

Homelessness Strategy

July 2003
Sevenoaks District Council

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1 INTRODUCTION

In the Sevenoaks District Council Area, homelessness is directly related to the inadequate supply of affordable housing in the district. The Review of Homelessness completed by SDC in Spring of 2003 indicated the main causes of homelessness and also the strengths and weaknesses of the service provided. The purpose of this strategy is to build on the review by investigating possible solutions to the problem, determining priorities and putting an action plan in place for the future.

This strategy sets out the seven key objectives for tackling homelessness in Sevenoaks District Council area. These objectives have been developed as a result of the review that was undertaken in conjunction with Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and are shared with that Council. More specific priorities and targets have been developed for each of the local authorities and are detailed in this strategy and the action plan for SDC.

The review of homelessness explained the statutory background and central government intentions in relation to homelessness. It also provided details of the local context within which the council is working and related strategies that have been taken into account.

The Shared Key Objectives

OBJECTIVE ONE – TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

To improve the quality and quantity of temporary accommodation used for homeless households and to reduce the length of stay in temporary accommodation where a statutory duty exists, ensuring that no households containing pregnant women or dependent children remain in B&B accommodation for no longer than 6 weeks from April 2004.

OBJECTIVE TWO – ACCESS TO HOUSING

Improve the utilisation of existing accommodation to increase housing options for people who are homeless and to ensure that opportunities to develop new social housing units are maximised.

OBJECTIVE THREE – PREVENTION

To improve services designed to prevent homelessness with a view to reducing the numbers of people who present as homeless.

OBJECTIVE FOUR – CONSULTATION WITH SERVICE USERS

To develop the way in which service users are involved with and are able to influence service provision.

OBJECTIVE FIVE – WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

To continue to work in partnership with other agencies providing services to homeless people and to improve communication networks.

OBJECTIVE SIX – SUPPORTED HOUSING

To identify support needs of homeless households, to provide appropriate information and signposting of the agencies providing support, to work in partnership with other agencies to obtain support and monitor and review service provision.

OBJECTIVE SEVEN – NON-STATUTORY HOMELESS

To keep under review the numbers of street homeless and others where no statutory duty exists and to ensure that appropriate housing services are provided with access to health and support services to avoid reoccurrence of homelessness.

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2 BACKGROUND

Summary of what the review revealed

Existing Services

A full description of existing provision and services was included in the review. The review also highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of the service, considering what works well and what could be improved. Over the last 12 months SDC have been developing the service and have put in place a number of new initiatives including the appointment of an Empty Homes Officer which will start to meet the challenges. There has also been a commitment to provision of the capital resources for four move on units for people with mental health problems.

Key trends

The Review included a wide range of statistics. The key trends were:

- An increase in the proportion of applicants accepted as unintentionally homeless and in priority need over the past five years.
- Main reason for homelessness continues to be parents, friends or relatives no longer willing or able to accommodate households.
- Majority of applications are from families or where the applicant is pregnant but there is an increasing number of applications from young people.
- The average number of households in bed and breakfast accommodation was 38 during the year 2002/2003 which compares to 33 in 2001/2.
- The average number of households in bed and breakfast either with dependent children or pregnant for 2002/2003 is 20 and of those an average of 11 at any one time had been in bed and breakfast for over six weeks.
- The numbers of young people placed in bed and breakfast accommodation is increasing. (7 in 2001/2002. 26 in 2002/2003).

Approach to developing the Strategy

The review detailed the approach and methodology used in the review and this same inclusive, qualitative approach has led the development of the strategy working in partnership with Tunbridge Wells Borough Council. The detail of how the initial consultation was carried out and the desktop review of secondary information were described in the Homelessness Review which will be published alongside this strategy in July 2003.

A further consultation was held by means of a half day Forum held on 8th May 2003. All stakeholders were invited to attend and participate in the consultation.

3 CONSULTATION ON THE STRATEGY

The stakeholders who took part in the focus groups and individual interviews considered the following :

- challenges for the service
- solutions

As always with qualitative research of this nature there were differing views depending on the perspective of the stakeholder. However, despite this, a clear picture of the issues emerged and the perceptions of the stakeholders are summarised in this section of the strategy.

