

A response by the Homelessness Strategy Steering Group to the Community Commission's 'Tackling Homelessness' observations and recommendations.

▪ Introduction

In October and November 2009 the Community Commission (CC) conducted its own review of homelessness and homelessness services within the city. Its objective was to assess the current situation and appraise existing and recent action to address the issue.

This review has resulted in a number of useful observations and recommendations which have fed into the discussion and consultation process for the new Homelessness Strategy currently under development.

This paper outlines the response of the Homelessness Strategy Steering Group (HSSG) to the recommendations of the CC.

▪ The recommendations and response

The findings of the CC have been divided into a number of conclusions and recommendations and are grouped under the 5 main areas specified by the CC, which are: Housing Options, Advice Services, City Strategies, Supported Accommodation and Health.

These findings have been summarised below, all of which propose - or imply the need for - specific actions which could be included in the homelessness strategy action plan. (Some of the findings comprise comments on the successfulness of certain measures already in place. These have been removed from this summary as it is solely concerned with proposed changes and improvements in future service provision)

The response of the HSSG to each proposed action is also shown. There are four main 'types' of response:

1. The action *will* be incorporated into the action plan - either directly or via a related/complementary action which will achieve the same objective
2. The action *cannot* be incorporated into the action plan, with reasons why
3. Similar or related work is already underway to achieve the same objective.
4. The action/recommendation falls outside of the remit of the Homelessness Team/Housing Options Centre and will be passed on for further comment to the appropriate department.

The recommendations/actions of the CC along with the response of the HSSG are tabulated below:

Recommendations/Actions

Response of the Homelessness Strategy SG

1. HOUSING OPTIONS CENTRE – THE LAW, POLICY, PROCESS

- C 2. a) There is a continuing problem of silting of temporary accommodation;
b) Members noted that the Homelessness Strategy is likely to propose the reduction from 3 months to 1 month for homeless people to use Homefinder to identify accommodation before receiving the one Final Offer – however the Commission do not readily accept the desirability of such a proposal.
- C 3. a) The Commission are concerned as to how someone homeless in an emergency and out-of-hours would know what to do;
b) a notice in the Housing Options Centre referring to Careline is not in itself enough as an individual/family outside the loop would not know to go to the Housing Options Centre anyway.
- R 1. a) The information needs to be more *informative*: simple and user friendly and based on an individual without any prior experience of the homelessness system;
b) To make information more widely available, locations could include public libraries, the use of the commercial advertising stands outside the Council House, the urban map in Osnabruck Square and the Big Screen to give basic information and directions.

C2. a) Improved effectiveness in the use of TA, to tackle 'siling up' and other issues will be part of the action plan
b) This point will be addressed in the allocations review currently underway

C3.a) & R1.a) & b) all highlight the need for greater clarity in signposting and wider availability and access to relevant and user-friendly information. This point will be included in the action plan and implemented through an expansion of the HOAMS facility – Housing Options Advice Management System. It will be available and publicised through public libraries, signs outside the Council house and advertised in Derby Express.

- R 2. The customer experience of Derby Direct needs a) monitoring to ensure recent improvements are sustained and b) built on, as already stressed people get more stressed if they cannot get through. The target should be a *minimum* of 97% calls answered.
- C 5. The CLG definition of street homelessness as used for the annual census may provide like-for-like comparisons between local authorities but is so strict it under reports the problem.
- R 3. Derby should conduct its own annual survey, during the same exercise as that for the CLG, with a wider definition to capture the full picture and create a local indicator to track
- R 4. To respond to emergency cases of homelessness Milestone House and, those involving children and young people, Housing Options should [be] publicly accessible 24 hours 365 days per week

R2. HOC continues to monitor DD but has no management control over its performance. This point will be passed on through the monitoring report meetings between derby Direct and Housing Options

C5 & R3: The commencement of Street Audits later this year will be in the action plan, and these should measure more accurately the incidence of street homelessness

R4: Resource implications of opening HOC 24/7 365 are huge and impossible to contemplate in the current financial climate. However, emergency accommodation is accessible through Careline 24/7 and Milestone House is also open 24/7. All hostels also open their doors to all street homeless between Dec-Mar as part of our cold weather provision.

Finally, there is a Council wide review imminent into opening hours of all services ongoing which may pick this up.

