

BEST VALUE REVIEW – HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING ADVICE - FINAL REPORT OF THE OFFICER REVIEW GROUP

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The provision of adequate shelter is a basic human need; the provision of a decent home for all who desire one is mark of a civilised society. Homelessness can affect almost anyone. Events such as loss of employment or business failure, relationship breakdown, ill health etc can, alone or in combination, bring about the loss of settled housing that was previously taken for granted.
- 1.2 Some groups, such as those who have been in care, those with a history of substance abuse and people with mental health problems are more likely than others to end up homeless.
- 1.3 Local Authorities have a key, statutory role in ensuring that appropriate help is given to those who become homeless. Appropriate, timely advice can help prevent homelessness.

2 EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

Economic Context

- 2.1 Rochford is a mixture of town and country, covering an area of 65 square miles (41,757 acres). Physically, the District is largely rural comprising large areas of green belt, with two main towns being Rochford and Rayleigh. Rochford is very much a rural market town whereas Rayleigh is much more urban with a much larger town centre. The District is well connected to London by road and rail and has a large “out commuter” population, with the major employment centres being London, Southend, Basildon and Chelmsford. There has been much development in the District, which is primarily residential. Growth has centred on the Rayleigh area, and also parts of Hawkwell, Hockley and Rochford. The influence of out commuting is certainly stronger in the west of the District in Rayleigh, with other main commuting centred around the other railway stations of Hockley and Rochford.
- 2.2 The District has a very high rate of owner occupation (86.3% - 1991 Census) and a low rate of unemployment (1.9% compared to an Essex average of 2.5% - June 2000). Recent research by Oxford University for the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, looking at the Index of multiple deprivation, represents a picture of general affluence. Where 1 represents the most deprived ward in the country and 8414 the least deprived ward, 8 of Rochford’s 23 wards are ranked between 7132 and 7971. Nonetheless, in relative terms, there are clusters of deprivation and these are centred on the wards of Foulness, Great Wakering, Rochford Roche, Rochford

Eastwood and Rochford St. Andrews ranked 2713, 2972, 3286, 3515 respectively.

- 2.3 In addition, from the data collected through the 1999 Housing Needs Survey, there would appear to be a very wide income distribution within the District, with 27.6% of households on low income, earning less than £10,000 per annum.
- 2.4 A further socio-economic indicator is the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals. Within the Rochford District 9% exercise that right, the 4th lowest in the County, behind Uttlesford, Brentwood and Chelmsford.
- 2.5 Economically, therefore the area appears to be reasonably affluent, with relatively high house prices, low unemployment and high mobility, although there are pockets of concern. It is worth noting that 80% of households have at least one car.
- 2.6 Looking to the future, there seems little reason to suggest that the general overall level of prosperity is likely to change significantly. The North Thames coastline to the south and west, incorporating Southend, Castle Point, parts of Basildon and Thurrock, has been in decline and suffering from lack of investment over a number of years. With the recent extension of the Thames Gateway to cover these areas, along with parts of Rochford around Southend airport, there is now the future prospect of significant investment in infrastructure and regeneration over a substantial period. This should help sustain the general economic well being of the District and present additional employment opportunities for residents.
- 2.7 It may also help to reduce the out commuting into London and the City as the more jobs that can be created along the North Thames corridor, the greater the opportunity and choice there will be for residents to work closer to home.

Social Context

- 2.8 The population of the District is approximately 78,300 (Office of National Statistics 1999 estimate) comprising approximately 38,400 males and 39,900 females. In terms of age breakdown, details of the resident population are shown below:

<u>Age</u>	<u>Total</u>
0-4	4,700
5-14	9,700
15-19	4,700
20-60	45,600
65+	13,500

- 2.9 Projections based on the 1991 mid-year estimates which track the assumptions of the OPCS-based forecasts indicate that the annual rate of population increase is projected to continue steadily at an average annual rate of about 0.08% over the period to 2011, growing over that period by approximately 1,200 people.

