

HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY- Progress Report

Report of:	<i>Acting Business Manager, Housing Services</i>	WARDS AFFECTED
		ALL
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Lead Member Responsible:	<i>Councillor Ed Turner Housing and Economic Development Portfolio Holder</i>	
<i>Overview and Scrutiny Committee</i>	<i>Housing</i>	
<i>Key Decision</i>	<i>No</i>	

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Oxford Homelessness Strategy was published in July 2003. A Delivery Plan was approved that identified the actions that statutory and other agencies in Oxford should undertake from 2003 to 2008. The Homelessness Strategy will be reviewed and a new strategy published by July 2008.

Executive Board requested a report back annually on progress of implementation of the Delivery Plan since publication in July 2003.

This report provides members with an update on progress relating to each action in the Delivery Plan since publication in 2003. It also highlights some of the successes and failures over the last year and provides a comparison between the current performance and the targets approved in the Homelessness Strategy.

Members should note that overall there has been a great deal of progress and success in implementing the Homeless Strategy. Against a national trend of increasing homelessness numbers, the new Options Service has reduced homelessness acceptances and reduced the cost of homelessness to the Council. Many agencies in Oxford continue to work together to provide additional and improved services to homeless people to meet their housing or support needs.

There are no staffing implications for the Council.

The financial implications are as set out in this report.

The proposal will help deliver the Council's vision in terms of the provision of affordable housing and in enhancing community safety, by providing advice on housing/homelessness issues to the community, and will contribute to the financial stability of the Council by helping to prevent homelessness.

The proposal also accords with the broad themes of the Council's Community Strategy.

Recommendation:

Members are asked to note the progress made by the Council and other agencies implementing the Homelessness Strategy since July 2003.

1 Background

- 1.1 The Oxford Homelessness Task Force, a multi agency group that included both members and officers from the County Council, the Oxford City PCT, the City Council, Thames Valley Police, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and representatives from Oxfordshire District Councils, RSLs and the Voluntary Sector, published the Oxford Homelessness Strategy in July 2003. The strategy was approved by the City Council on 14 July 2003 and has been adopted by the bodies that made up the task force.
- 1.2 Following publication of the strategy many organisations have been implementing the actions contained in the Delivery Plan. The multi agency Strategic Housing in Oxford Partnership monitors and reviews progress regularly and have endorsed this report that will be considered subsequently by partner organisations.
- 1.3 At Annex A Members will find an updated version of the plan showing what progress has been made so far. At paragraph 3 below members will find a summary of some of the key failures and successes over the last year.

2 Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) and Housing Quality Network (HQN) Assessment

- 2.1 The ODPM commissioned HQN to undertake an assessment of each local authority published Homelessness Strategy. HQN have provided an overview including the strengths and weaknesses and areas of good practice for Oxford and this is attached at Annex B.
- 2.2 The key weaknesses identified by HQN are not a surprise to the agencies involved in the Homelessness Task Force and who now form the membership of the multi agency - Strategic Housing in Oxford Partnership (SHOP) – the strategic group responsible for reviewing and monitoring both the Housing

Strategy and the Homelessness Strategy. However, based on the brief summary provided by HQN officers cannot agree fully with the comments relating to the “lack of involvement of the voluntary sector” and “no explanation of recent trends”. The Homelessness Task Force included the Supported Housing Manager (based at Lucy Faithful House), English Churches Housing Group who represented the voluntary sector and reported back to the Single Homelessness Group. The report did include a great deal of information on deprivation in Oxford and on homelessness trends at the local, national and regional level.

- 2.3 The lack of involvement of homeless people and the lack of any “mention of the advice provision” are valid criticisms of the strategy. The review of housing advice in Oxford was progressing at the time of publication and some reference to the proposal to tender this service could have been included. The Council is addressing the lack of “involvement” of homeless people this financial year. A contract has recently been let by the Council with ALPHA Research to consult with the BME community and households in temporary accommodation to develop a better understanding of their housing need, those at risk of homelessness and whether there are services we could provide that would help prevent homelessness.

