

Chair's Foreword

This short piece of work was very interesting. Each of the members of the group took the lead on a different aspect of the review and we found that this worked well.

We were helped considerably by the Housing Strategy and Homelessness department of the Council and we hope that the recommendations that we have made, will be implemented.

I would like to thank each of the Social Overview & Scrutiny Members for the time they gave. The Members who went to Harrow found its procedures interesting and very useful for the review, even though we felt not everything adopted in London would be appropriate for Redditch.

I would also like to thank the representatives from Shelter, Redditch CAB and Relate who gave up their time to help us with our review; we were grateful for their opinions on our existing procedures and for the ideas they gave us.

I hope that the Council will use the information contained within this report to accept the recommendations we have made.

Councillor Betty Passingham
Chair of the Social Overview & Scrutiny Committee
(May 2004 – May 2006)



Social O&S Committee

Duration of Review January 2006 – May 2006

Committee Membership Councillor Betty Passingham (Chair, May 2004 – May 2006; Vice-Chair, May 2006 onwards)
Councillor Mark Shurmer (Chair, May 2006 onwards)
Councillor Debbie Taylor (Vice-Chair, May 2005 – May 2006)
Councillor Juliet Brunner
Councillor David Cartwright
Councillor Jack Field
Councillor Diane Thomas

N.B. Councillors Kieth Boyd-Carpenter and Pattie Hill joined the Social Overview & Scrutiny Committee after the conclusion of this review.

**Overview & Scrutiny
Support Officer** Elizabeth Rattlidge



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Executive Summary

These recommendations will not cost the Council any money!

They can be achieved by using the Council's existing resources in a different way.

We want to challenge the traditional way of working. Justifying an action by saying "it is the way we have always done it" is not satisfactory. Why do we have all our homelessness resources at the end of the process, like a cursory roadblock just before a cliff? Why not start the process earlier and build in a series of prevention programmes and support networks to filter out potential homelessness before it actually occurs?

Our recommendations suggest a radical shake up of the Council's existing Housing Strategy and Homelessness Service; we believe that this is a necessary step to not only reduce the occurrence of homelessness in the Borough but to also reduce the number of people who are "playing the system".



Recommendations

We RECOMMEND that

- 1) there be a significant change in the focus of the Council's homelessness service towards prevention as detailed in the report and, where appropriate, partnerships with outside agencies be sought and service level agreements negotiated;
- 2) existing finances be refocused towards homelessness prevention to engage private landlords, to instigate schemes such as a "Finder's Fee" and to build up tailored prevention programmes;
- 3) a fast-track link between the Council's housing benefits and homelessness services be implemented;
- 4) the management of Discretionary Housing Benefits be transferred to Housing Strategy and Homelessness; and
- 5) the Council receive a peer assessment from a Regional Champion for Homelessness at the earliest opportunity.



Background

The National Picture

When you think of homelessness, you tend to only think of those who are sleeping rough on the streets; this is a common misconception, more often than not, homelessness is hidden. Homelessness can be hidden in a number of ways; we do not see the people who are staying with friends (“sofa-surfing”), staying in hostels or in insecure or temporary accommodation nor those who are living in cramped or overcrowded conditions.

The Government outlines its vision for homelessness in the opening lines of the ODPM strategy for tackling homelessness, Sustainable Communities: Settled Homes; Changing Lives,

“Homelessness has no place in a sustainable community. Like poverty and disadvantage, our aim should be to eradicate it.”

In 2003, homelessness figures across the country started to decline. By 2005, homelessness acceptances reached their lowest level for 20 years and are showing signs of a continued decline in 2006. It is no coincidence that in 2002, the Homelessness Act required each local authority to publish and implement a homelessness strategy detailing its provision for homelessness prevention by mid 2003.

The Government has recently set a challenging new target: to halve the number of households living in temporary accommodation by 2010. In order to help achieve this target, Local Authorities will have to:

- increase homelessness prevention schemes;
- provide support to vulnerable people;
- tackle the wider causes and symptoms of homelessness;
- help more people to move away from rough sleeping; and
- provide more settled homes.