- 2.10 Over the period to 2011, there is a significant increase of 11.4% in the 45 to retirement group and 26.5% in the post-retirement group. The number of over 80 year old people within the post-retirement group is forecast to rise to almost 2,200 over the 20 years to 2011, 81.4%, more than the 1991 level. During this period the 20 to 44, the main household forming age group, will fall by over 3,800 people.
- 2.11 The numbers of children are also projected to fall by almost 1,800 over the period to the end of 2011. Compared to an Essex average of 1.8%, it is estimated that just over 1% of the resident population is from an ethnic minority background.
- 2.12 In Rochford, 12.1% of households have young families (children under 5) compared to an Essex average of 12.6%. 4.5% have large families (3 or more children) compared to an Essex figure of 4.5% and an England and Wales figure of 4.7%. At the same time, households with lone parents' account for 2.5%, compared to an Essex figure of 2.9% and England and Wales figure of 3.7%.

Government Context

- 2.13 Providing support for unintentionally homeless people is very much seen by the Government as an important issue in the context of social inclusion.
- 2.14 The Housing Green Paper "Quality and Choice: A Decent Home for All" published in April 2000 set out options to strengthen protection for homeless people. The Government has, following consultation, just announced its policy proposals. These will include:
- Extending the priority need categories for homeless people to include 16 and 17 year olds; care leavers aged 18 – 21; and applicants who are vulnerable as a result of an institutionalised background or as a result of fleeing domestic violence or harassment. These changes are expected shortly, and guidance will be issued.
 - Repeal of the current two year limitation applying to the homelessness duty and requiring housing authorities to secure suitable accommodation for all applicants who are unintentionally homeless and in priority need until a settled housing solution is found.
 - Repeal of the requirement to consider whether other suitable accommodation is available before an Authority can let its own housing to a homeless household.
 - Repeal of the two year restriction on the use of Local Authority stock to provide housing.
 - Allowing housing authorities to secure accommodation for unintentionally homeless applicants who are not in priority need, where resources permit.

- Requiring housing authorities to take a more strategic approach to the prevention of homelessness, including a requirement to undertake a review of homelessness and to formulate an effective strategy.
- A revised Code of Guidance will be issued.

3. PLANNING CONTEXT

Corporate Plan

- 3.1 The Council's Corporate Plan was produced in March 2000 and is the Council's business plan for the next three years; matching resources with agreed priorities and objectives.

The key objectives are:

1. Provide quality, cost effective services.
2. Work towards a safer and more caring community.
3. Promote a green and sustainable environment.
4. Encourage a thriving local economy.
5. Improve the quality of life for residents in our District.
6. Maintain and enhance our local heritage and culture.

Best Value Performance Plan

- 3.2 The Best Value Performance Plan provides information on what the Council does, how it has performed over the last year and performance targets for the future. The Plan also provides a vehicle for the Council to measure service improvement and comparisons with other Local Authorities.
- 3.3 Performance indicators, both local and those set by Government are included in the plan and are grouped under headings compiled from the Council's key objectives.

Housing Strategy

- 3.4 The Council's Housing Strategy pulls together all those activities which are undertaken by the Council or partner organisations which have an impact on housing and housing support in the District, or which are affected by housing decisions. It aims to set out a clear strategy for investment in housing and development of support services to meet identified needs.

Homelessness and housing advice are important elements of the housing strategy.

4 PROFILE OF EXISTING SERVICES

- 4.1 The interim report of the review group, considered at Community Services Committee on 10 October 2000, detailed the services provided, interfaces,

resources, costs and an assessment of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

5 PERFORMANCE OF THE SERVICES AGAINST OBJECTIVES

5.1 The Corporate Plan target is:-

“To minimise homelessness by the provision of advice and services”,
with standards of:-

- Effective advice services available to prevent homelessness
- Efficient determination of homelessness applications and less usage of bed and breakfast accommodation.

5.2 Consultations have been carried out both with external agencies and other divisions within the authority, also with service users, to try and identify how well the standards are being met. This has necessitated investigating a range of issues, such as the availability of different types of housing for people who apply to the Council as homeless.

5.3 A comparison of the Council’s service provision against good practice guidelines published by the Housing Quality Network has been carried out, which identified a number of issues requiring attention:

- Corporate objectives and homelessness policies need further development.
- Documentation of procedures is needed.
- There is only limited monitoring of customer satisfaction.
- Protocols with some external agencies and other Local Authorities need improvement.
- The awareness of homelessness issues needs to be raised within the Authority.
- Improved publicity for homelessness and housing advice services is required.
- Decisions on homeless applications should be issued faster.
- There is a shortage of accommodation and support suitable for the needs of homeless people.
- Arrangements for the protection of property of homeless people should be improved.
- Meaningful local performance indicators need to be developed.