Information gleaned from surveys of users has also been used to identify issues.

Where quantitative data exists, these perceptions have been tested by reviewing the statistics and other evidence from the desktop research undertaken during the review. None of the data undermines the perceptions of the stakeholders.

Challenges

There is no doubt that the district has insufficient affordable housing to meet the needs of the area and stakeholders were only too aware that this situation is unlikely to change. Therefore the challenges for the service revolve around ensuring that best use is made of the resources that do exist and that homelessness is prevented whenever possible in order to reduce the pressure on the available housing.

More specifically the following were seen to be the main challenges facing the Council:

Resources

It is clear that the resources available for increasing the stock of social housing are going to be limited. The Government's agenda for provision of homes is clear and although there will be increased provision in the South East of England, Sevenoaks District will not directly benefit from this. The situation has been further exacerbated by LASHG being withdrawn as reported in the Housing Strategy.

Stakeholders were also concerned that although new funding opportunities had been achieved through the supporting people regime, there will be increased pressure on existing schemes as there will be no growth and new schemes will have to be funded from within present budgets. Further information on this is available in the Supporting People Action Plan.

The challenge is to ensure that all existing resources are used in the best possible way and this may involve consideration of the re-designation of accommodation or remodelling of services.

Temporary Accommodation

There was considerable concern about the options that are available for people who are homeless in the District. There is insufficient temporary accommodation available. Although the shared facility apartments are considered to provide good accommodation, the District is over-reliant on bed and breakfast accommodation which is both of a poor standard in terms of amenities and where the location is unsuitable.

One of the major challenges in the immediate future will be to meet the Government's target to reduce the use of bed and breakfast for families to emergency use only and for a maximum stay of 6 weeks.

Gaps in Provision

As well as the need for more affordable housing, significant gaps in provision for various groups of people were identified. The challenge for Sevenoaks District Council is how to meet these needs given the resource problems that it faces.

There is relatively good provision of supported housing for single people with mental health problems although more could be used and SDC works well with the voluntary agencies in this field. However there needs to be a wider range of services, including services for families where individuals in the family has mental health problems and clear pathways for movement between schemes should be developed.

All stakeholders were concerned about the lack of provision for young single people and the lack of planned approaches to this client group.

Stakeholders also identified challenges in meeting the needs for other groups:

- local refuge accommodation
- young single parents
- alternatives for offenders
- accommodation for single homeless which is not alcohol free
- accommodation for users with more chaotic lifestyles
- direct access accommodation

Only one gap in service provision was identified which was the availability of housing law advice. There was also some concern about possible duplication in advice giving services.

Working in partnership

One of the challenges which faces all statutory agencies is working effectively in partnership with other agencies both statutory and voluntary.

SDC has worked in partnership effectively with Tonbridge and Malling and Tunbridge Wells Councils for some years and the results are evident in various successful housing projects like the Refuge and Colebrook Road Hostel. All stakeholders agreed that sub regional co-operation of this nature was essential and should continue and be enhanced for a number of reasons.

- The authorities have similar issues and characteristics;
- Joint working provides economies of scale giving opportunities to the local authorities to provide accommodation for groups which on an individual authority basis would prove to be uneconomical,
- It allows officers to concentrate on different initiatives.

There was some concern that as a result of joint working services may be too remote for some residents and this requires careful monitoring.

It was noted that residents in parts of the District around Swanley relate to areas other than Sevenoaks, Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells and it may be appropriate for SDC to consider joint working with Dartford and Bromley on solutions for people in those areas.

SDC was one of the first local authorities to develop a Joint Assessment and Referral Process for supported housing involving social services and voluntary organisations, but as detailed in the Homelessness Review this is now in need of improvement so that it can become a more effective tool in ensuring an open approach to joint planning and accessing supported housing.