Background

We believe that each of these objectives could and should be addressed by the Council's homelessness prevention service.

Reporting Homelessness in Redditch

Each local authority has a statutory duty to collect data on homelessness in its area. Through this research the main reasons for homelessness in the Redditch Borough have been found. These reasons, the main "indices of homelessness" are as follows:

- 1) parents no longer willing to accommodate;
- 2) termination of assured shorthold tenancies; and
- 3) non-violent relationship breakdown.

The Council has a responsibility to report every quarter against each of the main indices of homelessness. By collating figures such as these, the Council has been able to obtain a £50,000 grant from the DCLG, Department for Communities and Local Government (formerly the ODPM) which has been guaranteed until 2008. This grant must be used for homelessness prevention; the Council has used this money to fund the sole Homelessness Prevention Officer post, to support a County-wide mediation service for homelessness, the Centrepoint fund and Redditch Night-Stop.

Homelessness prevention is not a statutory duty for the Council, however all recent homelessness guidance has focussed on prevention rather than reaction. In 2005, the Government introduced a national Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) to specifically measure the effectiveness of homelessness prevention:

BVPI 213 this indicator measures the number of homeless households who have approached the housing advice / homelessness prevention service and had their situation resolved.



Background

In addition to this, there are a number of other BVPI's that can be greatly influenced by pro-active homelessness prevention, such as...

BVPI 183a the average length of time spent in B&B accommodation;

BVPI 183b the average length of time spent in hostel accommodation;

BVPI 202 the number of people sleeping rough on a single night;

BVPI 203 the percentage change in the average number of families in temporary accommodation; and

BVPI 214 the proportion of statutorily homeless households that were previously accepted as statutorily homeless by same authority within the last 2 years.

What is Homelessness Prevention?

The ODPM advice notice, Achieving Positive Outcomes on Homelessness, defines homelessness prevention as:

“activities that enable a household to remain in their current home, where appropriate, or that provide options to enable a planned and timely move and help to sustain independent living”.

When broken down, homelessness prevention operates in three stages as detailed below.

Early Intervention: identifying those at risk and providing advice and support, building up a number of prevention schemes including a portfolio of private sector landlord and building up partnerships and working relationships with other Council services and external agencies;



Background

Pre-Crisis Intervention: negotiating with landlords, delaying loss of home, sign-posting to mediation services, working with clients to achieve planned exits from unsustainable accommodation; and

Preventing Repeat Homelessness: education and support, particularly in the cases where the underlying problems cannot be resolved by re-housing.

How the review was undertaken

With the level of Council-owned accommodation available to homeless applicants on the decline and the increasing costs incurred by temporary accommodation, we were keen to find what could be done to redress the balance. In order to find out the answer, we decided to conduct an Overview & Scrutiny investigation into preventing homelessness.

We embarked on this Scrutiny in January 2006; by that time, the Council's sole Homelessness Prevention Officer had been in post for five months and had already started to make a significant impact on the number of homelessness cases that were realised.

Through the course of this investigation, we met with local voluntary sector organisations who had expertise in the homelessness field; we attended a regional Homelessness Stakeholder event which set to form an action plan for addressing homelessness across the South Housing Market area; and we visited the London Borough of Harrow, which has been awarded Beacon Council status for tackling homelessness.

We strongly believe that the implementation of each of our recommendations is essential for the progression of homelessness prevention in Redditch.



Background

Risks The risks that could be incurred by not accepting our recommendations all relate to the increased levels of homelessness in the Borough such as a strain on the Council's housing stock and temporary accommodation; increased costs to house those eligible; increased demands on Officer and Member time with more applicants going through the Housing Appeals process; and finally, the risk of causing high levels of stress for those whose homelessness could have otherwise have been prevented.

The following chapter discusses our findings and details the reasoning behind each of our recommendations.



