

BEST VALUE REVIEW – HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING ADVICE

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report updates Members of the progress to date of the Best Value Review in respect of Homelessness and Housing Advice.
- 1.2 The review has identified areas which will require improvements which have resource implications.

2 BACKGROUND TO THE REVIEW

- 2.1 The review was started as a 'pilot' prior to the coming into effect of the statutory regime on 1 April and, as such, has been helpful in providing some guidance for the other reviews starting this year.
- 2.2 The recent Government Green Paper on housing contains proposals to strengthen the protection available to homeless families, including extending authorities' duties to provide advice and support and requiring them to take a multi-agency strategic approach to preventing and responding to homelessness.
- 2.3 The Homelessness and Housing Advice functions moved from the then Community Services Directorate to the Housing, Health and Community Care Division in January 1998 as part of the reorganisation of the Council's management structure. The work is located within the residential services unit of the division. The homelessness and housing advice functions are carried out by the same staff who, in some instances, also perform other functions eg: private sector housing enforcement and housing strategy.
- 2.4 The current Corporate Plan includes:

Secondary objective: To ensure housing provision appropriate to the needs of the community.

Targets: To minimise homelessness in the District by the provision of advice and services.

Standards: Effective advice services available to prevent homelessness.

Efficient determination of homelessness applications and less usage of bed and breakfast accommodation.

- 2.5 The Review has identified a wide range of internal and external interfaces for the services, including:

Internal Interfaces

- Reception Services
- Housing Benefit/Council Tax
- Housing Management
- Planning Services
- Legal Services
- Finance
- Community Safety
- Environmental Health
- Electoral Registration

External Interfaces

- Social Services
- Health Authority and Trusts/Doctors/independent Medical Advisor
- Police
- Women's Refuge
- Housing Associations
- Other Local Authorities
- Probation Service
- Court Service
- Housing Aid Charities
- Citizens Advice Bureau
- Hotels
- Removal/Storage Contractors
- Private Landlords
- Solicitors
- Funding Institutions
- Schools
- Interpreter Services

3 HOMELESSNESS SERVICES

- 3.1 The homelessness functions of the Local Housing Authority are contained in the Housing Act 1996 Part 7 which places a duty on the Council to take action whenever someone approaches them for help in obtaining housing and the Authority have reason to believe that that person may be homeless or threatened with homelessness. The Council is required to make enquiries into each application which can sometimes be quite complex and lengthy.
- 3.2 The main enquiries to be made deal with whether the applicant is:
- Eligible for assistance
 - Homeless or threatened with homelessness
 - In "priority need"
 - Homeless (or threatened with homelessness) intentionally

All enquiries have to be conducted thoroughly and the more complex cases can take a considerable time to complete.

- 3.3 In addition to the legislation, there is a Government Code of Guidance and a wealth of case law, some of it giving conflicting opinion. The Code of Guidance is due to be revised.
- 3.4 Whilst enquiries are being made it is sometimes necessary to provide shelter to applicants (known as interim accommodation). This is normally in bed and breakfast accommodation. It may also be necessary to remove and protect applicants' possessions, which are usually stored in Council owned garage units. Costs of both these services are charged to the General Fund, although applicants may be eligible for housing benefit for accommodation costs which reduces the net cost.
- 3.5 The duty owed to applicants depends on their individual circumstances, as established through enquiry. This can range from:
- A duty limited to the provision of advice and assistance to the applicant to help them find their own accommodation.
 - Provision of accommodation for a (relatively short) period whilst an applicant secures their own accommodation.
 - Assistance with securing privately rented accommodation within the District, where this is available.
 - Referral to another Local Authority where the applicant does not have a local connection with Rochford.
 - Provision of accommodation for the "minimum period" of two years (known as temporary accommodation).
- 3.6 On completion of its enquiries the Council is required to issue a Decision Notice to the applicant setting out its findings and the housing duty owed.
- 3.7 The applicant has a right to review of the Authority's decision and may subsequently appeal to the County Court on a point of law.
- 3.8 The Council dealt with 178 applications for assistance under the homelessness provisions in 1999/2000. Of these 38 were accepted following enquiry as being owed a housing duty for the minimum of a two year period.

4 HOUSING ADVICE SERVICES

- 4.1 The Housing Act 1996 places a duty on Local Housing Authorities to secure that advice and information about homelessness and the

prevention of homelessness is available free of charge to anyone in its area. The Code of Guidance deals with housing advice as well as homelessness.

