

Bolton Council

Report to: Executive Cabinet Member for Environment, Regulatory Services and Skills

Date: 25th March 2013

Report of: Director of Development and Regeneration

Report No: ECME/89/13

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Report Title: **Homelessness Strategy: Interim Statement 2012-2015**

Non Confidential: This report does **not** contain information which warrants its consideration in the absence of the press or members of the public.

Purpose: The interim statement builds on the original aims of the 2008-11 strategy, with the intension of securing continued buy in from across the Council and its partners in the prevention of homelessness. It revisits the key themes and sets out the key activities that will take place during 2012-15 for tackling homelessness in Bolton.

Recommendations: The Executive Cabinet Member is recommended to approve the Homelessness Strategy: Interim Statement 2013-15 and the associated action plan.

Decision

Background Doc(s):

Signed:

Leader / Executive Member

Monitoring Officer

Date:

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Homelessness Act 2002, placed a duty on every local authority in England to develop a homelessness strategy. The last Homelessness Strategy ran from 2008-2012 and although the key objectives remain the same, there is a need to update the Strategy to reflect changes in national and local Government and the economy that have occurred in the last few years.
- 1.2 Whilst building on the original aims of the 2008-11 strategy, this interim statement intends to ensure continued buy in from across the Council and its partners in the prevention of homelessness. It revisits the key themes and sets out the key activities that will take place during 2012-15 for tackling homelessness in Bolton.

2. Objectives

- 2.1 The objectives are to:

- Prevent homelessness by improving the range and quality of the housing options available through the provision of appropriate housing and support;
- Enable people to maintain their accommodation or secure more suitable accommodation where possible; and
- Provide appropriate services and interventions to those people experiencing homelessness and ensure that they are supported to play a full and positive role within the community in which they live.

3. Challenges

- 3.1 The Strategy identifies a number of challenges which impact on the levels of homelessness in the Borough. These include access to housing, unemployment levels, Welfare Reforms, low levels of new house building and savings requirements. In addition there have been changes to policy at national level which require a response from the Council and its partners.
- 3.2 This interim statement and action plan demonstrates how Bolton intends to build on existing partnerships and services to achieve the recommended standard of services as set out in the "Making Every Contact Count" report.

4. Priorities

- 4.1 The following priorities provide the strategic direction for homelessness services in the Borough.
- **Priority 1: Homelessness prevention and sustainability**
 - **Priority 2: Advice and access**
 - **Priority 3: Accessing interim accommodation**
 - **Priority 4: Move-on and sustainable outcomes**

5. Recommendations

- 5.1 The Executive Cabinet Member is recommended to approve the Homelessness Strategy: Interim Statement 2013-15 and the associated action plan.

Homelessness Strategy: Interim Statement 2012-15.

Introduction

Bolton has sought to regularly update and improve its Tackling Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan, a document the Council is required to produce under the Homelessness Act 2002.

The Homelessness Strategy 2008-11 set out to coordinate all work in the Borough aimed at helping those who are experiencing homelessness; as well as those living in temporary or insecure accommodation. The objectives were to:

- Prevent homelessness by improving the range and quality of the housing options available through the provision of appropriate housing and support;
- Enable people to maintain their accommodation or secure more suitable accommodation where possible; and
- Provide appropriate services and interventions to those people experiencing homelessness and ensure that they are supported to play a full and positive role within the community in which they live.

This interim statement is set within a context of unprecedented change in national and local government, and within housing in Bolton. Whilst building on the original aims of the 2008-11 strategy, this interim statement intends to ensure continued buy in from across the Council and its partners in the prevention of homelessness. It revisits the key themes and sets out the key activities that will take place during 2012-15 for tackling homelessness in Bolton. .

The changing context

Nationally, uncertainty in the economy, following the recession and concerns over the levels of public spending resulting in significant cuts, has lead to:

- Instability in the housing market;
- More stringent lending criteria for mortgages;
- Low levels of new housing building;
- Higher levels of unemployment;
- Increase in number of repossessions.

The Government has implemented a number of policy changes in relation to housing and homelessness to address these issues. All of the measures will have an impact on an individuals' ability to secure and sustain accommodation. These include:

- Vision to end rough sleeping (with the 'No Second Night Out' approach);
- Greater emphasis on utilisation of the private rented sector;
- Assistance to former members of the Armed Forces (via the Military Covenant) including access to housing;
- Preventative approaches to tackling homelessness;
- Tenure reforms which provide for fixed term tenancies and affordable rents;
- Clearer responsibilities to co-operate and assist in respect of Safeguarding children and vulnerable adults as well as duties in relation to the management of high risk offenders;
- Changes to Welfare and Housing Benefits, affecting both private and social housing sectors.

