

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
THURSDAY 18 SEPTEMBER 2014
REVIEW OF DISTRICT HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY
REPORT OF THE HEAD OF HOUSING DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT
(Contact: Lesley Sherratt, Tel: (01993) 861151)

(The Committee's decisions will be recommendations to Cabinet)

1. PURPOSE

To review and update the District Homelessness Strategy action plan.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- (a) That the updated action plan set out in [Appendix A](#) is recommended to Cabinet for approval.
- (b) That the updated eligibility criteria for the rent in advance and deposit bond schemes set out in [Appendix B](#) are recommended for approval by Cabinet.

3. BACKGROUND

3.1. The Council has a legal responsibility to secure accommodation for households that are threatened with homelessness where

- they fall within a priority need group¹
- they are not intentionally homeless² and
- they have a local connection³ with West Oxfordshire

There is also a statutory responsibility to assist other homeless households to secure accommodation by the provision of advice and information.

3.2. Local housing authorities are required by statute to carry out a review of the homelessness situation in their area and to develop their strategy for reducing the incidence of homelessness and ensuring that homeless households have the accommodation and support that they need. The Council first adopted a strategy for the prevention of homelessness in July 2003 and this was updated in July 2008 and January 2013.

¹ For example, the applicant is pregnant or has dependent children or is vulnerable because of their age or a disability

² That is they have not deliberately done or failed to do something in consequence of which they became homeless and it was reasonable for them to continue to occupy their former accommodation

³ Because of current or previous residence, employment or family associations in the District or other special circumstances

3.3. There are 4 strategic objectives:-

- To work in partnership to prevent homelessness
- To seek to ensure that accommodation is available at the right time, in the right locality and of the right quality for people who are or who may become homeless
- To support people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless
- To ensure a high standard of service to those seeking advice and assistance

Homelessness in West Oxfordshire

3.4. In 2013/14, the Council accepted a duty to secure accommodation for 32 households who actually became homeless and in addition, 13 households were considered to have become homeless intentionally.⁴ Of these, 35 households were initially placed in bed and breakfast accommodation, staying for an average period of 5 weeks.⁵

3.5. The main reasons for homelessness are;

- Being asked to leave by parents, other relatives or friends
(46% of accepted cases in 2013/14);
- Termination of a privately rented shorthold tenancy
(38% of accepted cases in 2013/14);

3.6. Other less frequent causes are relationship breakdown including as a result of domestic abuse, loss of MOD accommodation, mortgage arrears or loss of a housing association tenancy because of significant or persistent rent arrears.

3.7. Of the 32 homeless households for whom the Council accepted a duty to secure accommodation in 2013/14,

- 25 households contained dependent children
- 5 were 16 or 17yr olds
- 2 were vulnerable for other reasons

The number of people sleeping rough in the District continues to be low. In October 2013, based on analysis of the waiting list and following consultation with the police, it was estimated that there were at least 7 single people who were sleeping rough.

3.8. During 2013/14, the number of households that were prevented from becoming homeless as a direct result of casework advice and assistance from either the Council or the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) was 414. This is comparable with the previous two years when 411 preventions were achieved in 2011/12 and 385 preventions in 2012/13.

⁴ The Council has a duty to secure accommodation for intentionally homeless households in priority need for a temporary period only, 4 weeks on average)

⁵ Bed and breakfast accommodation may be used in an emergency but for no more than 6 weeks for families.

- 3.9. These prevention figures include households who were accommodated in either a housing association or a private rented tenancy prior to homelessness arising. 51% of all applicants who were housed from the housing waiting list in 2013/14 were threatened with homelessness.
- 3.10. At the end of March 2014 there were 14 households in temporary accommodation.⁶ However, by the end of the first quarter of 2014/15, the number in temporary accommodation had reduced to only 4 households.
- 3.11. There were a number of reasons why it was difficult to secure accommodation for potentially homeless households during 2013/14.
- Low supply of housing association vacancies (particularly two bedroomed accommodation suitable for families) compared to the demand.⁷
 - Single people who were ready for independent living could not secure accommodation to move on to from supported accommodation and thereby create vacancies for vulnerable potentially homeless single people in need of support.
 - Potentially homeless households, (particularly those who are eligible for housing benefit) had difficulty in securing offers of private rented accommodation.⁸
 - There continued to be a reduced number of opportunities for potentially homeless households to be able to secure alternative privately rented accommodation when their current assured shorthold tenancy ended.