- 4.2 The Code of Guidance specifies that an Authority can meet this duty by
- providing it themselves
 - securing it from some other organisation
 - securing it in partnership with another organisation
- 4.3 The Code also gives guidance on minimum standards likely to be necessary to meet the statutory duty:

Advice

- setting out a person's options or courses of action
- obtaining information from another source
- help with letters and form filling
- referral to another source of help or specialist advice such as a money advice service or call centre

Information

- providing written or verbal information and/or explanation
 - signposting to other available resources or services
- 4.4 Advice services may go beyond the minimum statutory duty and assist in areas such as provision of advocacy, mediation and negotiating with private landlords on a client's behalf.
- 4.5 Housing advice services are likely to receive a wide variety of enquiries ranging from the availability of local housing, rights of occupation, harassment and eviction to advice on rent levels, mortgage arrears and duties towards homeless householders.
- 4.6 The housing advice service should be accessible to all people in the area and should be well publicised.
- 4.7 Housing Advice is currently provided by the same staff that deal with homelessness. The service is entirely responsive and limited to the minimum necessary to meet legal requirements.
- 4.8 The Division deals with over 300 enquiries seeking housing advice each year.

5. RESOURCES INFORMATION

- 5.1 One full time member of staff is employed in the front-line provision of housing advice and homelessness services. The Housing Client & Strategy Officer provides some assistance to cover urgent cases, sickness etc but this is to the detriment of strategy and project development work.
- 5.2 The Residential Services Unit Manager also spends up to an estimated 50% of his time dealing with homelessness and housing advice. The staff involved often have to work significantly in excess of their contracted hours in order to deal with the number/urgency of applications and enquiries. The Head of Service is responsible for undertaking homelessness reviews and reporting to the appeals Panel if necessary.
- 5.3 Direct comparisons and contrasts with the situation when the service was within the then Community Services Directorate are difficult as there have been changes to the legislation and guidance, and also the practice then was to operate "generic" working where a larger number of staff involved in a range of other housing duties would undertake homelessness (and housing advice) duties.
- 5.4 Following implementation of the Housing Act 1996, the then Director of Community Services reported to Council on the provision of housing advice services estimated that, in time, housing advice would require at least two full time staff. In the short term a Lettings Assistant/Housing Adviser post was created.
- 5.5 When the housing strategy, housing client role, homelessness and housing advice were transferred in 1998, two posts were agreed - the Housing Client & Strategy Officer and the Homelessness and Housing Advice Officer.
- 5.6 Members will be aware from the concurrent progress report on the Best Value Review of Housing Strategy that there is a considerable amount of work to be undertaken in that area, which will impact on the workload of the Housing Client & Strategy Officer, Residential Services Unit Manager and the Head of Service.
- 5.7 The Council currently has the following temporary accommodation available:
- Ten hostel bedsits
- Six 2 bedroom flats
- Four 1 bedroom flats

Three bedsits

Four housing association properties

- 5.8 The Council formerly leased a second hostel which had 4 two bedroomed flats and 12 bedsit units. The lease was terminated in 1997.
- 5.9 The actual spend on bed and breakfast accommodation in 1999/2000 was £13,400 and the budget for the current year is £18,000. Grants of approximately £1,600 and £3,200 were given to the Southend Action Group for the Homeless (Night Shelter) and Southend Centre for the Homeless respectively. Removal and storage of applicants' possessions cost £3,800 in 1999/00 and the current budget provision is £7,000.

6 OTHER FACTORS

- 6.1 The review has identified that the interview facilities at both Rochford and Rayleigh are not adequate for the confidential and sometimes emotional interviews that take place. This is being considered by the pilot best value review team who are looking at reception facilities.
- 6.2 Information on applications, decisions etc has recently started to be stored on computer, but the Council does not have software specifically designed for this purpose and the environmental health software has recently been adapted for use. It is not yet clear how effective this will be in the long term and future requirements are being considered as part of the IS/IT strategy.

7 PERFORMANCE DATA AND TRENDS

- 7.1 Several statutory performance indicators deal with aspects of homelessness, including the speed of determining applications. The format for this indicator has changed:-

- (a) "The average time taken whether to accept people as homeless":-

1998/99	-	41days
---------	---	--------

1999/00	-	50 days
---------	---	---------

The average time for Shire Districts is 21 days, top quartile 13 days.

- (b) For 2000/01 onwards, "The proportion of homelessness applications on which the authority makes a decision and issues written notification to the applicant within 33 days"

2000/01, first quarter figure = 43%

(the 1999/2000 figure has been calculated as 48%)

- 7.2 The Review Team has also given some consideration to what local performance indicators it might be appropriate to introduce to supplement the statutory ones. Further work is required on this.

8 FIT TO THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

- 8.1 An appraisal has been carried out of the strengths and weakness of the homelessness service, the threats it faces from external factors and the opportunities which exist for service improvement. (S.W.O.T Analysis)

So far, this appraisal has only been conducted within the Authority. Arrangements are in hand for input from other key agencies – Southend Centre for the Homeless, Police, Health Services, Social Services and the Citizens Advice Bureaux. Also, a customer questionnaire currently being undertaken will provide valuable additional information.