Homelessness Services

5.4 The Council dealt with 178 applications for assistance under the homelessness legislation in 1999/2000 and has dealt with a further 140 between April 2000 and the end of December 2000. Last year, 37 of these were accepted following enquiry as being owed a housing duty for the minimum two year period . Between April and December last year, 30 have been accepted. Many applicants who were not owed this full housing duty received assistance in dealing with their housing problems.

- 5.5 The average time taken to decide applications rose from 41 days in 1998/99 to 50 days last year. This compares with an average time of 19 days for all Shire Districts and a top quartile performance figure of 13 days. Rochford is therefore in the bottom quartile.
- 5.6 Whilst investigations into applications are taking place, and in some cases once a decision to accept a housing duty has been made, homeless applicants are often housed in bed and breakfast accommodation outside the district. Twenty two applicants were placed in bed and breakfast establishments in 1999/2000; between April and November 2000, thirty-one have been accommodated in bed and breakfast. The use of bed and breakfast accommodation should, according to Corporate objectives be minimised, whereas it is in fact increasing. The cost of this accommodation is currently around £7000 per month and the 2000/01 spend is estimated will exceed £50,000.
- 5.7 Limited use of the Council's hostel is made for applicants whilst their claim is being investigated; in the main it is used to house applicants for whom the Council has accepted a full housing duty. Those living in the hostel usually receive an offer of permanent accommodation from the housing register or are moved into self-contained temporary accommodation after a period of 18 weeks on average. The hostel contains 9 unfurnished bed-sit units and one 1 bedroom unit. There are minimal cooking facilities and shared bathrooms and toilets. Families as well as single people are housed there.
- 5.8 In addition to the hostel the Council currently has the following temporary accommodation available:-
- Six 2 bedroom flats
 - Three 1 bedroom flats
 - Three bedsits (the future of which is uncertain)
 - Four housing association properties
- 5.9 The Council formerly leased a second hostel which had four 2 bedroom flats and twelve bedsit units, but the lease was terminated in 1997. The shortage of suitable interim and temporary accommodation for homeless applicants means that bed and breakfast accommodation has to be used, and that some applicants spend long periods there.
- 5.10 Applicants with special needs such as young persons, those with mental or physical disabilities, those with drug or alcohol problems or those fleeing domestic violence, need suitable accommodation and, often, specialist support services. It can be difficult to secure at short notice the support services required for such applicants because services provided by other agencies are under pressure. There is a shortage of suitable accommodation for such applicants.
- 5.11 A 'floating support' scheme which provides one bedroom accommodation for homeless people who have left care, or who have mental health or drug and alcohol abuse problems has recently been agreed and is being implemented as suitable accommodation becomes available.

- 5.12 Applicants who are in interim or temporary accommodation often have furniture and personal effects, which need to be stored. This is usually done by the provision of one or more garages, but this sometimes leads to damage to property. There have been five reported incidents over the past year resulting in three successful claims on the Council's insurance policy, resulting in insurance payments totalling £3,200. Procedures have been strengthened but there is still a risk of claims which cannot be refuted. The use of garages for storage of personal possessions is considered unacceptable. Arrangements for procurement of removal services for homeless persons' belongings need to be reviewed to ensure the Council is achieving value for money.
- 5.13 Calls outside office hours are referred to the Council's emergency service contractor who will try to contact the Homelessness & Housing Advice Officer or, failing that, another officer. However, the resources provided do not facilitate an on-call rota system which guarantees that an officer will be available at all times.
- 5.14 79 applicants who had applied as homeless or potentially homeless in the period 1 April 1999 – 31 March 2000 and who had received a decision on their application were surveyed for their views.
- 5.15 Twenty three responses were received. A summary is at Appendix 2. This is a small number and the results cannot with confidence be extrapolated to provide information about the views of all customers. It is also clear in looking at the returns that some respondents have made comments about aspects of the wider housing service, such as allocations of Council and Housing Allocation tenancies, which are not included in this review.
- 5.16 Customers who responded reported being generally satisfied with the process of making an application and access to the service, although availability of any service outside normal office hours was not known by a majority.
- 5.17 The number who were satisfied with information on the progress of their application was almost balanced by those who were dissatisfied and there was a balance of view on satisfaction with the time taken to reach a decision. Negative comments predominated about the quality of temporary accommodation, and size of such accommodation also received adverse comments. More respondents were dissatisfied with the way their belongings were protected than were satisfied.
- 5.18 A number of other issues articulated in the customer survey responses were:
- There was a wide range of views about how customers felt staff had dealt with them.
 - The need for more staff to deal with problems and give a quick response
 - Concern at the cost and stress of fighting possession proceedings by the landlord
 - Concerns about lack of space, inadequate heating, security, cleanliness and suitability of interim and temporary accommodation.
 - The need for more multi-bedroom properties for people in housing need.

