significantly in 1999/00 and 2000/01 it fell well short of the Council's target
- the number of homeless households in temporary accommodation cannot be reduced quickly as it is now very large compared with the number of social lettings which are likely to become available in future. It is doubtful whether the current target of allocating 55% of family housing and 80% of single housing to the homeless is compatible with an overall reduction in the number of households in temporary accommodation
- however, if even a modest year-by-year reduction could be achieved, it would substantially reduce the overall cost of homelessness. A crucial first step is to ensure that the revised targets the Council set in June 2001 for allocating dwellings to the homeless, particularly the single homelessness target, are achieved
- Oxford's stock of social housing is unlikely to increase enough in the foreseeable future to solve its homelessness crisis and therefore there are no easy or painless solutions. All aspects of the Council's approach to homelessness need to be reviewed and challenged fearlessly to have a chance of making a significant impact on the problem.



## The way forward

The Council has taken or plans to take action in many areas that could reduce the incidence or cost of homelessness. However, in our view further action is needed in the following areas:

- homelessness strategy
- homelessness prevention
- co-operation with other agencies
- homelessness administration
- temporary accommodation
- using existing housing better
- alternatives to traditional social housing
- increasing permanent social housing.

The Report Grid that follows discusses and makes recommendations in each of the above areas. Appendix A summarises our recommendations and sets out the Council's response in the form of an Action Plan.

## Detailed findings

Issue	Oxford	Recommendation
<p><b>Homelessness Strategy</b></p> <p>Is there a long-term strategy for homelessness?</p>	<p>The Councils has a three-year strategy for housing and publishes annual updates. The Single Homelessness strategy has been recently updated and the previously separate rough sleepers strategy has been included in it. However, the council does not yet have a comprehensive homelessness strategy. The Homeless Strategy Group, which has recently completed the Single Homelessness strategy, should help to address this. There is also a Best Value Performance Plan for homelessness that was developed when Oxford was a Best Value pilot Council but this is now in need of revision.</p>	<p>R2 Develop written guidance for officers assessing homelessness applications that is detailed enough to help officers reach sound and consistent decisions which reflect the Council's interpretation of its duty and its policy where there is an element of discretion.</p>
<p>Do officers assessing homelessness applications have written guidance on those matters where there is an element of discretion or interpretation of statutory duty or Council policy?</p>	<p>Some officers referred to the DETR Code of Guidance as being the framework within which they considered each case on its merit. There is a Children's Act protocol, which documents agreed procedures on the issue of children at housing risk. All staff have their own copy of Andrew Arden QC's book on Homelessness, which is the leading authority on issues of interpretation of homelessness law and regulations.</p> <p>While easy access to a leading work on the application of the homelessness regulations is good practice such a work is inevitably complex particularly for less experienced officers. In areas where interpretation is not clear-cut or involves an element of discretion it is for the Council corporately to take a view and provide written guidance. Without this there is increased risk that officers will make different decisions on the same facts or will not interpret the regulations and exercise discretion as the Council wishes.</p> <p>Training for new homelessness assessment officers is not as systematic as in larger teams such as Housing Benefit, who, for example, have a training log. The aim is to ensure that new HB assessment officers are exposed to all the difficult assessment points as soon as practical but in a systematic and supported way.</p>	<p>R3 Review training arrangements for homelessness assessment officers.</p>

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Issue	Oxford	Recommendation
<b>Homelessness Strategy</b>		
Has the Council considered large-scale voluntary transfer or other options for the ownership of its of housing stock such as housing companies?	<p>The Council, as part of the Business Planning process, is considering a number of options regarding the long-term ownership of the Council's housing stock. The options include sponsoring the establishment of a locally based arms length Housing Company. The choice of options for providing social housing for Oxford is one of the most important issues facing the Council since there are long-term problems with funding homelessness which threatens the financial health of the Council.</p> <p>Not having any Council-owned housing stock could, however, make it more difficult to place homeless households in permanent accommodation and robust nomination right agreements would be essential.</p>	R4 Give a high priority to progressing the consideration of options for providing social housing in Oxford.