The District Homelessness Strategy

- 3.12. The objective is to prevent homelessness by providing timely housing advice, mediating and negotiating to enable households to remain in occupation of their current property (where feasible) or by providing guidance on housing options and practical assistance to secure suitable accommodation before homelessness occurs.
- 3.13. A range of **preventative work and initiatives** is employed in order to prevent homelessness, e.g.:-
- Close working between housing services and support providers to ensure that vulnerable applicants are provided with any housing related support that they need to manage their finances and access other sources of assistance
 - Funding for a dedicated outreach service to support rough sleepers and an emergency bed space for rough sleepers in one of the supported housing projects in the District
 - Working with Connection Floating Support to sustain tenancies and the offer of pre-tenancy training and support
 - Close liaison with the Defence Infrastructure Organisation in respect of families who can no longer occupy armed services married quarters, to

⁶ The target was to have no more than 7 households in temporary accommodation at the year end

⁷ This was partly due to delay in commencement of a number of Cottsway Housing Association new developments.

⁸ Some lettings agents and landlords decline to offer tenancies to households who are eligible for housing benefit

ensure that they are able to access alternative accommodation without the need for eviction

- Participation in the work of the Oxfordshire Joint Housing Team⁹ to meet the housing and support needs of vulnerable young people, particularly 16 and 17 year olds and care leavers
- The Sanctuary scheme to assist with extra security measures for women at risk of domestic violence
- Funding for the specialist CAB debt and housing advice worker who represents clients in defending possession proceedings
- Shared practice agreements and preventative protocols with Registered Providers of affordable housing in respect of tenants with arrears
- The Financial Welfare Adviser (based in Revenues and Housing Support) who works with potentially homeless applicants in financial difficulty
- The effective use of Discretionary Housing Payments to top up housing benefit in order to prevent homelessness until a more permanent solution can be secured
- The Deposit Bond and Rent in advance schemes which help applicants to secure privately rented accommodation

Another objective is to ensure that accommodation is available at the right time, in the right locality and of the right quality for people who are or who may become homeless.

3.14. There is no homeless hostel provision in the District although rough sleepers may be referred to hostel accommodation in Oxford. Where a household is threatened with homelessness and requires the Council's assistance, the objective is to try and secure suitable alternative accommodation of a permanent nature.

3.15. The Council administers a common waiting list on behalf of housing associations that have dwellings in the District. The nominations policy prioritises applicants who are threatened with homelessness for re-housing. This is a major contributory factor to the successful prevention of homelessness. Vacancies may also be utilised as a temporary measure until more suitable accommodation can be secured.

3.16. Where an applicant can afford shared ownership, they are provided with advice and assistance with regard to pursuing this as a housing option.

Where possible, potentially homeless applicants are also assisted into the private rented sector with the help of the Council's deposit bond and rent in advance schemes. In 2013/14, 25 potentially homeless single people and 20 families were assisted through these schemes.

Current pressures - The impact of Welfare Reform

3.17. A number of **welfare reform** measures have been introduced by the present Government. Local Housing Allowance¹⁰ now only covers the cost of the cheapest 30% of rental properties in the private sector rather than the average cost and rates are now reviewed annually in line with changes in rental levels rather than monthly.

⁹ This is a joint countywide initiative with the Children, Education and Families Service at Oxfordshire County Council

¹⁰ The maximum eligible rent for housing benefit calculations

- 3.18. Another significant change has been the extension of the shared room rate to single people up to the age of 35 (whereas previously this was up to the age of 25yrs). This affects single people renting in the private sector as it restricts their maximum housing benefit entitlement to the cost of a room in a shared house.
- 3.19. Since September 2013, a cap has been imposed on the amount of 'out of work' benefits a household (excluding pensioners and those claiming disability benefits) can claim of £500 per week for couples and lone parent families and £350 per week for single people. Any excess benefit is deducted from the claimant's Housing Benefit. In May 2014, there were 24 households (all large families) affected by the household benefit cap in the District with the average excess being in the region of £66 per week.
- 3.20. Housing benefit is now reduced for social housing tenants of working age who occupy a larger property than the household needs, as determined by reference to the 'social sector size criteria'. Where the regulations determine that the tenant has one spare bedroom, their Housing Benefit is reduced by 14% of eligible rent (around £16 per week) and 25% for two or more extra bedrooms (around £28 per week). When this was introduced in April 2013, 467 households in West Oxfordshire were affected and in May 2014, 402 housing association tenants were affected.
- 3.21. Further major changes are due to be made with the roll out of Universal Credit up to April 2017. This new benefit incorporates Job Seekers Allowance, Income Support, Employment Support Allowance, Child Tax Credit, Working Tax Credit and Housing Benefit into one benefit with payments being made monthly in arrears direct to the claimant with limited provision being made for payment direct to the landlord where the claimant is deemed to be vulnerable.