Joint working with other statutory agencies is also essential. Some difficulties are faced when working with some agencies, such as health as the geographical boundaries do not relate to the local authorities. SDC has to relate to two Primary Care Trusts - South West Kent and Swanley, Dartford and Gravesham.

There was some concern that packages put in place by other agencies are not always maintained once a vulnerable person is housed.

Although there is inclusive consultation of stakeholders from other agencies, it is thought that the consultation could be made more meaningful by involving stakeholders at an earlier stage in the same way as they have been for the development of this strategy.

Moving On

An overriding concern related to the availability of suitable move on accommodation for people leaving supported accommodation, as well as the time it takes to find suitable permanent accommodation for people from bed and breakfast and temporary accommodation.

Although floating support services available to people in permanent tenancies by the RSLs has increased, there is still a need to increase this service and co-operative working between the main RSLs could improve the service. It is believed that there could be a significantly higher demand for this service which can significantly reduce the likelihood of repeat homelessness.

Prevention

The lack of resources for the District means that the major challenge is to find innovative ways to prevent homelessness. Concerns voiced during the consultation were around delays in Housing Benefit, lack of shared communications between various organisations, recognising the root causes of homelessness and dealing with them rather than the actuality of homelessness. An example would be improving mediation services to alleviate the need for young people to move away from home and present as homeless. As reported in the Review there is likely to be a continuing increase in young people presenting as homeless.

It is important that there is a corporate commitment to prevention of homelessness in order to find innovative means of tackling these problems. For instance, despite improvements in the performance of the housing benefit department some stakeholders still believed that more could be done to ensure that benefit claims were dealt with swiftly in order to prevent landlords taking action for eviction. It is also important to ensure that Housing Benefit is in place as quickly as possible for people in temporary accommodation as they will not be re-housed until their rent has been paid.

Consideration needs to be given to providing solutions to people who are not in the priority need groups in order to prevent crisis intervention at a later date.

It was thought that the liaison between the homeless section and RSLs could improve when RSLs are considering eviction of tenants so that alternative solutions could be found. However this is likely to effect only a small proportion of those presenting as homeless.

Solutions

The Need for a Strategic Approach

It is clear that due to the pressures on the Service the approach to date has relied to a large extent on dealing with needs as they arise rather than developing a strategic approach. Stakeholders understood the pressures facing the Council but felt that it is necessary to take a step back and welcomed the review of homelessness and the development of the strategy.

Stakeholders were asked to consider innovative solutions that may provide answers to some of the challenges.

Resources

Making best use of existing resources is essential. Stakeholders discussed the possibility of re-designation of some of the less popular sheltered accommodation as a means of providing either additional types of supported housing or general needs housing in order to assist with move on from the supported housing that exists. Some thought that it may be worth considering re-designation of under used nursing homes to sheltered accommodation and others thought that providing more residential places in the District would free up other suitable accommodation. It is clear that a complete review of housing and care for older people could lead to improved provision for older people and increased resources for other sections of the community

The current occupation of social housing in the district also needs to be investigated to determine whether there is significant under-occupation and if so whether a proactive approach to people under-occupying, for instance by offering enhanced alternative accommodation could release houses that would be suitable for families, thus relieving the pressures on the waiting lists.

New ways of developing social housing need to be considered. Given the desirability of the area to private developers more use should be made of planning gain for community development. Stakeholders considered that the housing needs of the area should be considered whenever any new planning permission is agreed, both residential and commercial. Social housing providers, like Registered Social landlords should also consider the possibilities of cross subsidising rented accommodation through shared ownership schemes. This type of scheme can also be used to reduce pressure on waiting lists and to release social housing that is currently occupied.

Given the limit to the availability of social housing in the district the Council needs to make best possible use of the private sector to encourage private landlords to rent accommodation to people who would otherwise be homeless. There are a

variety of methods of achieving this, many already in use. It is also possible to require landlords who wish to access grants to improve their properties to take nominations from the Council. In order for these private sector initiatives to be successful, it is necessary to ensure that private rents are within the means of people in housing need or that they can be met by housing benefit.

