



Ryedale District Council

REPORT TO: Community Services and Licensing Committee

DATE: 29 November 2007

REPORTING OFFICER: Housing Services Manager
Richard Etherington

SUBJECT: Development of Housing Options Service

WARDS AFFECTED: ALL

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

To inform Members of the proposed re-launch of the current Homelessness and Housing Advice Service into an integrated Housing Options Service to meet the government's homelessness prevention agenda.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Member approval be given for the development of an Integrated Housing Options Service in order to meet the government's homelessness prevention agenda.

3.0 BACKGROUND

The Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977 marked a fundamental change in the way local authorities were expected to respond to homelessness with a change of emphasis towards prevention initiatives. A purely responsive stance towards homelessness has never been condoned in government legislation and guidance since then.

Following the introduction of the Homelessness Act 2002, local authorities have been actively encouraged to adopt a more pro-active stance in tackling homelessness.

The government wish to see local authorities developing a more interventionist approach to homelessness more generally was also signalled in its 2003 policy publication "More than a Roof". That report advocated a number of practical initiatives which were seen as contributing to homelessness prevention.

Housing services have been successful in preventing homelessness through the development of many homelessness prevention initiatives made possible through the Homelessness Grant funding provided by CLG and the

Homelessness Prevention Fund, revenue funding for a housing options toolkit, Bond Guarantee scheme, Rent in Advance scheme and the Ryedale Nightstop scheme.

During 2006/07 a total of 118 cases of homelessness were prevented with 65 cases of homelessness having been prevented during the first two quarters of the current financial year however in order to continue to access CLG grant funding the authority has to continue to develop services in order to achieve the government's objectives to:

- Reduce homelessness presentations and acceptances
- Reduce numbers in temporary accommodation by 50% by 2010
- No use of bed and breakfast for 16/17 year olds by 2010
- No use of bed and breakfast accommodation unless in an emergency and in no case for more than 6 weeks for families with dependent children or where householder pregnant
- Reduce homelessness against main causes
- Reduction in the numbers of repeat homelessness

4.0 INTRODUCTION

In order to continue to improve services offered to our clients we propose to relaunch the services provided into an integrated Housing Options Service. The housing options service will incorporate our current Housing Advice Service, All prevention activities, Homelessness Service, Private sector Housing Link Worker, signposting to other agencies, temporary accommodation, nominations with partner RSL,s and the housing register.

Embracing the homelessness prevention ethos implies a substantial change in the culture of homelessness work, which has been successfully progressed in Ryedale. The housing services team have been encouraged to break with the traditional legalistic focus of homelessness work to adopt a pro-active, customer focused, problem solving ethos.

This has resulted in a reduction in homelessness applications during the last financial year of 54%. The service now needs to be structured and marketed in a more integrated and effective manner to reflect both our aims and objectives and the revised service ethos.

5.0 POLICY CONTEXT

Policies and strategies relating to the Housing Options service will be included within the Homelessness Strategy and the Housing Strategy Action Plan. There are a number of official publications which highly relevant to

homelessness prevention and to which we must have regard when developing policies and strategies. These include:

- Sustainable Communities, settled homes, changing lives. A strategy for tackling homelessness
- Homelessness Code of guidance for Local Authorities (2006)
- Prevention of homelessness policy brief ODPM (2003)
- Achieving positive outcomes on homelessness ODPM (2003)
- More than a roof: A report into tackling homelessness DTLR

6.0 REPORT

6.1 Housing Options Approach

The government have recommended that a crucial component of the new ethos of homelessness work is the housing options approach. This involves a standardised procedure whereby all new housing applicants participate in an initial interview to review their housing circumstances and prospects. The aim is to discuss, in detail, the feasibility of securing the applicant's existing accommodation, or failing that, to examine the full range of possible routes to accessing new accommodation. Essentially housing options interviews are the forum for the provision of housing advice.

In accordance with current legislative requirements, where the Housing Officer has reason to believe that an applicant may be homeless or threatened with homelessness; a formal Housing Act Part VII assessment is initiated. Under the housing options approach, the procedure for households likely to be eligible and in priority need for homelessness assistance is now therefore likely to be operated as a two stage process, with options and prevention considered first, but with safeguards in place where a person requires assistance within the homelessness legislation framework. Where a Part VII assessment is triggered through a housing options interview, all possible measures to prevent actual homelessness should be undertaken in parallel with this.

Housing options interviews can be a useful way of focusing attention in the first instance on practical steps which can be taken to avert homelessness.

In line with the government's wider commitment to customer choice, the housing options approach recognises the limited scale of social housing resources. It avoids any initial assumption that a social rented tenancy is necessarily the most appropriate solution for the household concerned

Housing options interviews are a crucial element in the new approach to homelessness prevention. It is, therefore, important that this process improves outcomes and does not unduly delay a statutory homelessness assessment if this is necessary.