Locally, Bolton Council is responding to Government policy through the implementation of a number of austerity measures. This has meant the targeting of resources to ensure services continue to be delivered to the most vulnerable people in the Borough. However, the impact of these changes cannot be entirely mitigated and there is often an increase in demand for homelessness and housing services as personal circumstances worsen.

In August 2012, the Government released a report "Making Every Contact Count: A Joint Approach to Preventing Homelessness". This report sets out ten local challenges which it expects local Homelessness Services to achieve through partnership working. These challenges are:

- Adopt a corporate commitment to prevent homelessness which has buy in across all local authority services;
- Actively work in partnership with voluntary sector and other local partners to address support, education, employment and training needs;
- Offer a Housing Options prevention service, including written advice, to all clients;
- Adopt a *No Second Night Out* model or an effective local alternative;
- Housing pathways agreed or in development with each key partner and client group that includes appropriate accommodation and support;
- Develop a suitable private rented sector offer for all client groups, including advice and support to both clients and landlords;
- Actively engage in preventing mortgage repossessions including through the Mortgage Rescue Scheme;
- A homelessness strategy which sets out a proactive approach to preventing homelessness and is reviewed annually so that it is responsive to emerging needs;
- Not place any young person aged 16 or 17 in Bed and Breakfast accommodation;
- Not place any families in Bed and Breakfast accommodation unless in an emergency and then for no longer than 6 weeks.

This interim statement and action plan demonstrates how Bolton intends to build on existing partnerships and services to achieve the recommended standard of services as set out in the "Making Every Contact Count" report.

Local Challenges

Increasing thresholds to access complementary services including adult social care, mental health and children services is likely to result in some households receiving less or no support. The result being some people struggling to maintain accommodation due to their vulnerabilities leading to increased pressures on preventative services.

The end to ring fencing of Supporting People Funding and the need for significant savings within Adult Social Care budgets will impact on the levels of support and accommodation available to homeless households. The nature of support provision is also shifting from long term accommodation based to shorter term floating support interventions.

Work to support increased numbers of offenders released from prison including the management of offenders and prevention of re-offending, has been carried out to date under the umbrella of the Bolton BSafe partnership. This area of activity has been affected very significantly with the withdrawal of Area Based Grant funding. However, the maintenance of Integrated Offender Management processes does provide a coherent framework, although there is a need to maintain a focus on the wider offender population as a whole as well.

The changes to Housing Benefit / Local Housing Allowance will have a significant impact within Bolton. These changes are estimated to result in the removal of some £3.3m pa of

subsidy to rental costs of low income households within Bolton over the implementation period. Inevitably this will increase the pressure on social rented accommodation as well as upward pressures on homelessness.

There are difficulties for first time buyers, being able to access home ownership due to the increased difficulty of securing personal finance and in particular mortgages on favourable terms without sizeable percentage deposits. This has led to an increasing demand for the social and private rented sectors.

A continuing uplift in unemployment as well as shifts to shorter-hours working, is affecting households abilities to cover priority expenditure. Whilst a number of measures in respect of forbearance by lenders and continuing low Bank of England interest base rate have to some degree slowed the increase in repossessions, there is a reducing level of funding for mortgage rescue schemes, as part of the Governments commitment to reduce public spending. Increasing levels of repossessions and households made homeless are likely to continue to rise as a result.

A major change in the local housing landscape is the stock transfer of the Council's 18,200 homes to Bolton at Home. The transfer will ensure that investment in the housing stock is sustained and that homes are modernised in line with the aspirations of tenants. This provides the Council with a stronger strategic role in relation to housing to ensure that the Boroughs housing needs are continued to be met. A review of the Council's retained housing functions will take place during 2012 -13 and is likely to result in the reshaping of services and an even stronger partnership approach.

Key achievements

This interim statement is able to build upon considerable progress that has already been made in tackling homelessness. It has been made possible through interventions made by the local authority and its partners, and services provided within both the statutory and voluntary sectors.