- 8.2 The perceptions of the review team are:-

(a) Strengths

- Good liaison with housing management
- Dedicated staff
- Thorough investigation of applications – high confidence level
- Few challenges to decisions
- Good legal information and support
- Separated from the housing management (HRA) functions
- Links with external agencies have improved
- Good liaison with housing benefits

(b) Weaknesses

- Office accommodation needs to be improved
- Arrangements outside office hours need to be strengthened
- Low staffing levels for the workload/highly stressful work
- Interim and temporary accommodation is in short supply and the quality is variable
- Reception facilities for interviews need improvement
- Housing advice duties not clearly defined
- Low profile of the services/lack of awareness
- Support from social services could be strengthened
- Arrangements for protection of property need improvement
- Complex review procedure
- No specialist I.T. software

-
- Insufficient private sector accommodation
 - further training on housing advice work is needed
 - Lack of fully qualified housing staff with sufficient professional experience in housing management

(c) Opportunities

- Increase number of Council properties available for homeless applicants
- Work with Housing Associations to provide accommodation for homeless applicants.
- Improve working protocols with health services/social services
- Improve sharing of information between ECC/Districts
- Improve use of I.T.
- Improve quality of homeless accommodation
- Involve other service providers
- Improve internal working (domestic violence/community safety)
- Increase supply of affordable accommodation through use of planning policies
- Improve liaison with private landlords to increase supply of rented accommodation
- Improve liaison with lending institutions
- Produce strategies/policies for specific groups of homeless applicants (single homeless/mental illness etc)
- Improve staff training
- Access charitable funding

(d) Threats

- Budget restrictions
- Increased complaint levels
- Increased request for service
- Abolition of current two year limit on housing duty
- Future changes in legislation/guidance
- Inclusion of 16 and 17 year olds as a priority group
- Potential fraudulent claims for property under protection
- Potential loss/illness of specialist staff
- Legal challenge on suitability of accommodation provided
- Increasing public knowledge/advocacy services will place increasing pressure on homelessness service
- Human Rights Act implications
- Small general needs housing stock
- Further stock reduction through Right to Buy
- Changes to allocations system may reduce priority given to homeless applicants
- Non provision of discretionary advice may lead to higher levels of homelessness
- Abuse of the system

-
- 8.3 The Review team has also undertaken an analysis of the current services using a specially designed Best Value in homelessness assessment toolkit produced by the Housing Quality Network. (HQN). This has been a useful tool, assisting the review team in examining both policy and operational issues.
- 8.4 The HQN toolkit notes that “adequate staffing levels are the key to coping with the demands of the different types of service, and reviews will bring into sharp focus the way that resource levels and services are planned to meet the demands of each particular area”.

9 CHALLENGE

- 9.1 The Best Value Review is not yet complete, but already it is becoming clear that any significant improvements in service provision will have resource implications.
- 9.2 Homelessness Services
- The objectives of the service are clear but the current performance in some aspects such as time taken to reach a decision is below average, the level of applications means that the situation is unlikely to improve.
 - Use of bed and breakfast accommodation depends on the applicants at any time, but increasing use has been necessary recently due to volume of applications.
 - There is a serious shortage of a suitable interim and temporary accommodation and steps need to be taken to secure more, better quality interim and temporary housing, either in the public or private sectors.
 - Protocols with other agencies need to be strengthened and documented
 - Internal guidelines need to be clarified and documented
 - The staffing workload balance of the unit needs to be addressed.
 - Consideration needs to be given to how homelessness services will be provided in the future, including the relationships with the Housing Revenue Account function.
- 9.3 Housing Advice Services

-
- The Council needs to determine the extent of housing advice it intends to provide – the minimum statutory service or a more comprehensive one.
 - The options for securing housing advice will need evaluation – internal, external or a partnership.
 - The low level of resources currently directed to housing advice will need reassessment in the light of decisions about the level of service and the potential costs of the service provision options.
 - Consideration needs to be given to securing provision of advice services independent of the Council.

10 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 These are outlined in the report.

11 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 As outlined in the report, the quality of services currently being provided is dependant upon the resources available, both in staffing and accommodation terms.
- 11.2 The shortage of suitable interim and temporary accommodation, and of affordable rented housing in both public and private sectors needs to be considered.

12 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1 Prevention of homelessness is an important factor in ensuring social inclusion.

13 RECOMMENDATION

- 13.1 It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES**
- (1) To note progress on the best value review to date and to comment on any particular issues that should be considered within the review process.
 - (2) That the review be progressed to report findings stage, together with possible solutions on the way forward, no later than January 2001. (HHHCC)

G P Woolhouse

Head of Housing Health and Community Care

For further information please contact G P Woolhouse on:-

Tel:- 3300

E-Mail:- graham.woolhouse@rochford.gov.uk