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Issue	Oxford	Recommendation
Are there adequate systems for forecasting homelessness demand and trends?	<p data-bbox="312 750 467 1526">Adequate system for forecasting homelessness demand and trends is vital to the strategic management of homelessness. The Council currently has a basic spreadsheet-based method of forecasting homelessness trends. The responsible officer is considering how he can improve the methodology including using more sophisticated statistical techniques such as regression analysis.</p> <p data-bbox="491 750 676 1526">The improvements being considered are welcome but do not go far enough. A much more sophisticated 'model' of homelessness utilising corporate modelling techniques is needed. This would encompass scenario analysis as well as forecasting and would not just show expected changes in the number of homelessness families but the likely impact on the Council's finances. Such a model would make it easier to estimate the financial impact of, say:</p> <ul data-bbox="700 750 975 1526" style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• employing an additional Assessment Officer</li> <li>• reducing the average void period by one week</li> <li>• changing the proportion of lettings made to homeless households</li> <li>• increasing the take up of the Homelessness at Home Scheme by 10 per year</li> <li>• temporary accommodation costs rising by one percent more than assumed in the budget.</li> </ul>	<p data-bbox="317 161 564 716">R5 Develop an improved methodology for forecasting homelessness. Consider whether the current Excel based system can be developed further to meet the Council's needs adequately, or whether the investment which would be needed to develop a homelessness 'model' based on corporate modelling principles would be justified.</p>

Issue	Oxford	Recommendation
<b>Homelessness Prevention</b>		
What are the arrangements for providing housing advice?	<p>The Council discharges its duty to provide housing advice by grant aiding the Oxford Housing Rights Centre (OHRC). The Centre follows a rights-based approach acting as an advocate for persons with housing problems in their dealings with landlords and housing authorities. In officers' view the Centre provides little or no options-based advice and would not be interested in doing so.</p> <p>All the Oxfordshire District Councils grant aid the Centre which is the main vehicle for discharging their duty to provide a housing advice service. The location in Oxford of the housing advice service for the whole County inevitably leads to leakage of homelessness applications from the other district councils to the City Council since it makes it more likely that households with a local connection with Oxford and another Oxfordshire district council will choose to make their application to the City Council.</p> <p>Agreement with OHRC and the Oxfordshire districts that, as far as possible, housing advice should be delivered locally would be needed to address the issue e.g. frequent and well-publicised advice surgeries might be held in all the main Oxfordshire Towns and teleconferencing facilities might have a role to play by enabling advice seekers to avoid having to go to Oxford to obtain specialist advice.</p>	<p>R6 Discuss with OHRC and the other District Councils the arrangements for providing housing advice in the districts. Try to agree that the delivery point for housing advice should be as far as practical within their own district.</p>
Is there a service agreement specifying the service the Council expects from OHRC in return for grant aid? Are there adequate arrangements in place to monitor performance?	<p>Whilst there is a service agreement with OHRC, it does not include much detail of the service the Council expects it to deliver. A particular issue is whether, as many officers believe, the Centre's current approach strays well beyond helping applicants to present their homelessness application effectively and amounts to unfair (on the Council) applicant coaching. Formal performance monitoring takes place twice yearly with OHRC providing a statistical breakdown of work undertaken</p> <p>There is scope to specify the service that the Council expects from OHRC more precisely and to improve monitoring of service delivery.</p>	<p>R7 Agree in detail with the OHRC the type of housing advice service that the Centre should deliver in return for its grant aid and establish more robust arrangements to monitor and report on performance.</p> <p>R8 Discuss the acceptable limits of advocacy with OHRC and agree a protocol setting out what is regarded as 'fair advocacy' and what amounts to unacceptable 'applicant coaching'.</p>