Discussion

Suggestions from External Agencies Through our interviews with voluntary service providers, a number of suggestions for best practice within Local Authorities' Homelessness Prevention Services were raised as detailed below:

- implementing a fast-track liaison between Homelessness sections and those who process Housing Benefits;
- introducing rent deposit schemes to encourage Private Sector lettings;
- liaising with Private Sector Landlords;
- providing early advice and referrals to independent advisors;
- undertaking full homelessness interviews as soon as possible;
- advising young people about their Housing options;
- developing cross-cutting policies and strategies to prevent homelessness that integrate with the Council's other strategies such as Community Safety and Supporting People;
- undertaking in depth monitoring to provide more information which demonstrates the Council's position when negotiating and applying for Government funding; and
- utilising independent mediation as long as it is voluntarily accessed by both sides.
(Please note, it was stipulated by Shelter that mediation should be entirely voluntary rather than the compulsory model that has been adopted by some Councils such as the London Borough of Harrow.)



Discussion

We are pleased that the majority of these suggestions are already common practice within the Council. However, we feel that there is still more that can be done to both strengthen the processes outlined overleaf and to adopt new methods.

The Council should not become complacent; it should be willing to accept change, even if that change is deemed radical.

Housing Benefit Payments

The link between Housing Benefits and Homelessness is a very important one. A change to a person's situation may mean that Benefit payments are withheld whilst further information is obtained; this withholding of monies could mean that the person becomes in arrears with their rent which could potentially escalate to a situation where they become threatened with eviction. With strengthened links and increased communication between benefits and homelessness, Officers would be able to fast-track cases where homelessness was imminent so that the situation could be resolved before any evictions occurred.

The London Borough of Harrow has found that the most effective way to provide a fast-track service between Housing Benefits and Homelessness is to have a Housing Benefits Officer actually situated within the Housing Needs (Homelessness) Team. Harrow uses this link with housing benefits as an incentive to entice Private Sector Landlords; it can literally guarantee that any delayed payment will be processed and paid within 28 days. Harrow is so confident of this system that it even goes so far as to offer compensation to landlords if payments take longer than 28 days.

We are pleased that our own Council's Housing Strategy and Homelessness Services is in the processes of building a fast-track link with Housing Benefits, we would like to build on this initiative. We would like to see a strong fast-track service between Housing Benefits and Homelessness and



Discussion

would like the possibility of a Housing Benefits Officer being situated within Housing Strategy and Homelessness Services to be investigated so that payments can be processed promptly to aid the prevention of homelessness.

Discretionary Housing Payments

We are concerned about the comparatively low level of funding the Council receives from the Government for its Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP), a fund that is given to each Local Authority so that it can make payments in cases where it considers additional help with housing costs is needed. This funding is allocated on a basis of need; it is definitely one of those situations where we must “use it or lose it”. If we do not use the whole contribution each annum, the following year the Council will receive a decreased grant; conversely, the more we can use, the more we will get the following year.

We feel that the Council should raise awareness of DHP to increase the number of people applying for the fund which would, in turn, lead to an increase in the overall contribution received by the Council.

We suggest that this money be used as a tool for preventing homelessness, for example, to assist in severe cases to prevent evictions.

We have been informed that there is no requirement for where this funding should be administered other than as has been dictated by tradition. We were strongly urged by both the Redditch CAB and by the London Borough of Harrow that we should ensure that DHP funding was being used to its full advantage for homelessness prevention by shifting the administration of the funds to our homelessness service. We have taken heed of this suggestion as we are keen to make the funds more accessible to those who are arguably in the greatest need, that is, those most at risk of losing their home.



Discussion

Partnership Working

We would like to encourage the Council to seek partnerships with a range of voluntary service providers such as the CAB, Shelter, Relate, Centrepoin, Nightstop and CRISIS who each have the necessary experience and expertise in their chosen fields and knowledge of the local area. We believe that such partnerships would enhance and complement the homelessness prevention service offered by the Council. Rather than the Council donating a sum of money to these organisations, we feel that the Council should make formal contracts with full service level agreements so that both sides can have the security of knowing what to expect from the arrangement and can work to achieve measured outcomes.

In addition to partnerships with voluntary organisations, we strongly feel that the Council should develop partnerships with other responsible organisations such as local Housing Associations, Social Services and the local PCT to effectively support those at risk of homelessness.

