

Rochford District Council



Homelessness Strategy

Published July 2003

Contents

	Page
1 Introduction.....	1
2 Aims.....	2
3 The Law and Guidance	3
4 Profile of the Rochford District	4
5 Developing the Strategy.....	6
6 Homelessness Review	7
7 Action Plan	15

1 Introduction

The Council recognises that homelessness and the threat of homelessness can be a very traumatic experience. Every year many hundreds of people face housing difficulties and look to the Council and other agencies for advice or accommodation.

In many cases however the reason for homelessness is very complex and homelessness is not just a housing issue. There are often other difficulties and support needs such as physical and mental health problems, substance abuse, unemployment and chaotic lifestyles. There are significant financial costs in meeting the needs of homeless people as well as longer term costs to the individual and public services in terms of health effects and underachievement of educational potential. Early intervention to prevent homelessness is the key to reducing these costs and effects. There needs to be a wide range of support and preventative services to achieve this.

A strategic approach to homelessness is therefore vital and must involve not only housing providers but also health, social and other community services including voluntary agencies.

This document sets out the Council's strategy for dealing with homelessness. It will form an integral part of the Council's housing strategy and will link closely with other strategies and plans such as the Supporting People Strategy, the Crime and Disorder Strategy, the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy and the Community Plan.

2 Aims

This homelessness strategy helps to meet the following Corporate aims

- To provide quality cost-effective services
- To work towards a safer and more caring community
- To improve the quality of life of people in the district

The strategy specifically delivers the following objectives in the Councils Best Value Performance Plan/Corporate Plan.

- To meet the Public Service Agreement target to increase the proportion of homelessness applications on which the authority makes a written decision within 33 days
- To develop alternatives to the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for the homeless

The strategy also aims to

- To provide a customer focussed approach
- To ensure there is sufficient suitable accommodation available for people who are or may become homeless
- To prevent homelessness arising or recurring wherever possible
- To encourage and develop multi-agency working
- To comply with legal requirements and government guidance

3 The Law and Guidance

The Housing Act 1996 is the main piece of legislation governing homelessness. It requires local housing authorities to provide advice on homelessness and the prevention of homelessness.

Where someone applies for housing assistance the Act details the duties the authority has, according to the applicants circumstances. Enquiries have to be made to establish whether the applicant is eligible for assistance, homeless or threatened with homelessness, in priority need and whether they became homeless intentionally. The Government has produced a Code of Guidance to assist authorities in meeting the requirements of the Act.

With the introduction of the Homelessness Act 2002 local housing authorities are required to take a more strategic approach to homelessness. A greater emphasis has been placed on prevention of homelessness as well as the provision of support and accommodation. The strategy, which has to be based on a review of homelessness in the district, must be in place by the end of July 2003. It must be kept under review and a new strategy must be published at least every five years.

The 2002 Act also extended the priority need groups to include sixteen and seventeen year olds, certain other young people, those fleeing violence and people who have become vulnerable through having an institutional background. Greater assistance has to be given to people who are not in priority need or who are intentionally homeless and there are powers to provide accommodation for these groups.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has established a homelessness directorate to monitor progress with strategy development and to provide advice and guidance. The Government has set the following specific targets and financial assistance is being made available through a bidding process to help authorities to meet these.

1. An end to the use of bed & breakfast hotels for homelessness families with children, except in emergencies, and even then for no longer than six weeks by April 2004. The Government is currently considering making this a statutory requirement together with setting minimum standards for temporary accommodation.
2. To sustain reductions in rough sleeping (this is where people are sleeping or bedded down in the open air) at two-thirds below the level in 1998 or lower.

4 Profile of the Rochford District

Key Statistics

Rochford District is situated in the south of Essex and covers an area of approximately sixty-five square miles. It is bounded by the River Crouch to the north and Southend-on-Sea to the south.