Issue	Oxford	Recommendation
Homelessness Prevention		
Does the Council provide proactive options-based housing advice?	<p>No; all housing advice to potentially homeless households is provided by the OHRC, which follows an exclusively rights-based approach. The Council's Housing Department provides virtually no housing advice prior to formal application for homelessness. For example, a local housing office would direct an enquirer to the OHRC, as would the Homelessness Unit when it became clear that the person was not wishing to make a formal application. Although some 'advice' might be given in passing the Unit is not resourced or equipped to provide housing advice.</p> <p>The Council's expenditure on housing was 15% higher than the CWOIL average in 1997/98 at £1.80 per head of population. Moreover, its approach to providing housing advice is different from the other CWOIL authorities, where Council funded housing advice is principally provided by Housing Department staff, who broadly follow an 'honest-broker' rather than applicant's advocate approach.</p> <p>Although the Council may be fulfilling its statutory obligation to provide 'housing advice', it is questionable whether the Council is providing a housing advice service in a broad sense. Put starkly, the current approach might be described as funding an advocacy service.</p> <p>While many housing authorities appear to consider an honest-broker approach properly discharges their responsibility to provide housing advice, many others, including Oxford City Council, consider that that an advocacy service has an important role to play. One way forward might be to negotiate with OHRC to broaden its approach. The main issue which would need to be resolved would be whether delivering options-based advice would be compatible with an advocacy role and whether the Centre both wished to and would be able to fulfil this role. Realistically, the prospect seems unpromising since there are conflicts of interest in acting as both advocate and honest-broker, which would be exacerbated if an organisation with deeply entrenched rights-based convictions such as OHRC were to attempt both roles. On balance, it might be best for the two roles to be provided separately.</p>	<p>R9 Consider whether pure advocacy is the appropriate role for OHRC, or whether the Council would wish the Centre to explore more widely with people seeking advice the housing options available to them.</p> <p>R10 Report to Members on the Council's current arrangements for providing housing advice and the options for the future. In particular, consider whether the Council's expenditure is appropriately balanced between rights-based and options-based approaches.</p>

Issue	Oxford	Recommendation
<b>Homelessness Prevention (contd)</b>		
Does the Council have a mediation service to prevent households threatened with homelessness losing their homes?	<p>There is no mediation service but the OHRC gives advice and support to persons in dispute with landlords. However, this tends to be advice on the tenants legal rights rather than mediation.</p> <p>There may be potential for a mediation service to prevent households threatened with homelessness losing their homes.</p>	R11 Consider whether the Council should develop a mediation service.
<b>Co-operation with other agencies</b>		
How does the authority engage and co-operate with neighbouring housing authorities, registered social landlords, health and social service authorities and other stakeholders?	<p>The Council is involved in more than a dozen County or Citywide multi-agency groups mostly related to vulnerable groups such as the mentally ill, drug or alcohol abusers, rough sleepers and the single homeless.</p> <p>The main, strategic standing forum is the Housing Strategy Group. Senior housing officer consider that the forum was not particularly effective helping resolving disagreements between the District Councils. While it is useful in cementing co-operation on matters where there is little real difference of view to start with, it contributes little to resolving more problematic issues, particularly those such as homelessness where financial interests conflict.</p>	R12 Consider what needs to be done to establish more effective arrangements for discussing and resolving issues with the other housing authorities in the County.
Is out of area placement (i.e. placing homeless households in Oxford without making proper efforts to find temporary accommodation in their own areas) by neighbouring housing authorities a problem?	<p>Officers consider out of area placement by neighbouring authorities, particularly the other Oxfordshire district councils, to be a significant problem. Moreover, they do not accept that temporary accommodation could not be found in the other Oxfordshire districts own areas: they believe that the districts have not developed local capacity because there is little incentive for them to do so. Placement in Oxford inevitably results in leakage of part of the burden that the districts would otherwise bear to Oxford City Council since:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• roots become established in Oxford and a proportion of applicants, particularly the single homeless, end up wanting to stay in Oxford and eventually make a homelessness application to Oxford</li> <li>• Oxford City Council pays the housing benefit claims and therefore bears the 5% of the benefit not borne by central government.</li> </ul>	<p>R13 Raise the issue of out of area placements formally with the other Oxfordshire district councils and seek to work with them to develop an out of area placement strategy and protocol.</p> <p>R14 Report to Members on the outcome of the initiative. If officer consider that the initiative is unlikely to progress to a satisfactory conclusion, include in the report the further options available to the Council.</p>