- 5.19 The use of customer survey forms will be continued for all service users to provide more robust information in the future.

Housing Advice Services

- 5.20 The Division provides advice on homelessness and related issues to over 300 people each year. Some of these quickly become homelessness applications; other are of a more general nature or relate to future or anticipated housing problems. Timely advice is important and has prevented homelessness in many cases. A range of other housing and related advice is given by the Council on issues such as the housing allocations scheme and housing benefit, but this is outside the scope of this review.
- 5.21 Other agencies also provide housing advice including the Citizen's Advice Bureau, the housing charity Shelter, individual Solicitors and Southend Centre for the Homeless. These sometimes work on behalf of applicants to challenge the Council's decisions.
- 5.22 The law requires the Council to provide advice on homelessness and its prevention, free of charge, to anyone in its area. Determining the type and level of advice given is a matter for the Council to decide. In 1996, the Council agreed a strategy to develop a comprehensive housing advice service which it was estimated at that time would eventually require at least two full time dedicated staff. A Housing Advice & Lettings Officer was appointed to start to develop the housing advice service but the strategy was not fully developed in the way envisaged in the report, and there have been a number of structural changes subsequently. However, more advice is now offered than was the case at the time of that report.
- 5.23 Housing advice (and homelessness) services are not currently well publicised.
- 5.24 Government guidance is now that housing advice services should be independent of homelessness service provision, because of a potential conflict of interest. This is not the case at Rochford as the same staff carry out both functions.

6. ASSESSMENT/ISSUES ARISING – HOMELESSNESS SERVICE

- 6.1 From customer feedback, the examination of performance trends, and comparison with good practice guidance it is clear that the homelessness service needs to be improved.
- 6.2 A range of suggested improvements are detailed in the Improvement Plan issues list at Appendix 3, but some of the key issues affecting performance are:

Staffing

- 6.3 Homelessness and housing advice duties are currently undertaken by an estimated 1.5 full time equivalent (FTE) staff who, in 1999/2000 dealt with 178

homeless applications and over 300 housing advice enquiries. Clerical staff assist by taking messages and undertaking limited general clerical duties for the homelessness and housing advice staff. From time to time, Management has called in additional resources to help meet the high demand levels experienced. Members will know that there is much work to be done to develop the Council's housing strategy and, therefore, the Housing Client & Strategy Officer now has little time to assist with homelessness duties. This is impacting on the situation and given that this is a growing area of work, there is little prospect of the situation improving.

- 6.4 The Team Manager is involved in a substantial amount of casework, which has a detrimental effect on his ability to effectively manage the full range of services under his control.
- 6.5 The limited staffing resource poses particular cover difficulties during periods of holiday, sickness, training etc. or where the staff are out of the office on visits. There are also cases where safety considerations require that two officers are present.
- 6.6 The current level of service is only being maintained through the dedication and efforts of the staff in post. However, the workload shows no signs of reducing and the review group considered that the staffing/workload issue needs to be addressed as a matter of priority.

Availability of suitable housing accommodation.

- 6.7 The shortage of suitable accommodation both for people awaiting decision and for those for whom the Council has accepted a housing duty means that the Council is unable to meet its Corporate Plan standards and statutory duty to provide accommodation suitable for the needs of all homeless people.
- 6.8 Government guidance is that bed and breakfast accommodation should only be used as a last resort for homeless people generally and cannot be considered suitable for families with children. Many bed and breakfast establishments will not accept young, single, homeless applicants or those who have mental health or substance abuse problems. The legislation requires that all accommodation secured for homeless people must be suitable.
- 6.9 Bed and Breakfast accommodation is also expensive and often in short supply. This is a 'sellers market' and it is doubtful whether hotel owners would be willing to undertake a detailed tendering process, as they have demand for accommodation from many authorities, including London Boroughs. It is not uncommon for staff to have to ring many hotels before a vacancy can be found. The review group felt that these difficulties should be brought to Members' attention and that if use of bed and breakfast accommodation continues to be necessary, then a procurement strategy is needed.
- 6.10 Unfurnished accommodation causes problems for some applicants, for example people fleeing domestic violence who may leave their former home without the ability to take belongings with them.

