

## SCRUTINY OF HOMELESSNESS

Report By: Head of Strategic Housing

### Wards Affected

County-wide

### Purpose

1. To provide an update on progress with the implementation of the Recommendations resulting from the Scrutiny Committee Homelessness Consultation Event held on 17th October 2005. To review progress made in respect of homelessness prevention in Herefordshire and to consider any further related issues for scrutiny.

### Financial Implications

2. Prevention-focussed Homelessness Services continue to contribute to a reduction in the use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation with the result that budgetary risks have been greatly reduced.

### Background

3. The number of households presenting and being accepted as homeless in Herefordshire rose steadily since 2002 reaching a high in 2004/05 of 719 applications and 510 acceptances.
4. In May 2005, Cabinet resolved that Homelessness and Housing Advice services should return in-house following Herefordshire Housing Limited's decision to withdraw from the agency agreement with affect from April 1st 2006.
5. In July 2005, Cabinet agreed a number of 'spend to save' initiatives and an improvement plan aimed at prevention of homelessness and eliminating the use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation.
6. At the request of the Chairman of the Adult Social Care and Housing Scrutiny Committee, a homelessness consultation event was held on 17th October 2005, involving representatives from the Council and relevant agencies across the County. The event, which was held to facilitate the Committee's review of homelessness, focussed on exploring the main causes of homelessness in Herefordshire and considered opportunities for closer working arrangements in the future.
7. The outcomes of the October 2005 event were considered by this Committee on 2nd December 2005 and a series of recommendations were agreed for submission to the Cabinet Member for Social Care Adults and Health. A number of the recommendations endorsed the continuation of preventative approaches to tackling homelessness and this report provides an opportunity to update the Committee on progress with homelessness and invites consideration of further issues for review.

8. Set out below are the minuted recommendations from the Social Care & Housing Scrutiny Committee meeting of 2nd December 2005.

“That the Cabinet Member (Social Care Adults and Health) be advised that:

(a) the establishment of a Homelessness & Housing Advice Steering Group comprising officers and key stakeholders would assist in the monitoring and development of prevention-focussed Homelessness & Housing Advice Services in Herefordshire and it is recommended that Councillors K.G. Grumbley, and Ms G. Powell and Reverend Towner should be invited to serve on it;

(b) the Committee should be kept informed of progress on developments in homelessness prevention services and the work of the Homelessness & Housing Advice Steering Group after services are transferred back in-house

(c) the Council should continue to develop a preventative and reconciliatory approach to homelessness in partnership with other agencies;

(d) agencies should be encouraged to continue to work together to share information and develop an ‘early warning’ approach to homelessness;

(e) mediation and sanctuary options should be considered with young people and victims of domestic violence whenever appropriate;

(f) agencies should be encouraged to work closely with schools to prevent youth homelessness;

(g) further work should be undertaken to develop further potential in the private sector housing market.”

## **Progress**

9. In accordance with recommendation A at the meeting on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2005, the Homelessness and Housing Advice Steering Group, comprising officers, key stakeholders and nominated Members of the Committee, agreed to assist in ensuring the development of prevention-focussed services within the County. The group has now met twice, and has provided helpful current advice about working practices, and the development of policy and procedures.
10. In accordance with recommendation B, officers will continue to update Scrutiny Committee on progress with homelessness in Herefordshire, a previous report having been provided on 17<sup>th</sup> March 2006.
11. In accordance with recommendations C and D, officers have continued to seek out further opportunities to develop prevention-focussed services and work in partnership with partner agencies in developing improved co-operation in tackling homelessness. Examples include a special meeting of the Registered Social Landlords (RSL) Forum held on 6th July 2006, comprising senior and executive officers of the Council’s main partners, to discuss improved co-operation around homelessness. At this meeting it was agreed that a homelessness protocol would be drawn up which would set out the role of each of the partner agencies in contributing to a prevention-focussed approach within the County. There have been some positive examples of co-operative working with challenging households, including early warnings of potential homelessness as a result of RSLs seeking possession of properties.