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Issue	Oxford	Recommendation
Co-operation with other agencies (contd)	<p>It also increases competition for temporary accommodation in Oxford driving up prices to the disadvantage of both the districts and the City Council.</p> <p>There have been discussions with the districts and some progress has been made. The districts now more readily acknowledge that a problem exists and have taken some action to build local capacity. West Oxfordshire DC and Cherwell DC have developed schemes for young homeless people and are developing more. South Oxfordshire DC is reviewing the issue as part of updating its housing strategy.</p> <p>Whilst these developments are positive, heavy reliance on placements in Oxford looks likely to continue for the foreseeable future unless the districts develop a local market for the temporary accommodation they currently source in Oxford.</p> <p>This is a sensitive issue and more direct involvement at Director and Chief Executive level may be needed to achieve further progress.</p>	R15
Homelessness Administration	<p>Has the process for receiving and assessing application been reviewed recently?</p> <p>Are there:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• clear procedures for assessing the eligibility of applicants?</li> <li>• written guidance for assessment officers?</li> <li>• a comprehensive suite of forms for officers undertaking assessment?</li> <li>• clear guidance regarding the standard of evidence required?</li> </ul>	<p>The Council does not have clear procedures for receiving and assessing applications set out in the form of written guidance for officers and a comprehensive review of procedures has not been undertaken.</p> <p>While generally procedures are not documented adequately, there is a suite of forms and a checklist to assist officers regarding the standard of evidence required.</p>



Issue	Oxford	Recommendation
<b>Homelessness Administration (contd)</b>		
Is the performance of the homelessness service adequately monitored?	Monitoring arrangements have improved with the development of new Departmental Performance Management arrangements, which are being implemented in the Housing Department and throughout the Council. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) have been established for the Homelessness Service as well as the necessary data collection, monitoring and reporting mechanisms.	None.
Do officers have caseload targets and are these monitored?	Homelessness Unit officers involved in receiving and assessing applications appear to be under intense workload pressures. The recently introduced caseload monitoring system would facilitate the establishment of appropriate caseload targets and enable them to be monitored.	R16 Set caseload targets for assessment officers after undertaking the necessary analysis and consideration of the results of caseload monitoring.
<b>Temporary Accommodation</b>		
Is there a strategy for increasing the number of units of the less costly types of temporary accommodation?	A key strategy has been to reduce the use of expensive bed and breakfast and HMO accommodation and develop alternatives that are both cheaper for the Council and better for homeless households. The Council has been successful in this. Over the last two years less than 10% of homeless households have been accommodated in B and B and HMO accommodation compared with about 25% in the mid 1990's and over 40% in the early 1990s.  At present, while about 10% of homeless households are in HMO or daily charge accommodation, none are in Bed and Breakfast accommodation, which is generally regarded as the most unsatisfactory arrangement of all.	None.