Choice based lettings is under discussion in the District. Stakeholders had varying views about how choice based lettings may be able to help relieve the homeless problem or whether it would exacerbate it. All were concerned that any new system should be monitored very carefully in order to ensure that those most in need were not disadvantaged

Temporary Accommodation

There may be opportunities for the provision of more suitable temporary accommodation through investigating the use of properties waiting for demolition as short life property.

Working in partnership

Stakeholders consulted believed that joint working between various Council Departments could be improved particularly with planning and housing benefits. If housing benefit could be fast tracked for people in temporary accommodation it might result in more rapid re-housing and release of temporary accommodation. Consideration should also be given to fast tracking for the private lettings schemes in order to encourage more landlords to take part.

Outside the Council there are other agencies where more effective joint working could help to provide solutions for the homelessness challenges. This includes :

- Social Services, Probation and Health where effective joint working will be an essential precursor to finding sustainable solutions
- Working with Rent Officers to establish rent levels in the private rented sector which are acceptable for housing benefit purposes.
- Improvements to the JARP could lead to more effective use of supported accommodation and prevention of homelessness.
- A support providers forum could help the various agencies to provide an improved service.
- Looking at other councils where joint working could provide benefits such as other neighbouring authorities councils working in areas of low demand that may be some distance from Sevenoaks.

- Ensuring that all stakeholders are involved in all consultations at an early stage so that they are able to influence the result with improved partnership working.

Prevention

One of the areas where stakeholders believed that homelessness is likely to increase and where early intervention could prevent future homelessness was in relation to young people leaving home. Young people need a greater awareness of the difficulties they are likely to meet if they leave home. A more co-ordinated approach to the provision of classes in schools is required. Another useful service would be the provision of mediation where there is a likelihood of family breakdown.

Tenants facing eviction are often unaware of their rights and fail to take advice. Facilities should be made available at West Kent Courts so that tenants can access advice on the day of the court hearing. Also stakeholders considered that there should be increased communication between social landlords and the homeless team both at the start of tenancies detailing any support needs of the tenants and when RSLs are considering taking action for eviction so that other alternatives and preventative measures can be pursued.

It is important that people who are at risk of becoming homeless have access to good quality information and information leaflets need to be improved.

Day services and community/social facilities can help to prevent emergency homeless presentations and stakeholders felt that SDC should investigate whether facilities of this nature should be available in the District and if considered necessary work with other agencies to develop them.

4 PRIORITIES FOR THE FUTURE

Stakeholders were very clear that the broad priorities for the future should be as follows:

- Creative use should be made of existing resources;
- Working jointly across geographical boundaries should be increased;
- Inter agency work should be improved;
- Prevention work should be prioritised;
- Sustainability should be paramount;
- Gaps in services to people with support needs should be addressed.

Developing the Key Objectives

As a result of the consultation and review of homelessness the broad objectives listed at the start of this document have been adopted and developed to reflect the following local priorities for action:

OBJECTIVE ONE – TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

To improve the quality and quantity of temporary accommodation used for homeless households and to reduce the length of stay in temporary accommodation where a statutory duty exists, ensuring that no households containing pregnant women or dependent children remain in B&B accommodation for no longer than 6 weeks from April 2004.

SDC Priorities for action

The shared facilities apartments used by SDC as temporary accommodation is perceived to be of a good standard and has been recognised as good practice alternative for homeless people. The overall priority in relation to temporary accommodation for SDC is to ensure that length of stays are reduced so that the accommodation is not silted up. It is also necessary to increase the amount of temporary accommodation in required areas to ensure that sufficient good quality temporary accommodation is available for new homeless households.

There are more issues in relation to the use of bed and breakfast accommodation which is seen as poor standard and in the wrong locations. Alternatives to bed and breakfast accommodation for families have been actively sought for some time. There are no easy solutions to this problem but the authority is committed to meeting the government target that no families should be in bed and breakfast accommodation except in an emergency and for no longer than six weeks by April 2004. One of the ways this will be achieved will be if funding is made available for more temporary accommodation.