- 6.11 The sharing of facilities causes difficulties, particularly for those with special medical or social needs.
- 6.12 Members may wish to consider viewing the accommodation used to house homeless people.
- 6.13 The level of preference given to applicants on the Housing Register who have been homeless is important in ensuring that they receive an offer of permanent housing as quickly as practical. Adequate preference on the points scheme prevents the blocking of scarce temporary accommodation and provides an opportunity for applicants to start to settle.

Operational Issues

- 6.14 Office procedures are not currently documented in a comprehensive way. This causes some difficulty in efficient operation, and in ensuring consistent working practices.
- 6.15 The Council does not currently have software designed to manage information on homelessness. Information has recently started to be recorded using the environmental health information management software, but because it is not designed for this purpose, the ability to generate information for performance indicators and statutory returns is limited.
- 6.16 The current staffing level requires the Residential Services Unit Manager to be involved in casework and he is responsible for making the decision on homelessness applications. Reviews of those decisions are investigated by the Head of Service and, if he is minded to find against the applicant's interest, a report has to be prepared for the Member Appeals Sub-Committee
- 6.17 This is an unusual arrangement. Many local authorities delegate the reviews decision to one or more Senior Officers which helps to speed up the process and avoids the need for a detailed Committee report to be prepared and a Sub-Committee meeting. This is the procedure at Southend, Castle Point and Basildon Councils. There have been three reviews over the past two years; three more are currently pending. It is likely that the number will grow because the way that investigations are now carried out means that more negative decisions are likely, and it is anticipated that applicants will be increasingly likely to use human rights and other legislation to challenge decisions. This will potentially place considerable pressure on the Head of Service and Sub-Committee. Applicants who are not satisfied with a review decision have a right of appeal to the County Court on a point of law.
- 6.18 In the long term, the Council may have to consider completely independent review arrangements.

7. OPTIONS FOR FUTURE SERVICE PROVISION

- 7.1 The Council's first priority is to minimise homelessness. Good quality, timely advice is the most effective way that the Council can achieve this objective.
- 7.2 The review group concluded that the Council is not fully meeting its objectives and was mindful of this in considering options and putting forward recommendations.
- 7.3 Whatever option is chosen, to provide an improved service is likely to require increased resources.

HOUSING ADVICE**Service Withdrawal**

- 7.4 The provision of advice on homelessness and the prevention of homelessness is a statutory function and cannot be completely stopped.

Service externalisation

- 7.5 In some other districts, housing advice is provided by agencies such as a Citizens Advice Bureau or housing charity on behalf of the local authority.
- 7.6 This may have the advantage of avoiding any potential conflict of interest with the homelessness service, but providing a comprehensive service is likely to cost substantially more than the present expenditure.
- 7.7 In 1996, the housing charity Shelter indicated that it would cost over £70,000 p.a. to operate a housing advice service on behalf of the Council. Recent discussions with the Citizens Advice Bureau have indicated costs in the order of £40-£50,000 p.a.
- 7.8 The development of the new Community Legal Service (CLS) is likely to impact on the provision of housing advice services in the District through increased awareness of the services that are available and the introduction of prescribed quality standards for those services. The Legal Services Commission has said that there may be targeted funding where gaps in service provision are identified.
- 7.9 Another local authority may be able to provide housing advice for the Council, or may be willing to enter into partnership to share service provision. Informal discussions with Officers at Castle Point Borough Council have confirmed a willingness to explore this further. The potential advantages, disadvantages and costs of sharing a housing advice centre independent of homelessness services would need to be thoroughly evaluated before a positive recommendation could be made, but the sharing of staff and pooling of expertise, experience and costs could be helpful in providing a better service than either authority can manage on its own.

- 7.10 A housing advice centre can act as a 'gateway' to services and can be used to quickly and professionally screen customers who may be homeless or potentially homeless, so that they can be referred to the relevant team with all the necessary documents. Such a system has been operating successfully in Colchester for some years and further evaluation of this type of system is recommended.