The keys to Bolton's Homelessness Strategy are those of:

- Prevention and a focus on integrated and sustainable approaches to interventions;
- Ensuring the needs of homeless households and the most vulnerable are met whilst maintaining wider access to affordable social housing for the community as a whole;
- A housing strategy approach aimed at tackling supply and affordability issues within the local housing market. This is linked to the wider corporate aims of improving the economic well being of the borough as a whole to enable households to secure and sustain their needs.

A summary of key achievements delivered through the Homelessness Strategy 2008-11 are highlighted below.

- Co-ordinated prevention activity that has seen a lower number of homelessness applications and acceptances maintained and any potential increases managed as a result of wider economic pressures.
- Minimal use of bed and breakfast accommodation for homeless families with children.
- A reduction & maintenance in the low level of rough sleeping.
- Increased secure re-housing outcomes for those accepted for a re-housing duty.
- Improved tenancy sustainment services with partner landlords and Council provision of housing related support.
- Development of Family Intervention Tenancy model.

- Development of offender management housing pathway including prison release arrangements.
- Continued maintenance of minimal 'bed blocking' with Mental Health ward liaison & planned discharges from hospital.
- Provision of timely family mediation to prevent homelessness of young people.
- The review of the single homelessness service & more efficient use of temporary accommodation resources through the development of the 'Gateway Approach' and MOP (Move-On Protocol). This includes advice, options and active turn-over case management: improved temporary accommodation vacancy management; increased turnover; & improved positive housing outcomes (both in volume of known positive outputs and sustainable outcomes).
- Improving use of social housing stock, including development of 'downsizing' and mutual exchange processes, and tackling 'housing fraud', returning significant numbers of units of social housing to legitimate use.
- Development of housing repossession interventions including county court casework offer, mortgage rescue, Prevention of Repossession Fund, landlord liaison and high rate of prevention outcomes.
- Development of financial inclusion support including money advice, budgeting and accredited financial capability workshops.

Strategic Priorities for Tackling Homelessness in Bolton

Going forward, housing services face increasing difficulty in meeting the housing needs of the borough. The securing of both interim and longer term housing outcomes is a particular problem for those in high need as well as more generally, at a time of increasing demand for affordable housing.

In terms of the highest needs including homelessness and those in precarious and unsuitable accommodation arrangements; the increased competition and relative scarcity of available suitable alternative housing presents major challenges.

Access to sufficient housing options across tenures; improving through-put and move-on from temporary accommodation; and ensuring efficient void management and allocation processes are all critical interlinked elements. Households with histories of arrears, abandonment and/or anti-social behaviour also face greater barriers to accessing settled accommodation, particularly given the high demand for accommodation. These circumstances have very significant implications for a wide range of statutory responsibilities of the Council.

Tackling homelessness requires a balance between interventions to prevent homelessness and meeting the needs of households experiencing homelessness; and the wider contexts that provide for the aspirations of the community as a whole. To focus resources and actions too far one way or the other, risks either failing those in the most immediate and pressing need or allowing an unsustainable increase in demand and wider deterioration of housing circumstances. The preventative approach ensures where possible circumstances are addressed early and in a planned way to ensure interventions are more likely to prevent a critical deterioration. Therefore reducing household difficulties and impacts as well as minimising requirements for more costly interventions. Financial difficulties are an increasing complication requiring specialist intervention in a timely manner.

The following priorities provide the strategic direction for homelessness services in the Borough.

- **Priority 1: Homelessness prevention and sustainability**

Continue emphasis towards prevention approaches and interventions to improve the sustainability of vulnerable households. This includes early interventions to prevent the loss of accommodation, money management support to create financially sustainable tenancies and mortgages and the provision of sustainable resettlement in cases of homelessness. Links to the development of wider life skills including education, training, financial capability and employment support will be made to enable greater chances of longer term stability.

- **Priority 2: Advice and access**

Ensure access to quality advice and affordable, appropriate housing options for those who are most vulnerable and in highest need. Achieve a balance in allocations between the high/urgent need cases and those with general housing need; whilst addressing those who have been excluded.

- **Priority 3: Accessing interim accommodation**

Reduce inappropriate use of temporary accommodation, increase through-put and ensure availability of suitable temporary/emergency accommodation when required. Ensure maintenance of viable and appropriate base line provision; including appropriate support and resettlement services.

- **Priority 4: Move-on and sustainable outcomes**

Promote an adequate and varied supply of accommodation within social and private rented sectors as well as home ownership options for those in high/urgent need and wider housing need. Where appropriate, facilitate the provision of support and housing management practices that assist the long term resettlement of the needier households.