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Issue	Oxford	Recommendation
<p><b>Temporary Accommodation (contd)</b></p>		
<p>Has the Council considered the scope for increasing the use of its own housing stock for temporary accommodation?</p>	<p>The Council's own housing stock is likely to be its lowest cost source of temporary accommodation. If such stock would otherwise be empty for management reasons, or is hard to let, it is especially advantageous to use it as temporary accommodation.</p> <p>The Council has increased the use of its own stock for temporary accommodation in the last two years. Before this the Council rarely used its own stock. Decanted Oriltt houses awaiting refurbishment have provided a number of houses but this source is drying up as the refurbishment programme progresses. At 31/03/01 22 homeless households were in Council stock compared with 46 a year earlier.</p> <p>All properties offered to tenants and refused three times ('hard to let') are made available to the homelessness section for use as temporary accommodation.</p>	<p>None.</p>
<p>Have all options for temporary accommodation been considered? eg</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• vacant properties owned by other public sector landlords?</li> <li>• static caravan sites?</li> <li>• other major organisations that may have properties temporarily surplus to requirements?</li> </ul>	<p>Officers actively try to identify new sources of temporary accommodation. However, officers believe the scope for securing additional accommodation from presently untapped sources is very limited. Thames Valley Police have reduced their domestic accommodation holdings substantially by selling their houses. Most surplus MOD accommodation in the area has also been sold and there are no static caravan sites within the City Councils boundaries.</p>	<p>None</p>
<p>Have temporary accommodation charges been reviewed to ensure that they are the highest that can be reasonably obtained?</p>	<p>Temporary accommodation charges were last reviewed in July 2001 and were standardised at £106.74 per week.</p>	<p>None</p>

Issue	Oxford	Recommendation
Temporary Accommodation		
Are households in temporary accommodation required to complete Housing Benefit forms?	<p>The Council requires applicants to complete housing benefit application forms or to satisfy officers that they are not eligible for Housing Benefit and that they understand that they will have to pay the full accommodation charge themselves.</p>	None.
Are there joint working arrangements between the Homelessness Unit and Benefits Team?	<p>Much better working arrangements have developed between the Homelessness Unit and Benefits Team over the last year, but this has not been formalised into a protocol.</p>	R17
Is the occupancy of bed and breakfast rooms regularly monitored so that payment of rooms is only made for those actually occupied by authorities nominees?	<p>Homelessness officers formally monitor occupancy formally. Other council officers such as Environmental Health Officers visiting properties, are expected to inform the Homelessness section if they have suspicions that rooms that the council is paying for are not occupied.</p>	None.
Is there a "homeless at home" scheme?	<p>Homeless at home schemes are used by many housing authorities and accounted for 20% of temporary accommodation placements in England and Wales in 1999. All the other CWOIL authorities use such schemes, as do Councils near to Oxford. As at 30 September 1999 South Oxfordshire DC had 27 placements, West Berkshire UA had 47 placements and Aylesbury Vale DC had 35 placements. However, the potential may be more limited in Oxford since such schemes are most effective in areas where the friends and relatives accommodating the homeless household can be assured they will be permanently rehoused within a few months.</p>	R18
	<p>The Council has a scheme but there is not a high take-up rate at present. In March 2001 there were only 5 placements. While homeless-at-home status will only be appropriate in a minority of cases and needs to be used judiciously, there may be scope to use it more. For example, perhaps it could more often be used to cover the few months between acceptance and transfer to Category 2 accommodation.</p>	<p>Identify the reasons for the low take-up rate of the homelessness at home scheme and consider what changes would be needed to exploit its potential better.</p>

Issue	Oxford	Recommendation
<b>Using Existing Housing Better</b>	<p>Is there a scheme to encourage tenants who are under occupying Council accommodation to transfer to a smaller property?</p>	<p>R19 Consult with tenants (e.g. focus groups) under-occupying accommodation to establish what would induce them to move to smaller accommodation and report to Members on the options.</p>
	<p>The Council has a scheme that allows between £100 and £1,000 per bedroom released and removal expenses. As many of the tenants concerned are frail, assistance with packing and house clearance is sometimes given. The average payment under the scheme is £2,200. In fact many payments may be unproductive at present going to people whose frailty leaves them little option but to move to supported accommodation. Very few physically active tenants would be persuaded to move to smaller accommodation for such a small sum.</p> <p>Officers consider that a major reason that under-occupiers do not move is the relative shortage of attractive one and two bedroom accommodation. In some cases non-cash incentives might be more effective e.g. refurbishing the accommodation offered to under-occupiers to a high standard before they move in, including allowing some choice in the design and colour schemes of refitted kitchen and bathroom.</p>	
	<p>The difficulty of persuading the elderly to down-size has been highlighted recently by the difficulty the Council has had taking up its nomination rights to William Morris Court a new 36 unit scheme for the over 55s developed by the Oxford Citizens Housing Association in partnership with the Council. Despite the accommodation being on the face of it highly desirable, the Council has found it necessary to introduce a special incentive package including a £2,500 addition to entitlement under the current scheme, to persuade current tenants occupying family accommodation to move.</p>	
	<p>A fairly large number of dwellings becoming available over a short period contributed to the William Morris Court situation. It has not changed officers' views that better accommodation for down-sizers' to move to is key to persuading more of the active elderly to move from their family-size accommodation.</p>	