Future pressures - A reduction in the budget for housing related support

- 3.22. The countywide budget for funding housing related support for homeless households and victims of domestic abuse is set and administered by the County Council. As reported to Economic and Social Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 10 July 2014, the budget is being reduced by 38% from £3.8m to £2.3m with a £1m reduction being made in 2015/16 and £0.5m reduction being made in 2016/17.
- 3.23. The funding covers the following support services in the county:-
- the three hostels for rough sleepers in Oxford City
 - supported accommodation for adult homeless or 'at risk' single people in the Districts (including 8 units in West Oxfordshire)
 - move on accommodation from the hostels
 - the community floating support service for a range of client groups including those with mental health needs
 - the three refuges for women at risk of domestic abuse and the West Oxfordshire outreach service
 - substance misuse services directly accessed from rehabilitation
- 3.24. The County Council is currently consulting on proposals to achieve their savings target with a view to commissioning new services within the much reduced budget commencing in April 2015. In respect of West Oxfordshire, the proposals are to reduce the number of units for single homeless adults from 8 to 4, to potentially

cease funding the District outreach service for men and women at risk of domestic abuse and to apply a countywide reduction of 30% in respect of funding for floating support.

- 3.25. If implemented, these changes will affect the District Council's capacity to prevent homelessness largely as a result of the reduction in floating support. The loss of the outreach service would also have an impact on the Council's ability to support victims of domestic abuse to remain in their present home.

Resources and initiatives to prevent homelessness

New affordable homes

- 3.26. There are 160 new units of affordable housing due to be completed in 2014/15. This includes 62 general needs units for affordable rent. There are also 67 rented extra care apartments due to be completed in the schemes being built in Witney and Milton under Wychwood which will offer opportunities to transfer a number of elderly housing association tenants and create vacancies of family housing to let.

Under-occupation incentives

- 3.27. Cottsway Housing Association (the largest social landlord in the District) has recently reviewed their incentive scheme to reduce under occupation in their housing stock and they are working with the Council to encourage their tenants to move into smaller accommodation with the help of the scheme. This includes supporting tenants affected by the housing benefit 'social sector size criteria' to downsize but is also targeted at tenants of pensionable age who wish to move out of family accommodation.

Young People's Supported Housing

- 3.28. The budget for supported accommodation for young people has not been reduced by the County Council and a commissioning exercise for new services is underway with replacement services becoming operational in April 2015. The number of bed spaces being commissioned for lone parents in West Oxfordshire has been reduced from 6 to 5 bed spaces. However, there is a proposed increase from 19 to 28 bed spaces for young people aged between 16 to 24 yrs.¹¹

New funding for single homeless people

- Over 2012/13 and 2013/14 Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire were allocated a one off sum by central government of £455k transitional homelessness funding. Across the two counties, this was spent on a project to improve access to employment and training for single homeless people, an outreach service and provision of emergency accommodation for rough sleepers in the rural Districts.
- 3.29. A second round of revenue funding has recently been made available (Help for Single Homeless) and the Oxfordshire housing authorities have made a bid for up to 250k for expenditure over two years on various partnership initiatives to reduce rough sleeping. The outcome of this bid is awaited.

¹¹ This includes one emergency access bed space

Measures to improve access to private rented accommodation

- 3.30. The Localism Act 2011 gave local housing authorities a new power to discharge their homelessness responsibilities by securing an assured short hold tenancy of at least 12 months duration in 'suitable accommodation' even if the applicant does not consent. However, due to the difficulties being experienced in securing private rented accommodation for those on housing benefit, it has not been possible to utilise this power.
- 3.31. In recognition of the increased need for temporary financial assistance for tenants affected by welfare reform, the Council's grant allocation from Central Government for the award of Discretionary Housing Payments was increased to £125k in 2014/15. This funding has traditionally been used to top up shortfalls in housing benefit for a limited period but the guidance also permits expenditure on measures that improve eligible claimants' access to suitable private rented accommodation.
- 3.32. The existing deposit bond and rent in advance schemes have also been reviewed and updated. [Appendix B](#) sets out the proposed revised eligibility criteria. The main changes are to enable homeless applicants to also be assisted where they are able to secure suitable accommodation outside of the District and to give greater flexibility to assist potentially homeless applicants through the schemes.

