

Title:	Home Visiting Officer Post
To/On:	Executive: 13th November 2006
By:	Executive Director
Status:	Report
Portfolio:	Deputy Leader

The Corporate Strategic Factor Checklist has been applied and validated by Corporate Management Team. There are no implications other than those covered in the report.

1. SUBJECT MATTER AND PURPOSE

1.1. The purpose of this report is to inform members that the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) have offered Derwentside District Council £15,000 funding for this financial year, if the Council are able to provide match funding in order to recruit a Home Visiting Officer to be located within the Council's Housing Team; and to recommend that members approve this initiative.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. In January 2005, as part of its national homelessness strategy 'Sustainable Communities: settled homes; changing lives', the Government announced a target to halve the number of households living in temporary accommodation by March 2010 from a baseline set in December 2004. Derwentside District Council must ensure that by and beyond March 2010, no more than 25 households are placed in temporary accommodation at any one time.

2.2. The Council has been required to produce an action plan outlining how the use of temporary accommodation will be reduced. Progress made against this plan is monitored via regional Government Offices and the DCLG. Performance and progress of all local authorities in achieving their reduction is published nationally.

2.3. Derwentside District Council's action plan highlights that the main way in which the use of temporary accommodation will be reduced is through the

implementation of an efficient and effective preventative and proactive housing options service, which involves the careful use of appropriate, intensively managed temporary accommodation that is of a high quality. This includes the use of a home visits to prevent homelessness; provide households with advice and assistance on housing options; and to prevent fraudulent homelessness applications.

- 2.4. A meeting was held on the 31st July 2006, with a Specialist Adviser from the DCLG Homelessness Directorate in relation to the 2010 temporary accommodation target. The purpose of this visit was for the DCLG to act as 'critical friend' assessing the areas in which the Council could improve performance or increase resources to assist in meeting this target.
- 2.5. The session broadly discussed the main causes of homelessness within Derwentside, which are domestic violence, evictions by family or friends and the termination of Assured Shorthold Tenancies, and the initiatives which could be implemented under a proactive and preventative homelessness service in order to tackle these.
- 2.6. Officers felt that the session was extremely useful and informative, and were able to receive feedback on a number of service improvement documents and strategies.
- 2.7. Following the meeting, Officers received an offer from the DCLG of £15,000 of funding for this financial year, in recognition of the motivation and commitment shown by Officers within the Homelessness Team to the Government agenda of positively preventing homelessness, on the basis that the Council would provide match funding specifically for the purpose of appointing a Home Visiting Officer.
- 2.8. Subsequently, a detailed feedback letter (appendix A) was received, summarising the initiatives discussed, which when implemented, could reduce the use of temporary accommodation through the prevention of homelessness. Highlighted in the letter in relation to a number of the initiatives is the use of a Home Visiting Officer and the impact this role can have on preventing homelessness caused by evictions by family or friends and the termination of Assured Shorthold Tenancies.
- 2.9. The letter from DCLG echoes concerns raised by Housing Quality Network Service (HQNS), in their external validation of the Strategic Housing Service Review, regarding the lack of resources available to implement and sustain a proactive and preventative homelessness service.
- 2.10. The recently published Homelessness Code of Guidance (July, 2006) advises that Local Authorities should consider the use of home visits in helping people find solutions, resolve difficulties and facilitate planned

moves to alternative accommodation in cases of the termination of Assured Shorthold Tenancies; parent, family or friend evictions; and non-violent relationship breakdown.

2.11. Colleagues in neighbouring authorities across the County are already using this approach, and Officers have been informed that authorities such as Easington District Council have experienced significant results in the reduction of homelessness. This has been replicated outside of the County, for example Wakefield Metropolitan District Council has seen a 95% reduction in homelessness amongst young people due to the use of home visits.

2.12. At present when a person presents as homeless to the Council a homelessness interview is undertaken; this triggers a statutory homelessness investigation. In relevant cases the Home Visiting Officer would intervene before this trigger occurs and a home visit would be undertaken to establish the validity of the claim and provide advice and assistance on the person's housing options in order to prevent homelessness. This is in line with the 'invest to save' principle outlined within the Housing Options Business Case and Implementation Plan. The DCLG provides the analogy that, after receiving a report of a broken sink, it is routine practice that the local authority's housing maintenance department will inspect the repair to validate the report, before it authorises for it to be carried out. However, it is not routine practice for a home visit to take place to validate or attempt to prevent a homeless presentation, which can cost the authority on average between £2,500 and £6,000 per case. The effectiveness of the post will be closely monitored but based on the experience of other authorities it is anticipated that this initiative will prove to be extremely cost effective to the Council.

3. MATERIAL CONSIDERATIONS

3.1. A job description and person specification have been drafted and personnel have evaluated the post at grade 6 at a cost of £31,489.44 (£27,361.44 in relation to salary with on-costs and £4,100 in relation to mileage, based upon 40 miles per day) per annum. With the availability of £15,000 from DCLG, there would be a requirement of £16,500 of funding from the Council's general fund in this financial year.

3.2. DCLG have indicated that this funding may be available in future years but are not able to guarantee on-going funding at this stage.

4. RECOMMENDATION

4.1. That members approve the appointment of a Home Visiting Officer on a one year fixed term basis with a view to possible extension and that £16,500 of funding is released from the Council's general fund for this purpose.