Relocation within the Authority

- 7.11 Consideration has been given to the possibility of relocation of the function and staff to another part of the Authority. The most obvious candidate is the Revenues and Housing Management Division.
- 7.12 Transfer might enable a larger number of staff to be involved in housing advice service provision, which might help address some of the problems of answering and responding to customer calls and cover for holidays etc.
- 7.13 However, the staff within the Revenues & Housing Management Division are already occupied with a demanding agenda and the Head of Service advises that there is no capacity to take on additional work or management responsibility. Extensive staff training would be required and the move would also mean that the present deliberate separation of general fund and housing revenue account would become much less clear. The present fundamental review of housing strategy, including future management of the Council's stock, militates against transfer at the present time.
- 7.14 The review team could not identify any improvement in customer service that would be likely to result from a transfer of the housing advice function within the Authority.

Leave it where it is

- 7.15 Leaving the service where it is within Housing Health and Community Care, at least whilst other long term options are fully investigated, ensures that the existing expertise that has been developed remains available.
- 7.16 As mentioned earlier in this report, the existing level of service currently relies on the dedication and commitment of existing staff to delivering the service, and the review group felt this was an issue that should be addressed. The current structure will not support an enhanced service provision.

HOMELESSNESS SERVICE

Service Withdrawal

- 7.17 The provision of homelessness services is a 'high risk' statutory function, open to challenge through the Courts and Local Government Ombudsman. Complete service withdrawal is not, therefore, considered to be an option. Even if a comprehensive, preventative housing advice service is provided, there will always be a demand for the homelessness service.

Service Externalisation

- 7.18 Enquiries undertaken by the Review Group have identified very few examples of externalisation of homelessness services. Those that have been identified have been in authorities which have undertaken large scale voluntary transfer (LSVT) of their housing stock, usually to a newly created housing association sponsored by the authority. In these cases the majority of the Council's housing staff have moved over to the association, with a small client function remaining. Many authorities that have transferred their stock have, however, decided to retain homelessness services in-house.
- 7.19 Specialist skills and experience are required to undertake this function and, unlike functions such as lettings and estate management, it is not an activity undertaken by housing associations, other than in some LSVT transfers as described above. Development of capacity in that sector would be needed before a transfer of homelessness services could be seriously considered.
- 7.20 This is not considered to be worthy of further development at the present time but in the event that at some future date the management of the Council's housing stock is transferred, the option might be reconsidered.
- 7.21 It may be possible to contract with another local authority to provide homelessness services for the Council, but informal discussions have indicated that this is not likely to be something which other local authorities would wish to undertake at the present time.
- 7.22 No examples of externalising homelessness services to a private contractor were identified. Informal discussions with the housing charity, Shelter, have indicated that they would not wish to consider providing the service under contract because of a potential conflict of interests. Any model for outsourcing would still require a close 'fit' with the Council's corporate strategies.

Relocation within the Authority

- 7.23 Similar considerations apply as for transfer of the housing advice service and the review group did not feel this to be an option which would deliver benefits to customers.

Leave it where it is

- 7.24 As with housing advice, this service is supported by staff working in excess of contracted hours.
- 7.25 With the current organisation where the same staff provide both homelessness and advice it is estimated that to provide an adequate response for the current level of applications and enquiries being received requires a dedicated team of staff, in addition to the Team Manager, comprising a Senior Homelessness and Housing Advice Officer with the authority to decide applications, a Homelessness and Housing Advice Officer and an administrative officer. This

would enable most review investigations to be conducted by the Team Manager and would build on the existing experience. This would mean an increase in establishment of two posts over and above the existing staffing level, at an estimated total cost of approximately £46,000.

- 7.26 If, in the future, a separate comprehensive housing advice service is established, this will release some staff resources.

8. IMPROVEMENT PLAN

- 8.1 One of the tests that must be applied to any review is

“will the service improve from the customer’s perspective?”.

- 8.2 Information emerging from formal best value inspections carried out so far indicates that an improvement plan must demonstrate that it will lead to a “step change” in performance for the customer, i.e. a sustained real and significant improvement, rather than a gradual, imperceptible change. In deciding whether the improvement plan is achievable the Inspectorate will question whether it has Member backing and whether adequate resources have been approved to deliver the plan.

- 8.3 A suggested list of issues for inclusion within an improvement plan is at Appendix 3, which has been compiled from the results of the review group study, benchmarking exercises, good practice guidance from the Housing Quality Network and the feedback from the customer survey.

- 8.4 Some improvements can be made as part of the ongoing work of the unit. However, the services are already under considerable pressure and many of the improvements identified in the list are dependent on additional resources. It is suggested that the appended list of issues be converted into an action plan with target dates and outcomes once the budget decision on additional resources for the homelessness service has been decided.