Issue	Oxford	Recommendation										
Use Existing Housing Better	<p>Are rent differentials between family-sized and smaller properties too small with the unintended result of discouraging single people and couples to transfer from family-sized to one and two bedroom dwellings?</p>	<p>R20 Consider whether rent differentials between different sizes and types of property should be increased gradually to reflect more closely the benefit enjoyed by the tenant.</p>										
	<p>Rent differentials between different sizes and types of property are very small and do not reflect the benefit being enjoyed by tenants. Currently the rent for a three bedroom house is only 6% more than the rent for a one bedroom flat. The average rents currently paid for a selection of property types is as follows:</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td>3 bedroom house</td> <td>£56.87</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2 bedroom house</td> <td>£55.19</td> </tr> <tr> <td>3 bedroom flat</td> <td>£54.94</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2 bedroom flat</td> <td>£52.50</td> </tr> <tr> <td>1 bedroom flat</td> <td>£53.53</td> </tr> </table> <p>Moreover, these figures do not include service charges, and often the total weekly amount payable for a three bedroom house would be less than for a one bedroom flat.</p>	3 bedroom house	£56.87	2 bedroom house	£55.19	3 bedroom flat	£54.94	2 bedroom flat	£52.50	1 bedroom flat	£53.53	
3 bedroom house	£56.87											
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Have targets been set for reducing the number of void properties and are they monitored?	<p>The rent structure provides no incentive for tenants who no longer need family accommodation to downsize. A new points system for determining rents might be needed to ensure that any rent changes are implemented fairly and consistently.</p>	None										
	<p>The BVPP sets a void target of 4 weeks. The Council's performance in 2000/01 was 4.5 weeks. A more challenging target of 4 weeks has been set for the current year. Performance is reported to Members regularly.</p>											

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Issue	Oxford	Recommendation
<b>Use Existing Housing Better</b>		
Has the scope for using surplus elderly person designated stock for general housing needs been considered?	<p>At 30 June 2001 the Council had 381 sheltered units and 1,221 elderly designated dwellings out of a total housing stock of 8,577. The difficulty which officers experience letting elderly designated properties strongly indicates that Council has too many of this type of dwelling compared with other types that are in strong demand.</p> <p>The correction of this mis-match by reallocating some elderly designated dwellings to general purpose housing could make a valuable contribution to meeting housing need in Oxford and in particular to reducing the number of single homeless in temporary accommodation.</p> <p>In December 1999 the Council agreed to de-designate up to 150 elderly properties. The decision was taken because of the acute shortage of properties for single homeless people below the minimum age for elderly properties of 40. A survey identified 309 properties that were suitable for redesignation. However, properties will only become available to let as general needs property very gradually over many years as the existing tenants end their tenancies. There are also difficult management issues associated with mixing young, often disadvantaged, single homeless with elderly tenants which need to be addressed.</p> <p>The Council has established two strategic reviews related to the issue of redesignation: the Elderly Persons' Accommodation review due to report in Autumn 2001 and the Single Allocations review due to report in December 2001. No elderly properties have been redesignated yet pending their outcome.</p>	<p>R21 Give a high priority to completing the Elderly Persons' Accommodation and Single Allocations reviews and implement a planned approach to redesignating surplus elderly dwellings.</p>