3 Homelessness Strategy Progress – Key Successes and Failures

3.1 Failures

- 3.1.1 The Housing Options Service has not been able to progress satisfactorily the review and revision of the Joint Protocol for 16/17 year olds who normally present to the Council as homeless. There is general agreement with Social and Health Care (SHC) that the County Councils City Team do not have the resources to undertake the housing assessment fully before referral to Housing Options. Discussions with SHC are continuing.
- 3.1.2 It has not been possible to secure funding from ODPM or other sources to provide joint training for staff of Oxfordshire District Councils and other agencies working with homeless people. Although the City Council has provided places to other Oxfordshire District council staff on in-house organised Shelter Training courses, specific funding is required to improve the joint knowledge base for staff to enable us all to provide a consistent approach and to improve our working relations with all agencies working with homeless people.
- 3.1.3 Mediation process for people excluded from the family home did not work. The integrity of the mediation process precluded any specific outcomes being laid down by Housing Options, therefore mediation had little or no effect in keeping people in their home or reducing numbers presenting as homeless. The Mediation Oxfordshire Service is however providing housing options with training on techniques that will help staff prevent homelessness. Housing Options are developing an alternative approach that hopefully will have an impact on family and friend exclusions and will include home visits and interviews with the “excluder”.

- 3.1.4 There has been no progress on developing out of area referrals to other LA's for permanent housing. The timescale for achieving this has been postponed until June 2005.
- 3.1.5 Although there will be an increase in the numbers of social rented housing completions in 2004/05, there has been no significant progress on "increasing substantially the provision of social housing in Oxford". The Housing Requirement Study identifies an annual shortfall in supply of social rented housing of over 1,700 units. All the efforts of various agencies in Oxford can continue to address the immediate needs of homeless people, however, without more social rented housing a significant number of households will remain in temporary accommodation in Oxford longer than they would if resident in other areas of the country.
- 3.1.6 There has been no tangible reduction in the average time spent in temporary accommodation before homeless households are permanently housed.

3.2 Successes

- 3.2.1 The Home Choice Scheme is very effective. Offering potentially homeless households the opportunity to access the private rented sector rather than go down the homelessness route has helped 84 households from April to September 2004 at a cost of £87,000. This includes our work with the County Councils Asylum Seeker Team to help families given Indefinite Leave to Remain through the Government Amnesty announced last year. It is estimated that around 140 households will have their housing needs met this way during 2004/05.
- 3.2.2 The Family Homelessness Group has been created. The multi agency group comprises representatives of the statutory agencies working in Oxford e.g. County Council, City PCT, Connexion, and representatives from other agencies working with families in Oxford such as the Teenage Pregnancy Unit, Cherwell Housing Trust and Surestart. This group is a subgroup of SHOP, and is trying to emulate the work of the existing Single Homelessness Group.
- 3.2.3 The City PCT have developed a website to provide information and access to networks for victims of forced marriages.
- 3.2.4 Funding was secured in 2004/05 from ODPM to provide a Domestic Violence Support Officer working in Neighbourhood Renewal to help prevent homelessness from this client group.
- 3.2.5 The City PCT has provided a Health Visitor post for 2 days per week to work closely with Housing Options to help households in temporary accommodation access health services.
- 3.2.6 Social & Health Care Children's Services in the City have appointed a Housing Development and Support Worker to work with families and young people with a housing need.

- 3.2.7 The Government target for no families in B&B, except in an emergency from April 2004 was met. Our current working practices ensure that families who are likely to be accepted as homeless are moved quickly (usually a few days) to Private Sector Lease (PSL) accommodation.
- 3.2.8 There has been a significant improvement in the Housing Benefit service over the last year. The target set to reduce the average time taken to process new housing benefit claim to 35 days by 2008, has already been met.
- 3.2.9 Funding has been provided by ODPM to help improved the support to families in temporary accommodation. A new Family Support service is now in place helping families with identified support needs, particularly those families who are 'repeat' homelessness cases to ensure the cycle of homelessness does not continue.

4 Targets and Performance Measures

- 4.1 The Homelessness Strategy identified a number of key performance measures
- 4.1.1 **A 40% reduction in the number of homelessness acceptances by 2008.**
A reduction of 13% was achieved in 2003/04. It is estimated that a further 9% reduction will be achieved in 2004/05. This may achieve an overall reduction of 22% in two years.
- 4.1.2 **Increase the current number of homes available to meet housing need from 2004.**
A steady increase in new housing provision has been achieved. In 2002/03 around 100 units were completed. In 2003/04 there were 141 completions. It is anticipated that around 200 completions will be achieved in 2004/05.
- 4.1.3 **Reduce the cost of homelessness over the life of the strategy from 2004.**
Significant savings achieved by the Council in 2003/04 – around £700k. Savings are anticipated in 2004/05, however they will be much reduced from last financial year. Changes in the use and provision of temporary accommodation during 2004/05 have resulted in a high void rate that reduces income. An estimated outturn deficit on PSL's will be offset by savings on B&B during the year.
- 4.1.4 **An end to the use of B&B for families except in an emergency for longer than 6 weeks.**
This has been achieved and will continue to be met.
- 4.1.5 **Levels of rough sleeping that are two-thirds below the levels recorded in 1998 or lower.**
Rough sleeper levels have been maintained at a low level for a number of years now. Current levels are fluctuating between 8 and 15 over the last 6 months. However that is normal for this time of year and it is anticipated that numbers will drop below 10 over the next 6-month period.
- 4.1.6 **Reduce levels of repeat homelessness.**
Difficulties in collecting data on households accepted as homeless who have