The Homelessness Prevention Action Plan

- 3.33. From time to time, the action plan for implementing the strategy is reviewed and updated. The proposed plan for 2015 going forward is set out in [Appendix A](#) to this report.

4. ALTERNATIVES/OPTIONS

The Committee may wish to suggest other actions for consideration by Cabinet.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1. Homelessness grant continues to be allocated to local authorities that are achieving Government targets for the prevention of homelessness. This grant is no longer ring fenced for homelessness prevention activity and from 2013/14 it became rolled into the overall finance settlement rather than being paid as a specific grant.
- 5.2. An allocation of £134k was received in 2014/15 with provision for at least £75k of this to be spent on homelessness prevention activities. Thus far, this budget has been spent on grant for the CAB, funding of the rent in advance and deposit bond schemes and funding for the outreach service for rough sleepers/ sofa surfers and the emergency bedspace for homeless single adults.

6. RISKS

- 6.1 Failure to sustain the efficiency of current prevention measures would inevitably lead to an increase in the number of households becoming homeless and needing to be accommodated in temporary accommodation at considerable expense.
- 6.2 The actions outlined in this report should help to prevent the incidence of homelessness increasing significantly but the effectiveness of the proposed actions must be kept under continuous review and new measures considered where any new pressure points emerge.

7. REASONS

One of the Council's corporate objectives is to prevent households from becoming homeless.

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Homelessness Strategy Action Plan 2015

Objective : To work in partnership to prevent homelessness

Action Points	
1	Continue to develop Local Support Services Framework in preparation for Universal Credit
2	Further development of working relationship with Registered Providers to manage impact of welfare reform

Objective: To seek to ensure that accommodation is available at the right time, in the right locality and of the right quality for people who are or who may become homeless.

Action Points	
3	Trial new incentives to secure private rented accommodation using Discretionary Housing Payments and re-evaluate landlord incentives
4	Re-consider feasibility of discharging duty to secure accommodation by offer of private rented tenancy
5	Continue to increase numbers of affordable homes and address shortfall in accommodation for single persons and couples with one child
6	Continue to pursue opportunities to establish additional temporary accommodation in the District

Objective: To support people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Action Points	
7	Re-commission 'homelessness' housing related support services and achieve savings targets
8	Re-commission housing related support for victims of domestic abuse

Objective: To ensure a high standard of service to those seeking advice and assistance.

Action Points	
9	Participate in countywide peer review of homelessness service

**West Oxfordshire Rent In Advance and Deposit Bond Scheme
Proposed Revised Eligibility Criteria**

To qualify

- Applicants must have an immediate housing need.
- Applicants must not be able to raise the rent in advance or deposit in any other way.
- Applicants should have a local connection to West Oxfordshire.
- Applicants must be capable of maintaining themselves in independent accommodation.
- Applicants must not have moved into the property before an application is approved.
- Applicants must not owe money to the District Council.

Payments are normally payable in respect of properties that are located within the administrative district of West Oxfordshire. However, where the household is threatened with homelessness and the Council has a duty to secure accommodation, payments may be made in respect of suitable properties that are located outside of the district.

Deposit Bond Scheme

Eligible applicants may be issued with a deposit bond to the value of 4 weeks rent (or up to 8 weeks rent in exceptional circumstances in order to prevent homelessness).

At the end of the tenancy, the landlord may make a claim up to the value of the bond in respect of reasonable expenses incurred when putting the property back into good order.

The bond does not cover rent arrears.

The outgoing tenant remains responsible for repaying the Council for any monies paid out in respect of a bond claim.

Rent in Advance

Eligible applicants are provided with four weeks rent in advance payable direct to the landlord on the condition that they agree to pay back the loan in reasonable instalments and that they agree that any final Housing Benefit payment in respect of their tenancy may be used to offset any monies due to the Council.

At the end of the tenancy, the outgoing tenant remains responsible for repayment of any remaining monies due to the Council in respect of the rent in advance.

The applicant must be eligible for 100% of the rent to be paid by Housing benefit except where they are threatened with homelessness and can demonstrate that they will be able to pay the full rent on a regular basis.

In appropriate cases, in order to prevent homelessness the Rent In advance Payment may exceed the applicable Local Housing Allowance.