12. Recommendation E centred on the need to consider the use of “Mediation” and “Sanctuary” options for young people and victims of domestic violence respectively. We can report the continuing success of mediation services being provided by Herefordshire Mediation. Although more rarely used, due to the specific criteria around whether the initiative is appropriate, sanctuary services are now an option for homelessness staff to consider for specific cases in consultation with Herefordshire Women’s Aid and West Mercia Police. More specifically, under the scheme, households living in fear of domestic violence from outside the home can in certain instances access the fitting of improved security measures to the home thereby reducing the risk of having to flee violence and present as homeless.
13. Recommendation F required agencies to work closely with schools to prevent youth homelessness. A school’s project has now been established in partnership between Strategic Housing, Children’s Services and SHYPP operated by Kemble Housing. Under this scheme, a project worker will visit local schools targeting children in year 10 with sessions aimed to fit into Citizenship Key Skills 4. The first school will be targetted during October/November 2006 with lessons learned informing sessions at other schools in early 2007.
14. Recommendation G proposed that further work be undertaken to develop further potential in the private sector housing market. The Rent Deposit Scheme administered by the Homeless and Housing Advice team continues to be one of the most successful routes of preventing homelessness, providing an opportunity for households to access the private rented sector, which has been traditionally resistant to assisting with the housing of homeless families and/or persons on benefit. A further piece of work is being undertaken to develop and launch a Landlord’s Accreditation Scheme within the County in a bid to encourage landlords to maintain high standards and work closely with the local authority. The Private Landlords’ Forum and Fair continue to provide an excellent opportunity to interact with private sector landlords in the County. The Landlords’ Forum, held on 20<sup>th</sup> September 2006, included a briefing and discussion on the proposed Landlords’ Accreditation Scheme and a proposal to establish a working group, including landlords, to establish the mutual requirements and benefits from such a scheme.
15. The minutes of the meeting dated 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2005 proposed that the Cabinet Member for Social Care Adults and Health be advised of the recommendations set out in the report
16. The Cabinet Member has agreed that the outcomes from the consultation event should be considered by the Homelessness Strategy Implementation Group when it commences its review of the action plan of Herefordshire’s Homelessness Strategy, and contributes to the development of the West Housing Market Area Homelessness Strategy, in partnership with our neighbouring authorities in Shropshire.
17. The last Homelessness Update to Scrutiny Committee, dated 17th March 2006, reported on early progress being made into homelessness prevention in Herefordshire. Two FT officers had been employed in January to tackle this issue, prior to the scheduled transfer back in-house of the Homelessness and Housing Advice team from Herefordshire Housing Ltd in April 2006.
18. As reported in the March 2006 update, the number of successful homelessness prevention interventions at that time stood at 25, representing a cost of £5000, while

the number of families being placed in B&B stood at 7 per month. The total number of families in B&B in March 2006 stood at 44.

19. Homelessness & Housing Advice staff transferred back in-house in April 2006, and the team was reshaped to increase the number of homelessness prevention officers working to reduce temporary homelessness levels and the use of B&B.
20. To date, from when the fund was initially set up in October 2005, the number of homelessness prevention payments now stands at 550, (including repeat sustainment payments) representing a cost of £101,000. The Council has implemented a repayment scheme to enable the authority to recuperate as much of this spend as possible. However, these payments represent a substantial saving against the likely B&B costs had these households not been helped through the Prevention Fund.
21. Broadly speaking, the nature of these prevention payments breaks down further as follows:
  - Accessing private rented sector - 50%
  - Tenancy sustainment - 15%
  - Preventing family exclusions - 25%
  - Domestic violence - 10%
22. The number of new families booked into B&B now averages 2 per month, and there are currently only 11 families in B&B, a considerable improvement on the high of 55 reported in January 2006.
23. The number of homelessness applications and acceptances has reduced significantly through prevention. These are currently in the region of 35 acceptances per quarter, which is below the target set for acceptances in 2007/08 and this reflects positively by comparison to neighbouring authorities.
24. The proportion of lettings going to homeless individuals and families, as a proportion of all lettings, has also reduced - from 43.8% in 2003/04 to 28% in 2005/06. This should result in an increased number of lettings to other banded groups within the Home Point system and is broadly similar to neighbouring authorities and below South Shropshire District Council.
25. The Homelessness Advisory Steering Group has met twice since April 2006. Feedback on services is generally positive, and requests for clear policies and procedures around homelessness prevention have been acted upon - these are due out by the end of December.

### **Future Issues**

26. The Homelessness & Housing Advice Service has now been operational 'in-house' for six months and during that time progress has been evidenced in both homelessness levels and B&B usage with the associated budgetary risks reduced.
27. The continual scrutiny of this area will assist in monitoring and assessing the sustainability of the identified improvements in the long term. Issues which will need to be kept under review include:

- The extent to which the Council, in partnership, is able to locate re-housing opportunities for the most challenging and socially excluded households in Herefordshire.
- Continuing to encourage the public and partner agencies to see early homelessness prevention as a viable alternative to homelessness applications
- Ensuring sufficient resources are available to enable the homelessness and housing advice team to continue to respond to the local demand for services
- Tackling the high level of debt-driven homelessness in the County, and addressing the blocks subsequent arrears create in terms of future housing option
- Ensuring homeless households use the Home Point system appropriately and proactively
- Tackling the increasing number of Notices to Quit issued in the private sector
- Continuing to engage sensitively with lettings agents and estate agents in the County
- Addressing the impact of the financial gap between housing benefit levels and actual market rents in Herefordshire
- Ensuring the supply of affordable housing meets local demand in a constantly changing housing market

## **RECOMMENDATION**

- THAT**
- (a) the updated position be noted;**
  - (b) the Committee is kept informed of progress and developments in homelessness prevention and the work of the Homelessness & Housing Advice Steering Group;**
- and**
- (c) the Committee considers options for further review.**

## **Background Papers**

None.