In order to ensure that this can be achieved the authority will:

- continue to monitor closely homelessness statistics and will start to monitor stays in bed and breakfast accommodation of more than 4 weeks in order that solutions to trends can be investigated.
- The Empty Homes Officer will investigate the use of short life property for temporary accommodation in order to increase availability.
- Introduce target dates for re-housing from temporary accommodation and a case worker assigned to each household to follow this up. The choice of case worker will depend on the household circumstances and may include staff from other agencies.

- Targets will be introduced relating to the average time taken to re-house homeless households from temporary accommodation with a view to reducing the time spent in temporary accommodation.
- The performance for settling HB claims will be improved.

OBJECTIVE TWO – ACCESS TO HOUSING

Improve the utilisation of existing accommodation to increase housing options for people who are homeless and to ensure that opportunities to develop new social housing units are maximised.

SDC Priorities for action

It is clear that there is a need to review the accommodation and care needs for older people with a view to releasing accommodation for other groups in the District. This needs to be undertaken in conjunction with other agencies so that an older persons' housing and support strategy can be developed.

There may also be opportunities for increasing social housing available for families by encouraging people who are under-occupying accommodation to move to smaller accommodation. This would either release accommodation suitable for homeless households or reduce pressure on waiting lists making it easier to find accommodation for homeless people. It will be necessary to work with RSLs in the District to ascertain whether a policy of this nature would obtain the desired results.

Wherever possible, private developers should be required to provide social housing whenever planning permission is given. The Housing Team needs to work with planners to ensure that all opportunities are fully used. It is also possible that social housing planning gains could be available from commercial developments and this needs to be investigated.

RSLs will be encouraged to cross subsidise provision of rented housing from shared ownership schemes. Where RSLs provide shared ownership, priority for the properties should be given either to tenants from their rented housing stock or people on the housing register.

The private sector lettings scheme will be expanded and landlords encouraged to let properties to homeless people by publicising the successes and ensuring that potential landlords recognise the benefits from taking part in this initiative.

The Housing Team will contact Rent Officers to try to identify rent levels in the private sector that are within the allowed parameters and eligible for housing benefit.

The granting homes scheme which encourages private landlords to let properties to homeless households will be launched provided resources can be found. The Empty Homes Officer will set up an empty properties data base with a view to granting incentives to owners who are willing to let property to homeless households.

The new Choice Based Lettings scheme will be monitored to ensure that it does not disadvantage homeless households and that a minimum of 35% of lettings are made available to homeless applicants. This target will be reviewed annually.

OBJECTIVE THREE – PREVENTION

To improve services designed to prevent homelessness with a view to reducing the numbers of people who present as homeless.

SDC Priorities for action

The Council will work with voluntary agencies who are in contact with schools to ensure a planned approach to education on issues around homelessness for young people.

In order to try to reduce the numbers of people presenting as homeless as a result of family breakdown the Council will work with partner local authorities and voluntary organisations to develop a relationship and family mediation service.

Effective protocols will be developed with the RSLs regarding notification to the homeless team of potential eviction so that the team can become involved at an earlier stage and investigate alternatives to eviction.

To try to prevent future homelessness, RSLs will be notified of potential support needs of new tenants and SDC will continue to jointly fund one of the supported housing posts to provide floating support to homeless people. The Council will also support Moat Housing Group to provide its defined floating support service.

In conjunction with partner local authorities the Council will investigate ways in which an advice support desk could be operated in the Courts when eviction cases are being held. This work will be undertaken in conjunction with CABs.

The Council will aim to improve the quality of information available to residents about housing options available in the District and will continue to fund outsourced advice service in order to maintain effective independent advice.

The Council will continue to take an active role in the Community Legal Services Partnership and will aim to achieve a quality mark for in house advice giving services.

The feasibility of using the Welfare Desk Model in conjunction with Housing Benefits will be investigated.

The Joint Assessment and Referral Process (JARP) will be developed so that it becomes an effective tool in ensuring an open approach to joint planning and accessing supported housing. It will be widened to include SDHR applicants and those homeless people accessing probation services. Health and Probation professionals will be encouraged to become involved with the JARP.