6.2 Principles of the Housing Options Approach

The following are the guiding principles to be applied in the Housing Options Approach:

- Providing an improved service for all customers with less distinction in the service provided to applicants in relation to their probable 'priority need' status asking how we can help? Rather than who can we help?
- Examining all possible accommodation solutions both in relation to retaining any existing tenancy or residency and accessing alternative accommodation.
- Exploring the pros and cons of any available and appropriate options to help applicants themselves make informed decisions and choices.
- Adopting no prior assumptions as to whether a social rented tenancy would be an applicants most appropriate rehousing solution.
- Making full use of information about an interviewees current housing circumstances to assess whether there is reason to believe the applicant is homeless or threatened with homelessness.
- To develop processes with sufficient flexibility such that, where necessary, a full homelessness assessment can be conducted without delay.

6.3 Service Development

The homelessness and housing advice team have already been involved in two planning days to look at improving the services provided. A project team have been set up in order to further develop the service as follows:

- Clarify the aims and targets for the service including a deadline for relaunching the service
- Identify options for promotional activities
- Develop a mission and vision statement for the service
- Agree a 'brand' including logos, colours, image etc
- Organise promotional material (business cards, posters, leaflets, badges, uniforms etc)
- Monitoring progress of the project team against milestones
- Relaunch through media, Council newspaper etc

6.3.1 Staffing

The housing options team will be line managed by The Senior Housing Services Officer within the Housing Services section and will include the Senior Housing Officer, 2 Housing Officers and the Private Sector Housing Link Officer.

The nature and scope of the work undertaken as part of the service will not change just the way it is delivered. The two frontline Housing Officers provide a duty service on a daily basis and this will continue. However in order to ensure that staff are more readily identifiable with the service revisions it is proposed to change some job titles.

Housing officers will become Housing Options Officers and the Senior Housing Officer will become the Senior Housing Options Officer. The Private Sector Link Officer will become the Housing Options Officer (Private Sector).

7.0 OPTIONS

In order to ensure that the service can respond effectively to the change in emphasis and approach that the Government is promoting it has been necessary to develop a preventative approach to homelessness. The whole ethos of the funding support that has made available to local authorities is centred on performance based outcomes and in order to ensure that we are able to maximise our opportunities to attract such funding it is essential that the service responds to the changing agenda. The development of this service will further embed these changes in the culture of service delivery.

8.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no additional cost implications for the Housing Services budget. The initial development costs will be funded through the CLG Homeless Prevention Grant with continued funding from the existing budgetary provision.

9.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no legal implications in so far as the re-positioning of the service is concerned however it will be a visible recognition as to the way in which the delivery of the service has responded to the Government's changing agenda.

10.0 RISK ASSESSMENT

A prevention centred approach to addressing homelessness issues is at the forefront of the Government's agenda in this particular area of service delivery. Every effort has been made to develop initiatives and maximise funding opportunities in order to respond to this changing approach which has resulted not only in a substantial reduction in homeless applications but also secured substantial funding in order to progress service initiatives.

Failure to fully embrace this change in emphasis could have an adverse impact on key performance indicators and affect our ability to attract external

funding. The proposals contained in this report will underline the commitment to respond to the change of approach in this vital area of service delivery

11.0 CONCLUSION

Homelessness gives rise to very significant costs to public services. These take the form of direct costs, such as the provision of accommodation, and indirect costs due for example, to the additional use of health services where homelessness has a negative impact on the health of homeless households. The exact cost of homelessness is not known. It does need to be noted however that most homelessness prevention initiatives also involve expenditure on the part of local authorities and so there is a need to assess the cost effectiveness of homelessness prevention at a local level. Monitoring arrangements will become part of the new housing options service.

In order to continue the success that has been achieved in relation to homelessness prevention and meet the challenging government targets the services we provide need to be developed and integrated to provide a more cohesive and structured way of working. The repositioned service will need to be marketed in order to ensure that we are reaching all members of our community to make them aware of what we can offer.

Effective prevention schemes offer the potential to deliver not just a better quality of life for people at risk of homelessness, but also a real cost benefit for the general community and those contributing financially to the Council's services.

OFFICER CONTACT: Please contact Richard Etherington, Housing Services Manager if you require any further information on the contents of this report. The officer can be contacted at Ryedale House, telephone 01653 600666 ext 383 or e-mail richard.etherington@ryedale.gov.uk

RISK APPRAISAL FORM *(One for each Option)***Annex A**

Policy Context	Risk Appraisal/Impact Assessment	Impact +ve -ve Neutral	Level of Risk
Community Plan Themes <i>(Identify any/all that apply)</i>			
Corporate Objectives/Priorities <i>(Identify any/all that apply)</i>			
Service Priorities			
Financial			
Procurement Policies			
Asset Management Policies			
LA21 & Environment Charter			
Community Safety			
Equalities			
E-Government			
Risk Assessment			
Estimated Timescale for achievement			