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Issue	Oxford	Recommendation
<p><b>Use Existing Housing Better</b></p>	<p>Has the proportion of lettings made to homeless households been reviewed?</p> <p>In November 1998 the Council set a target of letting 70% of family accommodation and 80% of single person accommodation to homeless households. It did this because it had become apparent that fewer dwellings were being allocated to homeless households under the new allocation scheme than formerly increasing numbers in temporary accommodation. Some months earlier the Council increased the housing points awarded for being in temporary accommodation from 250 to 325 to help address the issue.</p> <p>These targets were not achieved. In the year ended 31/03/01 62% of family lettings and 46% of single lettings were made to the statutory homeless. In June 2001 the target for family accommodation was reduced to 55%. The new target is probably not compatible with an overall reduction in numbers in temporary accommodation and the implications need to be analysed and drawn to the attention of Members.</p> <p>While allocation targets are needed, the primary mechanism for achieving the pattern of housing allocations the Council wants should be the housing allocation scheme itself. For example, if the Council judges too few dwellings are being offered to the homeless it could award more housing points for being in temporary accommodation.</p> <p>No additional housing points accrue for length of time spent in temporary accommodation. Without such points some homeless households with otherwise low housing need might never accumulate enough housing points to receive an offer of housing. Also points awarded for time spent in temporary accommodation would provide a self-regulating mechanism: in a period when length of stay in temporary accommodation was increasing, homeless households would accrue more housing points and thereby receive more housing offers, which would ameliorate the build up of numbers in temporary accommodation.</p>	<p>R22 Prepare a three year forecasts of numbers in temporary accommodation over a range of scenarios e.g. central, optimistic and pessimistic assumptions of acceptances, number of available lettings, proportion of lettings allocated to the homeless and 'voluntary leavers'. Report to Members the implications for numbers in temporary accommodation and the Council's finances.</p> <p>R23 Consider whether the housing allocation scheme or points weightings' need to be revised, including whether additional points for length of time in temporary accommodation should be introduced.</p>

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Issue	Oxford	Recommendation
<b>Alternatives to Traditional Social Housing</b>		
<p>Are the alternatives to social housing located in Oxford explored seriously as a means of the Council discharging its duty to homeless households?</p>	<p>Some of the information required to determine whether housing solutions other than social housing located in Oxford is, or may in the future be, feasible may emerge from the interview process but it is not collected and assessed systematically.</p>	<p>R24 Collect as part of the homelessness application process the information needed to assess whether a solution other than social housing located in Oxford might become feasible eventually. Update the information when significant changes of circumstances become known e.g. employment status or marriage.</p>
<p>Are applicant's:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• financial circumstances</li> <li>• employment prospects/earning power</li> <li>• precipitating event and the prospect of overcoming it</li> <li>• connections with other areas</li> <li>• desire/willingness to move to another area</li> </ul>	<p>In about 10 –15% of cases the Council's statutory duty is 'discharged' by homeless households leaving their temporary accommodation voluntarily without the Council placing them in permanent accommodation. The heads of some homeless households will no doubt have formed relationships with partners who are able to offer them accommodation; others may have solved their housing difficulties by moving to an area where housing is more affordable. Yet others, particularly the single homeless, may have just decided to move on without obtaining alternative secure accommodation. Currently the Council has little information on the households who 'disappear'.</p>	<p>R25 Invite homeless households to a meeting to review their situation at least annually. Explore with those households whose current circumstances or aspirations suggest it could be feasible, the housing options available to them not involving a lengthy wait for social housing located in Oxford.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• right to go on the housing register in another area</li> </ul>	<p>In a sense, therefore, alternatives to social housing located in Oxford is already a major means of the Council discharging its duty. All this happens with little advice, support or assistance from the Council. If such advice and support were available more households may be able to solve their housing problem in a way that avoids the usually very long wait for social housing located in Oxford.</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• housing history eg owner- occupier in the past</li> </ul>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• housing aspirations</li> </ul>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• established in order to determine whether housing solutions other than social housing located in Oxford might be or eventually become feasible?</li> </ul>		