previously been homeless. Info available from April 2004 and in the first quarter this year 7 repeat homelessness cases were identified. The second quarter figure is 1 case.

4.1.7 Reduce levels of homelessness against main causes

4.1.7.1 Family and friend exclusions

The 2nd quarter P1E return to Government in 2003/04 showed 34 accepted family or friends excluded homelessness cases. In the 2nd quarter in 2004/05 there were 37 cases

4.1.7.2 Loss of private rented tenancies

The 2nd quarter P1E return to Government in 2003/04 showed 25 cases where households accepted as homeless had lost their private rented tenancy. In the 2nd quarter in 2004/05 there were 11 cases.

4.1.7.3 Relationship breakdowns

The 2nd quarter P1E return to Government in 2003/04 showed 12 cases where people were accepted as homeless because of a breakdown in a relationship. In the 2nd quarter in 2004/05 there were 14 cases.

4.1.8 Reduce inappropriate use of temporary accommodation.

The re-procurement of PSL properties went a long way to improving the quality of the temporary accommodation used by the Council. The reduced use of B&B from around 60 units at any one time last year to around 10 units currently has also helped. New working practices try to ensure that wherever possible households are accommodated near support networks, existing schools and health services.

4.1.9 Significantly improve services for homeless people.

Historically Oxford has provided relatively high levels of services for homeless people. Oxford is well served by voluntary organisations and housing providers funded by ODPM, City Council, and County Council and more significantly over recent years by Support People. The new Housing Options service has also provided more opportunities and choices for people in housing need.

4.1.10 Provide a strategic framework for services to homeless people by March 2004.

The Homelessness Task Force has handed over the strategic lead for the Homelessness Strategy to SHOP. SHOP has created a number of multi agency sub-groups to oversee areas of housing and homelessness. There are two sub groups for homelessness - the Single Homeless Group and the Family Homelessness Group. Currently considering how both groups ensure common homeless issues are discussed and priorities for homelessness agreed.

4.1.11 To reduce the average time taken to process new housing benefit claim by 20% by March 2004.

This was achieved.

4.1.12 To reduce the average time taken to process new housing benefit claim to 35 days by 2008.

Already met by the Council's Housing Benefit service.

5 Conclusion

- 5.1 An ambitious programme of actions was adopted in the Homelessness Strategy Delivery Plan published in 2003. There were also some tough but achievable targets set over the lifetime of the strategy. Generally the efforts of many agencies, particularly this Council have achieved a great deal over the last year. The Council has reduced numbers of households accepted as homeless; reduced the cost of homelessness generally, improved its services to homeless people and developed good working relationships with many agencies working with homeless people.
- 5.2 Over the next few months' officers will be developing proposals for the introduction of homelessness prevention measures that have an impact on family and friend exclusions – the main cause of homelessness in Oxford. The Options Service will also be developing a 'supported lodgings' scheme, hopefully in partnership with Social and Health Care, in Oxford. A scheme currently operates in Banbury and Witney dealing with relatively small numbers, but is effective in providing accommodation, living skills and alternatives to Council temporary accommodation. A report will be brought to a future meeting of the Executive Board.
- 5.3 The proposed outstanding actions in the Delivery Plan will be developed and implemented where possible. However, the continued provision of services for homeless people in Oxford could be affected by the new proposals in the Supporting People Strategy and the proposals to introduce a procurement programme through a competitive tendering process. This may have a negative impact on future service provision in the City.

<p>THIS REPORT HAS BEEN APPROVED BY: David Higgins – Finance and Asset Management Business Unit Sue Brown – Legal and Democratic Services Business Unit Ed Turner – Portfolio Holder</p>
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