And lastly, we want to stress how important it is, in a situation where there are finite accommodation resources, for the Council to recognise the potential of utilising the Private Rental Sector and to build up robust relationships with the Private Sector Landlords accordingly.

London Borough of Harrow

As part of our information gathering exercise for this review, a number of Members visited the London Borough of Harrow, a Beacon Council for tackling homelessness and one of the DCLG appointed Regional Champions for Homelessness.

We found that Harrow's approach was very radical and was to a certain extent, ruthless. We learnt a lot from our visit and although we feel that some of the practices adopted in Harrow are perhaps too extreme for the level of homelessness encountered in Redditch, we feel that we have gained a



Discussion

valuable insight into what can be achieved and how the traditional methods and boundaries for addressing homelessness can and should be challenged.

In addressing its homelessness problem, Harrow reserves the word "homeless" for the most serious and immediate of cases, for the rest it uses the term "in housing need". This minor change is part of a bigger scheme to change the culture of homelessness and to challenge the traditional mindset, not only of the applicants but also within the Council. Harrow does not automatically accept a duty to house every homelessness case, instead it accepts that the person is in housing need and then works with them to achieve a planned exit from their accommodation. We would particularly like to highlight the fact that Harrow does not accept a duty to house any person aged 16-18, instead it works with them towards a planned exit. This is because it feels that once inside the system, the person would not be inclined to leave and so the Council becomes obliged to house that person for the rest of their life.

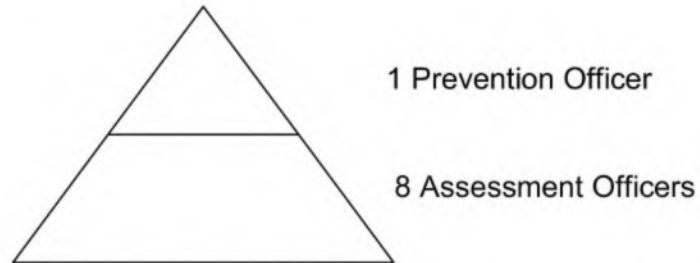
In progressive authorities such as Harrow, the number of people working towards preventing homelessness greatly outweighs the number of homelessness assessment officers. In a survey undertaken in 2005 by the former ODPM Homelessness and Housing Support Directorate, some 86% of local authorities had more officers working on homelessness prevention than on processing homelessness applications.

We applaud this approach and firmly believe that it should be adopted in Redditch.

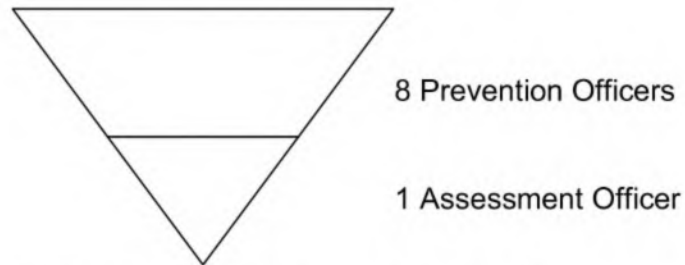
The following diagram (overleaf) describes the current staffing structure within Redditch Borough Council's Homelessness Service. You will note that the Officer working at the frontline (prevention) is clearly outweighed by the number of Officers who process the homelessness cases.



Discussion



We suggest that the most effective way for Redditch to address homelessness would be to literally turn this traditional model on its head. That is, to invert the staffing structure triangle as shown below to bring more of the resources towards the front-line where they are most needed.



The thinking behind this model is that if the existing resources are focussed on preventing homelessness, the amount of people ultimately needing homelessness assessment will be vastly reduced. In support of this model, our own homelessness figures show that since the Homelessness Prevention Officer post was introduced in 2005, there has been a marked decrease in the number of applicants accepted as homeless by the Council.



Discussion

We believe that, in the long term, a preventative approach to homelessness would prove far better for the people of Redditch than one that is reactionary. We want more Officers doing solely preventative work to ensure that a full “basket of options” is in place to encourage Private Sector Landlords to engage in the process. As the number of Council-owned properties is decreasing, we see Private Sector Landlords as the key to successfully housing those in danger of homelessness. A wide range of schemes have proven to be effective in engaging Private Sector Landlords; they just need sufficient Officer time and support.

