

## **Homelessness report**

*Oxford City Council*

Audit 2000/2001

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### **Action Plan**

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*Colin Stratton*

*Dianne Few*

Key Priority ••• High •• Medium • Low

Date 00.00.00 Target completion date 00.00.00 Actual completion date

Page	Recommendation	Priority	Responsibility	Agreed	Comments	Date
	<b>Homelessness strategy</b>					
R1	Give a high priority to completing work on preparing a comprehensive strategy for the homelessness service and update the Homelessness Best Value Performance Plan to reflect the strategy.	H	David Hill Strategic Policy		This work falls within the remit of the new Homelessness Task Force, and the City Council's Homelessness Strategy Officer. Initial consultation with the relevant Local Authorities, RSLs, and other Statutory Agencies is underway, with a view to determining the membership of the Task Force. Operational managers will be encouraged to feed their concerns and knowledge into the process of developing a comprehensive strategy.  A Best Value Review is scheduled to take place this year, and the outcomes of that review will be fed into the development of future strategic and operational planning.	Commence June 2002  Complete March 2003
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.	H	Chris Quainton Homelessness  Graham Stratford Homelessness		Assessment officers have access to publications detailing current legislation and case law on Homelessness. We will develop guidance notes covering the areas of discretion within the legislation by September 2002, but would note that the intention of the relevant Acts is that Authorities should not adopt a blanket approach	Scope by end June 2002  Complete by end October 2002  Complete by September 2002

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R3	Review training arrangements for homelessness assessment officers.	H	GS/Kevin O'Malley		This work will form part of the current review of policies and procedures.	September 2002
R4	Give a high priority to progressing the consideration of options for providing social housing in Oxford.	H	Neil Gibson Health, Housing &Community		<p>It will be necessary to involve Senior Officers from a range of Business Units, and to have significant input from Elected Members, in order to satisfy this requirement.</p> <p>We are already working in close co-operation with the major RSLs in Oxford to develop schemes to increase the supply of Social Housing, and have taken a proactive approach to planning issues regarding the provision of affordable housing. The deposit version of our Local Plan calls for 50% Affordable Housing, and 205 Key Worker Housing on all suitable new build sites.</p> <p>It is our intention to initiate discussion with all our stakeholders regarding the future management arrangements for existing Council housing stock, and the financial issues which surround this topic.</p>	Ongoing

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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.	H	CQ Homelessness		Initial enquiries have not yet revealed any truly effective methods of prediction for homelessness trends. The responsible officers will continue to investigate possible improvements to the existing models. It is felt that a thorough Housing Needs Survey is an essential precursor to any effective modelling, and this will be undertaken	December 2002
<b>Homelessness prevention</b>						
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	M	David Hill Strategic Policy		District Councils will have input to the new Homelessness Task Force, and it is just this type of issue which the Task Force is expected to address. It is to be hoped that involving the Districts in the development of a comprehensive Homelessness Strategy will broaden their perspectives on this and other related issues.	View by March 2003
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.	H	Penny Randall Neighbourhood Renewal		Work on this issue is currently being undertaken by officers of the neighbourhood Renewal Business Unit, and the Homelessness Strategy Officer. It is intended that the contract drawn up for the provision of this service will reflect the need for OHRC to provide a greater range of advice services, and will also define the acceptable limits of advocacy.	June 2002
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'.				See previous section.	

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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.				See previous sections	
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.	M	CA Strategic Policy		Options for the delivery of housing advice are currently being considered. A report will be submitted to the Executive Board detailing the possible options. It is anticipated that both the new Allocations Team being developed by the Housing Management Business Unit, and the existing Customer Service Officers will be instrumental in providing initial advice to clients. Although the rights based approach of OHRC is seen to be an essential component of a good Housing Advice Service, it is generally felt by officers that a much greater range of options based advice must also be made available.	Options report to Executive Board June 2002
R11	Consider whether the Council should develop a mediation service.	H	GS Homelessness		Caseworkers already have access to the services of the Council's Tenancy Relations Officer in cases of dispute between landlord and tenant. However, it is felt that the availability of mediation services could provide a valuable additional resource in cases where potential homelessness could conceivably be avoided by conflict resolution. To this end, a budget of £5,000 has been identified within the general financial provisions for the Homelessness Unit, and initial discussions have taken place between the	September 2002

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					responsible officer and two mediation service providers. Some issues as to guidelines for the use of the service remain to be clarified, but it is anticipated that these will be resolved quickly, and that we will be able to begin use of the service in the near future.	
<b>Co-operation with other agencies</b>						
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.	M	David Hill Strategic Policy		Again, this comes within the remit of the new Homelessness Task Force, and it is hoped that the successful establishment of this team will go some way towards resolving areas of potential conflict and open the way to more meaningful exchange of views and information.	March 2003
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.	M	David Hill Strategic Policy		This issue will need careful consideration by the Homelessness Task Force, in order to develop a long term, County wide strategy for more effective management of temporary placements. This will be high on the agenda for the new team.	View on way forward by March 2003

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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.	L	David Hill Strategic Policy		Subject to outcome of R13, above.	
<b>Homelessness administration</b>						
R15	Review and document procedures for receiving and assessing homelessness applications.	H	GS/Carol Shields Homelessness		We are currently reviewing all procedures within the Homelessness Unit, and developing documentation to reflect the improvements we are making. From June 2002, Customer Service Officers will undertake initial receipt and completion of Homelessness applications. The advantages of this change are twofold – firstly, clients will no longer need to make an appointment for initial presentation as homeless (and will be able to present at any office where CSOs provide the front of house services), and secondly, the Homelessness Caseworkers will be able to utilise their time to greater effect, and to investigate the background to applications more thoroughly.	June 2002
R16	Set caseload targets for assessment officers after undertaking the necessary analysis and consideration of the results of caseload monitoring.	H	CS Homelessness		As noted above, we are currently reviewing all procedures within the Homelessness Unit. We will, as part of this review, consider the appropriate levels of casework for our assessment officers, implement better monitoring of progress, and develop ways of targeting resources onto more problematic cases.	September 2002
<b>Temporary accommodation</b>						

