

6 July 2012



Homelessness Strategy Update

Report of Ian Thompson, Corporate Director, Regeneration and Economic Development

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To provide members of the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee with an update on progress made by the Housing Solutions Service in the delivery of County Durham Homelessness Strategy 2008 -13.

Background

- 2 The Homelessness Act 2002 placed a duty on every local authority to produce a Homelessness Strategy. The strategy must include a review of current services and performance over the preceding five years against the action plan put in place following the first strategy in 2003. The strategy must also predict future levels of need and demand based on research findings and consultation with partners and service users.
- 3 Prior to Local Government Reorganisation each of the seven District Councils within County Durham worked within their strategy action plan to meet the housing needs of customers over the previous five years. In addition, the seven districts, the County Council and other partners worked together through the County Durham Homelessness Action Partnership to further improve and develop services.
- 4 In 2008 and in preparation for the commencement of a unified authority the County Durham Homelessness Action Partnership agreed to develop a Homelessness Strategy. This document represented the strategic vision for services across the new unitary authority from April 2009 to meet housing needs across a diverse geographical and demographic area. As a consequence of this work, Durham County Council had in place a single Homelessness Strategy from vesting day, 1 April 2009.

Legal context

- 5 Local housing authorities have a statutory duty to provide assistance to all households who are homeless or threatened with homelessness, regardless of whether there is any duty to accommodate.
- 6 Over recent years central government has emphasised the need for local authorities to take a more proactive approach to the prevention of homelessness to all in housing need and to work in partnership across sectors to meet housing, support and advice needs.

- 7 Part VII of the Housing Act 1996 – provides the statutory under-pinning for action to tackle homelessness. This legislation places a general duty on housing authorities to ensure that advice and information about homelessness, and its prevention, is available free of charge to everyone in their area. The legislation also requires authorities to assist individuals and families who are homeless or threatened with homelessness to apply for help.

The County Durham Homelessness Strategy has 3 main strategic objectives:

- To prevent homelessness by delivering prevention and housing options focused service across County Durham that delivers advice and assistance to all in housing need.
- To ensure that sufficient, appropriate and affordable accommodation is available for people who are homeless or at risk.
- To support people who are homeless or who are at risk of repeat homelessness.

Identified Priorities

- 8 The review of existing homelessness strategies prior to LGR identified a range of needs across the County. The challenge was to respond to emerging trends and threats to meet the needs of customers who are homeless or threatened with the loss of their home, whilst bringing together seven services from the current district councils. In doing so, we needed to ensure that our focus was to align service provision to replicate good practice where it existed, and resource service development within budgetary constraints to meet identified need.
- 9 In response to these challenges it was recommended that the following core themes drove the development of a co-ordinated, prevention focused Housing Solutions Service, working across statutory and voluntary sector partners:
- **Bringing together services to respond to housing, advice and support needs:** to enable housing options to be effective and consistent in responding to the needs of customers, services must have comprehensive procedures aligned to good practice in delivering advice services to those in need. This will include issues of client care, supervision of casework, customer satisfaction, training and resources of services across the County. There was also a need to consider how services will interact with users across a wide geographic area to ensure access to services for all. A review of service delivery therefore considered the needs of a wide and diverse demographic and geographic county with areas of high deprivation and customers with multiple needs.
 - **Partnership working:** services must respond to meet the housing needs of customers. However, we must also ensure we assess and address the underlying causes of homelessness and this can only be done by working in partnership across all sectors.

- **Working with Registered Social Landlords:** Registered Social Landlords are major partners in delivering on new affordable homes and also by helping people at risk of homelessness to maintain their tenancies. Many work actively across the County to prevent homelessness and deliver affordable housing to those in need. We needed to build and strengthen these links to improve customer outcomes and tenancy sustainability.
- **Smarter working:** investment has been required in service development to respond to housing need. We needed to develop smarter working practises across all sectors to respond to vulnerable customers with multiple needs. Early identification of risks or triggers, which if left unchecked may result in homelessness, resulting in early intervention to respond to accommodation, advice and support needs, could avoid crisis presentation to front line services. By developing smarter working practices, we aimed to reduce crisis presentations by offering early intervention and solutions.

By linking and expanding housing options to include advice on training and employment, there is an increased opportunity to break the cycle of 'no home, no job'. We therefore needed to develop links with training providers, employment agencies and social enterprise organisations to offer solutions to customers beyond that of securing accommodation.

- **Prevention tools:** a range of prevention tools were already available in some parts of County Durham. For example, family mediation, Bond Guarantee Schemes, Prevention Funds, Peer Education, Sanctuary Schemes, Floating Support and other tenancy support services. Prevention tools enable the Housing Solutions Team to deliver the housing solutions customers need to prevent homelessness. Without initiatives to prevent homelessness, housing options are a blunt tool unable to empower customers to exercise choice in resolving housing need. There was therefore an urgent need to ensure prevention tools were accessible to all in housing need across the new authority.
- **Planning for future need:** with increasing pressures placed on household budgets and utilities and fuel bills, there is a risk of increased repossessions and possessions across the housing sector. Advice and early intervention services need to ensure customers have access to advice and information to make informed choices about their housing options and to prevent the loss of their home.

We therefore needed to develop partnerships with lenders to ensure customers are made aware of the services available offering advice on issues of debt, consumer rights, welfare benefits, training and employment opportunities. This included a greater role for the Housing Solutions Service to ensure an effective marketing and communications strategy was developed enabling communities to be fully aware of the prevention services and advice available.

Further links were needed to be developed with debt advice services to promote financial inclusion and partnership working, in addition to consider developing cheaper forms of credit, such as credit unions.

- **Increasing supply of accommodation options:** in addition to encouraging the private rented sector to engage with vulnerable groups, we also needed to work with partners to enable the development of direct access supported housing to meet the needs of homeless-people, and support with strong links to employment and training options.

Current position

- 10 The presentation to Members on the 6 July 2012 will provide an overview of progress made by the Housing Solutions Service in the delivery of the above key priorities for the County.

Recommendation

- 11 That the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the contents of the above report and presentation.

Background Paper(s)

Presentation to Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 6 July 2012.

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Appendix 1: Implications

Finance – None

Staffing – None

Risk – None

Equality and Diversity –. Impact assessment completed.

Accommodation -. None

Crime and Disorder – None

Human Rights – None

Consultation – None

Procurement – None

Disability Discrimination Act –None

Legal Implications – None