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Issue	Oxford	Recommendation
<p>Alternatives to Traditional Social Housing (contd)</p>	<p>Has the Council established relationships with local authorities with substantial hard to let housing with a view to placing willing homeless and general register applicants in their areas?</p> <p>The Council has made contact with over 25 other local authorities, seeking to develop relationships, which would allow the placing of willing homeless and general register applicants in their area.</p> <p>None of those authorities were willing to enter into such a relationship.</p>	<p>None.</p>
<p>Are applicants given information on their likely length of stay in temporary accommodation?</p>	<p>Applicants are informed that their removal to permanent accommodation is unlikely to be within two years and may be much longer.</p> <p>Homeless households can choose the areas to which they wish to be re-housed in the same way as others on the housing register. This means they can choose only one area, which may be in high demand and which may have only a tiny housing stock e.g. Jericho. Unsurprisingly, area choice significantly affects the length of wait for an offer of permanent accommodation.</p>	<p>R26 Obtain written advice from the Council's legal section on whether giving different area choice options to homeless households would be legal.</p> <p>R27 Report to Members on the options for allowing area choice and what could be done to prevent abuse.</p>
<p>It seems perverse to allow homeless households to specify narrowly the areas to which they are willing to be re-housed when the consequence may be that the Council has to maintain them for a longer period in expensive temporary accommodation. However, officers believe that it may not be possible to have different rules for the statutorily homeless than for others since it might be considered indirect racial discrimination under race relation's law as the homeless come disproportionately from ethnic minorities.</p>		

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Issue	Oxford	Recommendation
<p><b>Alternatives to Traditional Social Housing (contd)</b></p>	<p>Most homeless households once they are in second stage accommodation are very happy with it since it is generally of good quality and often more desirable (e.g. more likely to have a garden) than the accommodation to which they will be permanently rehoused. Officer believe that some homeless households deliberately choose their areas very narrowly to reduce their chances of being rehoused in less desirable accommodation than the temporary accommodation they occupy. One household has been in temporary accommodation for 12 years.</p> <p>Officers receive reports detailing households who have been in temporary accommodation for a prolonged period without having received an offer of permanent accommodation. Such households are encouraged to adopt a more flexible approach to their preferred location(s).</p>	
<p><b>Increase Permanent Social Housing</b></p>	<p>Has the Council's approach to planning agreements been reviewed with a view to increasing the amount of social housing generated?</p> <p>Has the Council considered using PFI and other alternative funding arrangements to allow the building of more social housing?</p>	<p>R28 Report to Members on the Council's approach to planning agreements and include in the report a recommendation on whether a more detailed internal or external review should be undertaken.</p> <p>None.</p>

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Issue	Oxford	Recommendation
<p>Increase Permanent Social Housing (contd)</p> <p>What has the Council done to encourage shared-ownership or other low home ownership schemes?</p>	<p>The Council is involved in shared ownership initiatives with two housing associations. These allow participants to buy an equity share, which they can increase, and pay a social rent on the remainder of the house. The Council and Northcote Housing Association are running a scheme under the Homebuy initiative introduced by the Government in April 1999. The scheme allows Council and Housing association tenants who are giving up their current tenancies to buy a home of their choice on the open market. Applicants have to finance 75% of the house they want, the rest is funded by an equity loan, which has to be repaid when the property is sold. This scheme is at a fairly early stage and activity is still building up.</p> <p>It is difficult to assess accurately the extent to which such schemes release social dwellings or reduce demand for traditional social housing. In some cases, people apply to go on the General Housing Register in order to qualify to participate in the schemes. Clearly, however, they contribute to the stock of affordable housing and have a role to play in attracting and retaining key public service workers.</p> <p>Central government has recently put more emphasis on the role of low cost ownership in providing affordable housing and it may be timely for the Council to review its contribution to its overall housing strategy.</p>	<p>R29 Consider whether shared ownership and other low cost homeownership initiatives could contribute more to meeting the need for affordable housing in Oxford.</p>

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