

Chester le Street District Council Prevention Fund

Introduction

The extension of duties under the Homelessness Act 2002, increased the number of Homelessness Presentations to Local Authorities and as a result Local Authorities are now expected to concentrate more on preventative measures and housing options. The Governments strategy for tackling homelessness is outlined in *Sustainable Communities: Homes for all*. The strategy aims to expand housing opportunities and advising, that wherever possible, authorities must consider all prevention options available to the applicant and ensure early intervention to prevent homelessness.

Why does Chester le Street need a Homelessness Prevention Fund?

Chester le Street District Council currently operate a housing options service and currently have one Prevention Officer Post. The work of the Prevention Officer involves early intervention and assessing all initial presentations in an attempt to prevent homelessness from occurring. During 2006/2007 95 cases were prevented though effective casework intervention however a total number of 737 people presented to the Housing Options Team and 322 homelessness applications were still submitted. By introducing a homelessness prevention fund it would enable the authority to increase the options for preventing homelessness.

In other areas Homeless Prevention Funds have also been proven as a successful tool for reducing homelessness and reducing the need to place people in temporary accommodation. By operating a prevention fund and widening the prevention measures available, it is envisaged that the costs associated with Temporary Accommodation will reduce.

'Value for Money' has been a key consideration in the development of this Scheme and it is envisaged that by implementing a Prevention Fund within Chester le Street the number of prevention cases will increase and reduce the numbers submitting homeless applications.

The Benefits:

- Reduction in the number of Homeless Applications
- Increasing the prevention options to applicants
- Reduction in the number of households in bed and Breakfast
- Reduction in Bed and Breakfast costs
- Spending to Save and providing real and costs effective benefits

Criteria for Use

The following criteria should be followed when making a decision:

- Applicants must be homeless or threatened with homelessness. An assessment of the individual's needs must be assessed through the Housing Options Team Initial Assessment procedure and evidence must be supplied before making a decision.
- A maximum of one payment to any one household, to a maximum of £300
- Applications will be considered on a 'first come, first served' basis
- Invoices will be raised for the total amount and applicants must enter into a repayment agreement
- The prevention fund must be likely to prevent the homelessness for at least six months.

Prevention Options that may be considered

The Prevention fund would only be administered if all other preventative measures had been considered and payments would be authorised by front line staff to enable them to work pro-actively in reducing the number of homelessness presentations and acceptances. The Officers should consider any or a combination of the following options for the use of Prevention fund:

- Rent Arrears and Court Payments*
- Former Tenant rent arrears payments *
- Mortgage or Rent Arrears**
- Goodwill payments (Max £150 for households with Children where prevention of homelessness can occur)
- Rent top ups and tenancy sustainability payments
- Assistance with delays in Housing Benefit
- Purchase of equipment for Low Level support for cases of Domestic Violence such as window locks, alarms, etc
- Agency fee Payments
- Financial Incentives to delay the eviction of Private Tenants***
- Court Application Costs
- Damage Payments
- Travel Costs
- Any other circumstances will be considered where prevention of homelessness can occur

* Payment must enable the applicant to remain in their home for a period of at least 6 months, must be pending an offer of accommodation or payment of arrears must result in an offer of accommodation being made. Arrears should not be paid if it does not result in the Homelessness situation being prevented.

** Mortgage and Rent arrears should only be paid if it results in no application being made to court

*** Payments to RSL and Private landlords only to be made where there is an undertaking not to evict the tenant and allow the tenant to return to the property and remain there for at least 6 months. Any landlord who behaves unreasonably by not allowing the tenant to return will not receive any further payments.

Many local authorities have already established homelessness Prevention Funds. Many others are in the process of establishing this fund. Sometimes labelled "Spend to Save", prevention funds are being used successfully by

Local Authorities across England to reduce the number of homeless applications and acceptances in their district. These funds enable Councils to spend relatively small amounts of money to prevent homelessness thereby saving large amounts of money that would otherwise be wasted on Bed and Breakfast accommodation.

The Homelessness Prevention fund is held within the Housing Options Budget and the Homelessness Prevention Officers will have control over the allocation of payments. To limit the cost to the authority, applicants who are accepted for a bond will be expected to repay the monies received. A invoice will be raised and the applicants will enter into an affordable repayment scheme.

Equalities and Diversity

The Introduction of the Homelessness Prevention Fund will broaden the housing options for all applicants including those minority groups and those with support needs.

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