Harrow have adopted a very successful “Spend to Save” programme whereby a “Finder’s Fee” is paid up front to Private Sector Landlords to accept a tenancy rather than the traditional deposit (a barrier which prevents many people in housing need from accessing privately rented accommodation). Harrow does not expect to recover this payment as it acknowledges that the costs incurred through monitoring would be counter productive, instead the Finder’s Fee is seen as a good will gesture to build up a portfolio of Private Sector Landlords who would be willing to accept tenants referred from the Council in the future. Harrow has found that in the long-term, this scheme had saved a large amount of money that would have been spent on its temporary accommodation and Bed & Breakfast costs.

Integral to the Harrow approach is that the onus for the progression of a case is completely on the applicant; cases are not progressed unless the applicant has provided the relevant information or been to the relevant interviews. In addition, Harrow has implemented a series of filters to their service which all contribute to sifting out the non-priority cases and those applicants who are simply playing the system.

We admire this approach, particularly as it encourages and allows people to take responsibility for, and ownership of their own problems.



Discussion

We would like a similar set of filters to be implemented into the Redditch system as detailed below.

The Initial Filter We suggest that a short ten minute interview should be held with each and every homelessness applicant at the very start of the process; this interview should be taken by an experienced Homelessness Officer who could make an initial assessment as to the level of need and to advise the applicant of the options available to them.

The Compulsory Element Following our visit to Harrow, we accept that there needs to be a compulsory element to the homelessness process in order to filter out false homelessness claims. The compulsory element to the Harrow model was mediation, with each of its cases being referred to Relate at the start of the process. Conscious of the concerns raised by Shelter (page 13), we feel that mediation should not be the part of the process that is made compulsory; in addition, we feel that compulsory mediation would put an unreasonable strain on the County-wide mediation service currently supported by the Council. We suggest that rather than using mediation as the compulsory element, the Council should adopt compulsory home visits for parental exclusion cases with both the applicant and the excluder in attendance. The Officer could then make an assessment on housing need based on the family atmosphere. We suggest that a case should not be furthered until such a visit has taken place.

We feel that by adopting these methods, the message will permeate across Redditch that the Council is taking a strong stance against those who are trying to play the system; it is our hope that this will see a significant decrease in the number of false homelessness applications.

Peer Assessment We understand that these proposals mean that there will have to be a radical shake up of the Council's existing homelessness process and so we suggest to aid in this transition and to provide some insight and expertise, that the Regional Champion for Homelessness undertake a peer review of Redditch Borough Council's homelessness service at the earliest opportunity.



Recommendations

We RECOMMEND that

- 1) there be a significant change in the focus of the Council's homelessness service towards prevention as detailed in the report and, where appropriate, partnerships with outside agencies be sought and service level agreements negotiated;
- 2) existing finances be refocused towards homelessness prevention to engage private landlords, to instigate schemes such as a "Finder's Fee" and to build up tailored prevention programmes;
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- 4) the management of Discretionary Housing Benefits be transferred to Housing Strategy & Homelessness; and
- 5) the Council receive a peer assessment from a Regional Champion for Homelessness at the earliest opportunity.



Expert Witnesses

- Redditch Borough Council** Matthew Bough, Housing Policy Manager
Brenda Harbon, Homelessness Team Leader
Sharon Samuel, Homelessness Prevention Officer
- London Borough of Harrow** Laurence Coaker, Housing Needs Manager
Mark Sinclair, Acting Housing Assessment Manager
- Redditch CAB** Moira Morris, Manager
Tony Ventura, Deputy Manager
- Relate** Annette Summers, Deputy Chief Executive
Nancy Griffiths
- Shelter** Julian Garside, Shelter Housing Aid Centre



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Glossary

BVPI	Best Value Performance Indicator
CAB	Citizens Advice Bureau
DCLG	Department for Communities and Local Government (formerly ODPM)
DHP	Discretionary Housing Payments
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
ODPM	Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
O&S	Overview & Scrutiny



Overview & Scrutiny

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