The latest census carried out in 2001 revealed the following key facts:

- The District has a population of 78489 people approximately 1.7% of which are from a mixed or ethnic minority background.
- There are approximately 32000 households, 86% of which live in owner-occupied accommodation, 8% in social rented housing (either renting from the Council, a Housing Association or a Registered Social Landlord) and the remaining 6% renting privately or living rent free.
- The average price of all types of housing is higher than that across England and Wales generally except in the case of flats where it is much lower.
- The proportion of one-person households is 25% compared to the England and Wales average of 30% and the proportion of lone parent households with dependant children is 4% compared to an average of 6%.
- There is lower unemployment than the England and Wales average but a higher proportion of retired people.
- Levels of all types of crime are much lower than the average.

Local Authority Housing

The Council has a very small housing stock and this is being further depleted by right to buy sales. As at 1st April 2003 the total stock was 1827 comprising 714 OAP and sheltered units and 1113 general needs housing units.

Housing Need

The last Housing Needs Study, carried out in 1999, found that the majority of people were adequately housed and satisfied with their housing conditions. There were nevertheless a significant number of concealed households identified many of whom were not recorded on any register of housing need. Many of these households had very low incomes and were not able to afford even the cheapest housing in the district. The study identified a need for 1700 units of affordable housing over the five year period to 2004. It was anticipated that this need would be largely met by the re-letting of existing stock but, to date, the estimated number of vacancies has proven to be over-optimistic.

The need for 380 units of low cost market housing was also identified to satisfy the home ownership aspirations of newly forming households with incomes over £20,000.

It is acknowledged that the housing needs study requires updating and options for achieving this are currently being evaluated.

Information gathered in the study and from other sources also showed the district will have an increasingly elderly population with a significant rise in the number of people aged over eighty by the year 2011. The changing age structure is predicted to have a major implication for housing and related care needs. A range of services to address the needs of the elderly and frail elderly are currently being developed with Health and the County Council. To this end the Council's Best Value Performance Plan/Corporate Plan includes an objective to approve a frail elderly housing and support strategy by October 2003.

5 Developing the Strategy

In order to develop the homelessness strategy a small working group has been set up. This group consists of Council Officers together with representatives of Social Services, the Castle Point & Rochford Primary Care Trust, the Citizens Advice Bureau and the Homelessness Action Resource Project (HARP). The group will be responsible for ensuring the strategy is implemented and that it is periodically reviewed.

The strategy has taken forward the work that has already been done following the Best Value Review of the Council's Homelessness and Housing Advice Service that was carried out in 2001. This Review resulted in additional staff resources being provided and an action plan to secure the necessary improvements to the service that had been identified. Implementation of the plan as well as other initiatives has led to additional temporary accommodation being made available, improvements to the Council owned hostel, the development of better partnership working, the provision of greater support to help vulnerable people sustain their tenancy and faster decisions on a greater proportion of homeless applications.

The action plan has been modified as necessary and incorporated into the action plan under this strategy. The special Sub-Committee which was set up to monitor progress with implementation of the Best Value Action Plan will continue to monitor progress with this strategy.

6 Homelessness Review

In order to produce a homelessness strategy each local housing authority must carry out a review of homelessness in their district and the strategy must be based on the results of this review.

The review must consider:

- (a) the levels and likely future levels of homelessness in the district
- (b) the activities which are carried out for the purposes of:
 - (i) preventing homelessness in the district
 - (ii) securing that accommodation is or will be available for people in the district who are or may become homeless
 - (iii) providing support for people in the district who are or may become homeless or who have become homeless and need support to prevent them becoming homeless again
- (c) the resources available to the authority , the social services authority for their district, other public authorities, voluntary organisations and other persons for such activities

In order to complete the review, information was requested from the various agencies involved in homelessness work. Unfortunately the response was very limited and as consequence the review has had to rely mainly on the information that the Council collects in respect of its own activities. One of the challenges will therefore be to find ways of improving the quality of data that is available on housing need.

The agencies were nevertheless given the opportunity to identify the specific problems they encountered in delivering their service. These have been included in the summary of the review findings.

In order to identify any trends or patterns in homelessness the information that has been gathered by the Council over the past three years has been collated. The information does however only relate to cases where the Council has a full housing duty i.e. those accepted as unintentionally homeless and in priority need. The information has to be treated with some caution as the reason for homelessness recorded is the main reason and in many cases there are several factors involved. The number of housing advice enquiries has also been included.