- 8.5 Some of the issues such as allocations policy, use of Council housing stock and further work with neighbouring Authorities will also need to be considered within other Best Value reviews such as Housing Strategy and Housing Management.

APPENDIX 2

A. YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH THE HOMELESSNESS & HOUSING ADVICE SECTION

To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements (please tick)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	It does not apply
1. Before making my homeless application						
1.1 I knew who to contact and where	3	10	4	5	1	0
1.2 I was satisfied with the date and time for the appointment	5	13	4	1	0	0
1.3 I understood what information I needed to provide	5	14	2	2	0	0
1.4 My options were clearly explained to me	4	10	7	2	1	0
1.5 The officer was helpful	6	13	2	1	1	0
2. Once I made my application						
2.1 I was kept informed of the progress of my application	4	6	4	5	4	0
3. Regarding the decision						
3.1 I was satisfied with the length of time taken to make a decision on my application	2	8	3	6	4	0
3.2 I understood the decision issued to me	5	13	4	1	1	0
3.3 I understood that I had a right to a review of the decision	6	12	3	0	2	0
3.4 I was satisfied with the review process	2	10	7	1	1	2
4. Regarding the accommodation						
I was satisfied with the temporary accommodation provided in terms of						
4.1 Cost	2	14	1	2	3	0
4.2 Quality	2	7	2	4	7	0
4.3 Location	4	11	1	3	4	0
4.4 Size	2	8	4	2	6	0

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	It does not apply
5. Generally						
5.1 I understood the process involved in looking at my homeless application	3	12	7	1	0	0
5.2 I was satisfied with the length of time I had to wait for permanent accommodation from the housing register	2	10	4	2	3	2
5.3 My belongings were adequately protected	2	4	6	2	5	4
5.4 I was able to contact the officer during office hours	6	13	1	2	0	0
5.5 I was aware of the out of hours service	2	6	3	5	6	1
5.6 I found the out of hours service helpful	2	3	1	3	2	10
5.7 Overall I was satisfied with the way my application was handled	4	10	6	0	2	1

6. Please provide brief details of the reason/s for your homelessness

7. Is there anything that you would like to add? (attach an additional sheet if necessary)
Please include any recommendations or comments that you feel would help to improve the service we provide

HOMELESSNESS / HOUSING ADVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN ISSUES

1. Provide a more focused service

- Review Corporate objectives
- Document strategy
- Document policies & procedures / guidelines

2. Improve customer awareness of service

- Ensure adequate publicity for homelessness and advice services

3. Develop a more customer focused approach

- Evaluate customer satisfaction
- Record and analyse all complaints about the service
- Improve stakeholder consultation

4. Provide a more 'joined up' service

- Establish protocols for liaison with other agencies for identifying and dealing with homelessness
- Improve linkage of homelessness/advice services with other services to provide seamless delivery
- Further develop joint working with other agencies
- Develop more formal working arrangements with RSL's
- Develop working arrangements with neighbouring authorities
- Maximise opportunities for joint work with other council departments

5. Provide a more consistent service

- Ensure homelessness policy and practice complies with the Council's equal opportunities policies
- Introduce procedures to help ensure consistency in decision making

6. Improve quality of service

- Ensure homelessness / advice services support corporate aims and community plan including:
 - i) Equality issues
 - ii) Social inclusion
 - iii) Community safety
 - iv) Quality objectives
- Improve quality of temporary/interim accommodation
- Develop strategy/options to minimise the use of bed and breakfast accommodation.
- Improve monitoring of persons in interim and temporary accommodation
- Improve interview facilities

- Improve facilities for protection of property
- Reduce time taken to decide applications

7. Improve delivery of service

- Develop realistic, challenging local performance indicators
- Provide better comparative information on performance

8. More cost-effective services

- Develop procurement strategy for temporary/interim accommodation that ensures cost effectiveness
- Develop procurement strategy for removals which ensures cost effectiveness
- Implement suitable information management software

9. Increase availability of accommodation

- Improve range of temporary/interim accommodation available
- Improve research into availability of good quality temporary and permanent accommodation
- Encourage new markets, particularly private rented sector
- Improve knowledge and understanding of private rented sector
- Allocations policy to give appropriate preference to applicants who have been homeless

10. Develop service to meet demand

- Improve understanding of demographic changes in the planning of future service provision.
- Investigate whether there is a 'rough sleepers' problem
- Adequately prepare for legislative changes