2. DERBYSHIRE HOUSING AID / DERBY ADVICE

- R 5. A priority should be to have a money adviser for owner occupiers as a means of preventing homelessness, including representation at mortgage repossession hearings.
- C 6. Anecdotal evidence was given that the Council sometimes fails to comply with its own Fair Debts policy, with the consequence that some debtors agree higher weekly repayments than they can service and this can itself be the tipping point to rent/mortgage arrears leading to homelessness.
- C 7. The Commission endorse the concerns expressed by DHA about the use of expensive temporary accommodation because:
 - a) service charges of £30 - £40 per week are too high for the homeless person/family responsible for their payment
 - b) the rent levels do not represent value for money for Council Tax payers
- R 6. The Council should consider adopting (or adapting) the Wakefield City Council scheme of providing interest free loans between £2,000 and £15,000 to home owners with mortgage arrears and repayable over three years to prevent homelessness.
- R 7. The Council should consider adopting (or adapting) the Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council system of online alerts to social housing

R5. DHA provides this service, including representation at repossession hearings. Our own in house Financial Inclusion Advisor also gives advice in these matters especially in view of government initiatives such as the Mortgage Rescue Scheme

C.6. Action on FDP is outside of our remit, and we have no evidence at HOC of homeless persons claiming that the Council negotiated too high repayment agreements.

C7. As C2 above. We are similarly concerned about this issue and improved effectiveness in the use of TA will be part of the action plan

R6. A similar service to this is now provided through Midland Community Finance

R7. This will be put into the action plan

providers regarding e.g. benefit suspension, problems obtaining information or claim processing as this enables earlier interventions and so reduces actions to evict tenants

- R 8. The Council should adopt the following corporate priority: "To maximise the income of the poorest households and assist with personal indebtedness across the City".

R.8. The post of Financial Inclusion Advisor already acts to assist those in financial hardship and help them maximise their incomes. But again, this issue could be taken up by the 'Homelessness Champion' when in position.

3. CITY STRATEGIES

- C 9. There had been agreement that there was currently a 'quality gap' in temporary accommodation with standards lowest for single people
- C 10. The Commission support the intention to have a contracting process to obtain both better value-for-money and standards of accommodation
- C 11. Without creating delay, the Commission will wish to see the specification in order to be reassured that obtaining improved quality is equal to obtaining better financial terms.
- R 9. The Council should appoint from its members a Homelessness Champion

C9/10/11. Supporting People are leading in the tendering process for B&B, to drive up standards and obtain better value for money. It should be possible to obtain the specification from Linda McCay in procurement– please advise if it is still required

R9. Mark Menzies discussing protocols with Steve Dunning with a view to approaching appropriate member

4. SUPPORTED ACCOMMODATION

- R 10. As the only solution to the turn-away rate at Milestone House another unit of accommodation should be created
- C 13. The rules for and slow processing of Community Care Grants are major impediments to move-on from supported accommodation to a mainstream tenancy – the Job Centre Plus statement 'We make most decisions within 2 weeks' does not accord with local experience.
- R 11. The Council should engage with the LGA to make strong representations to central government seeking step improvements in Social Fund eligibility and processing
- R 12. 'Starter packs' of basic household amenities / equipment should be available for loan in order enable prompt moves from supported accommodation when an unfurnished tenancy is offered, and based on the presumption that the new tenant has nothing.
- R 13. A day time hot meal should be available at Milestone House and the Padley Centre

R10: There are not the resources to provide another unit of accommodation. But we will investigate the extent of the problem and see if an innovative solution can be found. (This action to be added to the strategy).

C13. We have no control over CCGs as they are administered by DWP

R11. This could be taken up by the 'Homelessness Champion' when in position

R.12 Starter packs are now provided for those leaving hostel accommodation.

R13. This is already provided at the Padley and is joint funded by Adult Social Services and the PCT.

5. HEALTH

- R 14. Finance should be identified to support the Street Drinkers Panel, in order to fund a part time case worker
- R 15. The PCT should now act to employ a dedicated GP and nurse at Milestone House, in addition to the CPN, as previously envisaged
- R 16. Social housing providers should be encouraged to explore the provision of long term support to residents, vulnerable for one of many reasons e.g. physical frailty or memory loss and, for those with alcohol problems to encourage them to engage in treatment programmes

R14 This case worker now in post. (Since June 2010)

R15 This is scheduled to commence in September this year, subject to funding to get the room set up as a clinic. The GP will specialise in alcohol misuse issues

R16. There are a number of measures here that are already in place or scheduled to be in place soon. These are:

- a) Milestone House is making referrals for those with alcohol problems to the reconfigures alcohol services 'DAMS' (The Drug & Alcohol Misuse Service)
- b) There will also be six additional units for those with alcohol problems available at centenary house from about September this year. And as mentioned in R14 we are now part funding an alcohol case worker for street drinkers.
- c) Adult Social care are currently working on a dementia strategy
- d) Carelink already provides a telecare service for those vulnerable at home and more recently 'telehealth' is being addressed by the remote monitoring of 'vital signs' this service is being provided by Derby Homes and number of the RSL's
- e) 'Extra Care' services are now being provided at Handyside Court Alvaston and the Leylands Estate on the Broadway.