A new software package has been purchased in order to improve the keeping and analysis of data on homelessness applications. Further work needs to be done in connection with housing advice enquiries to identify trends and to establish how many cases result in a successful outcome i.e. where homelessness is prevented.

Review of Homelessness - Information

Year	2000/1	2001/2	2002/3
Homelessness applications	199	125	135
Decisions made	71	55	81
Decisions within 33 working days (%)	42	53	60
Full duty owed	44	40	56
Housing Advice enquiries	no data	488	677
No of homeless people housed from register	28	31	28

Reasons for priority need

Year	2000/1	2001/2	2002/3
1 child	14	16	16
2 children	14	10	10
3 or more children	6	7	7
Pregnant - no other dependant children	5	2	1
16/17 year old	-	-	5
Formerly in care and 18-20 years old	-	-	2
Vulnerable due to - old age	1	0	0
- physical disability	0	1	1
- mental ill health/LD	4	1	6
- young person	0	2	1
- domestic violence	0	0	1
- other	0	1	6
Homeless in emergency	0	0	0

Reason for Homelessness

Year	2000/1	2001/2	2002/3
Parents will no longer accommodate	6	8	18
Friends will no longer accommodate	2	1	9
Non-violent relationship breakdown	4	1	2
Violent breakdown of relationship involving - partner	6	4	6
- associated person	0	0	0
Racially motivated violence	0	0	0
Other violence	0	0	3
Harassment - racially motivated	0	0	0
- other	0	0	0
Mortgage arrears	2	1	2
Rent arrears - LA	1	0	0
- RSL	0	0	1
- Private	1	0	2
Termination of assured shorthold tenancy	15	17	8
Other reason for loss of rented/tied accommodation	0	3	1
Required to leave N.A.S.S. accommodation	0	0	0
In institution or care	1	0	2
Other reason (emergency, ex-H.M. Forces, etc)	6	5	2

Levels and likely future levels of homelessness in the District

The information indicates that there has been a rise in the number of homelessness applications over the last year. This reflects the national picture and is not unexpected. This is attributable in part to the fact that the Homelessness Act 2002 broadened the statutory safety net to ensure more vulnerable people get the help they need.

There is a rising trend in homelessness caused by parents refusing to continue to accommodate their children and is the main cause of homelessness. There is a similar trend in cases where people have been staying with friends. On the other hand homelessness due to the termination of an assured shorthold tenancy appears to be decreasing but nevertheless is still the third most common reason for homelessness. Again these fully mirror the national picture. The statistics clearly show that there has been a considerable increase in the number of requests for housing advice. As stated previously further analysis of this data is necessary to identify trends and outcomes and to put the numbers in context both locally and nationally.

These figures also clearly show that the number of homeless people to whom the Council owes a full accommodation duty each year exceeds the number who are being housed from the housing register. As a result of this there has been a gradual increase in the number of households being accommodated in temporary accommodation.

Homelessness amongst older people is not seen as an issue. The Council is well served with housing for this group and anyone in need of accommodation is likely to be found it through the housing register. Similarly homelessness due to mortgage arrears is very low, possibly due to the current low rates of interest. The situation may of course change if interest rates rise particularly where people have borrowed relatively large sums of money relative to their incomes.

Activities for preventing homelessness, securing accommodation and providing support

Preventing Homelessness

There are a number of agencies situated in Rochford and the neighbouring districts that carry out activities which directly or indirectly prevent homelessness. The main sources of advice and information are as follows:

- The Council provides advice and information on a range of matters including security of tenure and rights of occupation, family home rights, re-housing options, harassment and illegal eviction, domestic violence, disrepair and welfare benefits. This is mainly provided by the Homelessness and Housing Advice Team although other officers in Housing Health and Community Care, Housing Management, Benefits, Community Safety and Planning also provide advice and information related to specific issues. The Homelessness and Housing advice team has good working relationships with other divisions. There is early

intervention with the housing management section in cases where an applicant for housing indicates potential homelessness. There are referral arrangements with the Community Safety team concerning cases of domestic violence and close liaison with the Housing Benefits section to maximise discretionary housing benefit payments. A key aspect of the service provided is making home visits. Externally there are good working relations with the Police including an agreement on the sharing of information.