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R17	Document the agreed working arrangements between the Homelessness Unit and the Housing Benefits Section.	H	CS Homelessness		Staff in the Homelessness Unit are now working very closely with the Housing Benefit Section, both on the day-to-day administration of claims and on the strategic issues facing both departments. Regular briefing meetings between the two departments have been initiated. We are in the process of reviewing the ways in which we acquire and fund the acquisition of temporary accommodation, and are committed to designing schemes which utilise the Housing Benefit regulations to our best advantage. As a part of this process, we will clarify any outstanding issues surrounding Housing Benefit, and will draw up a set of guidelines for handling Housing Benefit claims made by Homelessness clients.	July 2002
R18	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.	L/M	GS/CS Homelessness		Homeless at Home is usually only viable in cases where the period to be spent in current accommodation is short. Improvements to the move on rate from 1 <sup>st</sup> to 2 <sup>nd</sup> stage accommodation could benefit this scheme. We will also look at the possibility of incentives for those accommodation providers willing to consider co-operating in this scheme	March 2003
<b>Using existing housing better</b>						
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.	M	GS/Dave Scholes Housing Management		A full review of the current arrangements for offering incentives to tenants who are under-occupying their properties will be carried out as part of our general Allocations Review in the Autumn. It is our intention to include all stakeholders in this review, including current	March 2003

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					under-occupiers.	
<b>Using existing housing better (continued)</b>						
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	H	Sarah Fogden Housing Finance		This issue will be addressed by the introduction of the Government's Rent Restructuring Programme. Approval from full Council for the introduction of the programme will be sought in the near future, and the changes to rent structure will be introduced over a ten year period. The programme will result in substantial differentials between property types.	Approval by July 2002  Programme complete by 2012
R21	Give a high priority to completing the Elderly Persons' Accommodation and Single Allocations reviews and implement a planned approach to designating surplus elderly dwellings.	H	GS/DS Housing Management		This work will form part of a more general Allocations Policy Review scheduled to begin in the Autumn. We are already actively considering the use of surplus Sheltered Accommodation for the provision of temporary accommodation for Homelessness clients.	March 2003
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.	H	CQ Homelessness		This work is ongoing. We have some preliminary forecasts for the next 3 years, but will need to revise these in light of new legislation and allocations percentages, and to take account of the costings which will be generated by changes to the ways we procure temporary accommodation.	December 2003
R23	Consider whether the housing allocation scheme or points weightings' need to be revised, including whether additional points for length of time in	H	GS/DS Homelessness /Housing		This will form part of the general Allocations review this Autumn. There is a strong feeling amongst officers that additional points for length	March 2003

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	temporary accommodation should be introduced.		Management		of time in temporary accommodation would be a desirable feature of any changes, particularly in conjunction with the higher percentage of allocations, and limited area choice policy which currently apply to Homelessness clients.	
<b>Alternatives to traditional social housing</b>						
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.	M	GS/CS Homelessness		It may be possible to build this function in to the initial interview with Customer Service Officers, and we will work towards developing a simple pro-forma for completion by the applicant/interviewer. There may also be scope for developing the role of the Allocations Team in providing Housing Options Advice, and collecting relevant data.	October 2002
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.	M	GS/CS Homelessness		These meetings will take the place of the current 2-year review interviews, which are no longer appropriate following changes to the Homelessness legislation. It may be possible to utilise the new Allocations Team for a percentage of these interviews, but this will depend on the decisions taken in relation to the delivery of Housing Advice as a whole.	December 2002
R26	Obtain written advice from the Council's legal section on whether giving different area choice options to homeless households would be legal.				Completed – all applications from Homelessness clients have been set for "Any Area" and "Any Property Type", except where an appeal against this decision has been received.	
R27	Report to Members on the options for allowing				Completed. The additional appeal process for	

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	area choice and what could be done to prevent abuse.				clients not wishing to be allocated in certain areas, combined with the statutory right to review of the suitability of any allocation is felt to safeguard the rights of clients, and protect the Council from abuse of the system.	
<b>Increase permanent social housing</b>						
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.				The new planning framework in the Oxford Local Plan (Deposit Version) specifies 50% Affordable Housing, and 20% Key Worker Housing for all new build developments over five units. It is currently felt that this is a positive approach to the issues covered by this recommendation.	
R29	Consider whether shared ownership and other low cost homeownership initiatives could contribute more to meeting the need for affordable housing in Oxford.	H	DS Housing Management		We are keen to encourage use of these schemes, and will continue to work with our RSL partners to ensure maximum possible uptake.  It is envisaged that the new Allocations Team will take responsibility for the development and delivery of these schemes.	Team in place July 2002
			Steve Northey Neighbourhood Renewal		Responsibility for new build agreements with RSL partners falls within the Neighbourhood Renewal Business Unit.	Ongoing
			Duncan Hall		Development work on a Public Service Agreement initiative for Key workers is currently	Initial submission 30 <sup>th</sup> June

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			Strategic Policy		being undertaken.	2002
			CA			
			Strategic Policy		The Homelessness Task Force will also be looking to develop new opportunities in this area.	March 2003