- Essex County Council Social Services through their various teams provide advice and assistance to families and young people, people leaving care, older persons and people with disabilities. There is joint working with the child protection team on the assessment of needs for children under the age of eighteen. There is a referral system in place with the leaving and aftercare team and a protocol is currently being developed.
- The Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) through its offices in Rayleigh, Rochford and Southend provides a wide range advice including housing, welfare benefits, relationships, employment rights and debt counselling. They will also represent clients in County Court proceedings and in respect of Local Authority's duties under allocations and homelessness.
- The Homeless Action Resource Project (HARP) provides advice and assistance on tenancy sustainment and benefits through its Day Services in Westcliff (the Southend Centre for the Homeless). They also provide meals, clothing, and outreach services. There is close liaison with both the under eighteens specialist support worker who monitors young vulnerable people and the accommodation officer for those over eighteen.
- There is also close liaison with HARP Night Services in Southend (The Nighshelter) who also provide general advice services.
- The Community Legal Service ensures that people can get information and help about their legal rights and how to enforce them by bringing together organisations offering legal and advice services into local networks.
- The Dove Project in Westcliff provides information, advice and counselling on all matters relating to domestic violence and abuse. The Police Domestic Violence Liaison officer gives support and advice to victims of domestic violence.
- There is close liaison with the Roche Unit in Rochford which provides advice and treatment in relation to drugs and alcohol. A protocol has been developed which provides for joint interviews.

- The Connexions Service provides information, advice guidance and support services to young people. They can refer clients to other agencies for in-depth guidance on drugs, health, housing and other issues.
- The “Information Station” in Rochford provides advice and support for young people looking for accommodation.
- For applicants with mental health problems there is a protocol with Coombewood Mental Health Resource Centre. Officers attend Care Programme Approach (CPA) assessments and make visits to the wards. They also work closely with support workers for people in temporary accommodation.
- There is a protocol with the specialist health visitors for homeless people in temporary accommodation and a referral procedure regarding people housed in the Council’s hostel. There is also close liaison with other health visitors and practice managers.
- Shelter, Action on Elder Abuse, Age Concern, Essex Racial Equality Council and many other agencies also provide advice

Securing accommodation

The following accommodation is provided for homeless people:

- The Council currently has forty-one units of temporary accommodation dispersed across the district. This comprises eight hostel rooms (three of which are self-contained), four self-contained bedsits and twenty-nine houses and flats. Ten of the units are owned by Springboard Housing Association and provided under a contract to the Council. A further unit is still to be secured under this contract. During 2003/4 the Council will be providing two additional bedsits by converting some disused business premises and a further unit is being secured through Swan Housing Association.
- Although the amount of temporary accommodation has gradually been increased the Council does nevertheless still have to use Bed & Breakfast Hotels.
- Short-term emergency accommodation is available for single people at HARP Night Services (Nightshelter).
- HARP (Day Services) provides access to schemes which provide accommodation with more intensive support for vulnerable young people

- Swan Housing Association provide four bed-spaces in two properties under the Parent and Child project. The project is managed by the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NACRO) and referrals can be made by the Council and Social Services. The Council is represented on the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy Group.
- NACRO provide supported housing for single homeless young people. There are six bed-spaces provided in two properties in Rochford under the Single Homeless Accommodation Project in Essex (SHAPE). NACRO accept referrals from the Council other agencies Council as well as self-referrals.
- The YMCA has a thirty room supported housing project in Southend. The Council has nomination rights to three of the rooms under a contract secured with additional funds provided by Government.
- Ling Housing Trust has a four bed-space unit in Rayleigh providing shared facilities for adult people recovering from mental health problems.
- John Grooms Housing Association can provide adapted accommodation for people in housing need who have physical disabilities.
- The Richmond Fellowship/East Thames Housing Group have a six bedroom housing scheme in Westcliff for single homeless people with mental health needs. This provides twenty-four hour, high level support and accommodation is normally provided for six months. The Council has nomination rights to one unit.
- The Council works closely with Estuary Housing Association to secure accommodation for people with mental health needs
- Three Council owned properties and three Springboard Housing Association properties are leased to New Essex Housing Association under an agreement to provide floating support services to people with special needs (see also 'provision of support' below).
- The Womens Aid Federation provides a network of refuges across Essex for women fleeing domestic violence. The Council works particularly closely with Basildon and Shoebury Refuges.
- The Council works extensively with H.O.M.E.S (Housing Organisations Mobility and Exchange Services) to help people find accommodation.
- Springboard Housing Association through their Homeowner Services help owners to move to more suitable accommodation or resolve their housing problems.

- The Probation Service employs an accommodation officer who has close liaison with the Homelessness and Housing Advice team.

Provision of Support

- There are two floating support schemes in Rochford both provided by New Essex Housing Association. The schemes provide general counselling and support to tenants with special needs and are particularly aimed at those with mental health problems, young people leaving care and people with substance misuse problems. One scheme is a management agreement under which three Council-owned properties and three Springboard Housing Association properties are leased to New Essex Housing Association. Under the agreement three existing Council tenants are also given support. The second scheme is to provide up to a hundred hours of support a week for people in both temporary and permanent accommodation.
- Floating Support/Outreach Services are provided by Basildon Womens Refuge to women suffering from domestic violence to help them remain in their homes or resettle in alternative accommodation.
- Both NACRO and the Richmond Fellowship provide a degree of support for people who move on from their supported accommodation.

Resources

Obtaining information on resources available to the agencies working in homelessness has been difficult. Again it has been necessary to rely on the resources that the Council provides.

There are three full time officers in the Homelessness and Housing Advice Team. Other officers within the Housing Health & Community Care Division and across the Council are also directly or indirectly involved with homelessness. The net budget for the Councils expenditure on homelessness and housing advice services is estimated at £ 106,800 for 2003/4. This includes grants totalling £18,800 to HARP, SHAPE and the Womens' Refuge. In addition the CAB estimates that 3.2% (£2240) of the grant it receives from the Council is spent on homelessness work.

Future Plans

There are a number of schemes proposed for the development of Council owned land in partnership with Cygnet Housing Association, under the Housing Corporation's Approved Development Programme 2003/4.

- A six unit scheme for people with learning disabilities
- A four unit scheme for young people at risk
- A five bed-space scheme for women fleeing domestic violence
- A scheme to provide two units of move-on accommodation
- Two schemes to provide thirty additional housing for general needs including key workers

Summary of Issues Arising from the Review

There are very good working relationships between the Council's Homelessness and Housing advice Team and other agencies and service providers and some good examples of successful joint working. There are nevertheless a number of areas where improvements to the service are required. Some of these improvements were identified during the Best Value Review, some from this Review and others simply from the experience of those working in the field:

- There is an urgent need to find alternatives to bed and breakfast accommodation. This is reflected in the Council's Best value Performance Plan/Corporate Plan
- There is a shortage of low cost housing in the district to either buy or rent which restricts the options people have to resolve their housing problems.
- There is a shortage of social housing lettings available generally and in particular to homeless people.
- There is a lack of suitable accommodation, particularly on an emergency basis for particular groups including young people, dangerous offenders and those with substance misuse problems.
- The review of homelessness decisions takes too long.
- There is insufficient consultation with service users.
- There is insufficient information on the true extent of rough sleeping in the district.
- The Council's interview facilities need improvement.
- The improvements that have been carried out to the first floor of the Council's hostel need extending to the rest of the building.
- The floating support scheme needs expanding.
- The time taken to decide homelessness applications needs to move to top quartile performance.

7 Action Plan

The following action plan has been drafted to address the improvements needed to homelessness services. The existing Homelessness Review Best Value Action Plan has been rationalised and combined with the further actions that have been identified during the Homelessness Review and from other sources.

The resource implications will be confirmed as the options under each action in the plan are explored and evaluated.