OBJECTIVE FOUR – CONSULTATION WITH SERVICE USERS

To develop the way in which service users are involved with and able to influence service provision.

SDC Priorities for action

The Council will continue regular surveys of users of the homelessness service and report their views to the homelessness strategy group. Other service providers will be encouraged or where a contract is in place, required, to collate information in relation to the views of their service users and provide reports to the same group. Alongside this work the Homelessness Strategy Group will investigate best practice relating to consultation and develop meaningful methods of consulting with service users.

OBJECTIVE FIVE – WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

To continue to work in partnership with other agencies providing services to homeless people and to improve communication networks.

SDC Priorities for action

The Council will work with Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and other statutory and voluntary agencies to formalise the membership of the homelessness strategy group so that it involves representatives of all relevant sectors. Terms of reference will be developed for the group so that it has a constructive role to play

in ensuring that the Council is meeting the objectives of the homelessness strategy.

The Council will continue to take advantage and actively pursue joint solutions with South West Kent local authorities. (Tonbridge and Malling, Sevenoaks and Tunbridge Wells). In order to pursue the benefits of working jointly Tonbridge and Malling will be invited to join the Homelessness Strategy group.

The Council will explore possibilities for joint working with Dartford Borough Council in order to take into account the needs of the Swanley area.

The Council will develop joint planning with health agencies and Probation through the Joint Planning Policy Board, taking account that the District is part of two Primary Care Trusts.

The Council will assess the benefits and disbenefits of out of area solutions for homeless people, taking into account research currently in progress with a view to working with other local authorities in the future if it appears to provide a feasible and satisfactory alternative solution

The Council will build on the joint training between staff in various agencies already taking place, in order to build up relationships and share best practice

OBJECTIVE SIX – SUPPORTED HOUSING

To identify support needs of homeless households, to provide appropriate information and signposting of the agencies providing support, to work in partnership with other agencies to obtain support and monitor and review service provision.

SDC Priorities for action

In partnership with providers and the Supporting People Team a monitoring system will be put into place for the floating support scheme for people in bed and breakfast accommodation and temporary accommodation. The Council will continue to support WKHA to provide probationary tenancies and support contracts to secure the service.

The Council will work with the Core Strategic Development Group on a review of the supported housing in the District, the support requirements for different client groups in the district and develop solutions to meet the ongoing development of the Kent wide Supporting People Strategy.

The needs and waiting times for tenants wishing to leave supported accommodation will be monitored and the information obtained will be used to

gauge the requirements for move on arrangements with a view to reducing the 'silting up' of supported housing

A sub group of the Homelessness Strategy Group will develop a specific strategy for homeless young people in conjunction with partner authorities. Where care plans are in place for young people the strategy will incorporate joint protocols and procedures for support into the JARP

OBJECTIVE SEVEN – NON-STATUTORY HOMELESS

To keep under review the numbers of street homeless and others where no statutory duty exists and to ensure that appropriate housing services are provided with access to health and support services to avoid reoccurrence of homelessness.

SDC Priorities for action

The Council will investigate the need for drop in advice and will review the service provided at Colebrook Road to determine whether or not there is a need to run annual winter shelters in tandem with the scheme

The Council will work with its partner local authorities to ensure that the Colebrook Road Support Group meets regularly, develops terms of reference and reviews the need for increased provision for street homeless.

5 PROPOSALS FOR MONITORING

Monitoring the targets contained in this strategy will be the responsibility of the Homelessness Strategy Group. A named officer will take responsibility for chasing progress on targets and reporting targets to the Group. The Group will review the action plan annually and a new action plan will be formulated to be approved by the Council.

In order to be effective the group will set additional outcome measures, progress against which can be monitored at each meeting and corrective action taken where targets are not being met. These measures need to be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timetabled. (SMART)

The Council will continue to benchmark the service in the SE LSVT Benchmarking group and will use the results to test the effectiveness of the service provided in Sevenoaks District.

6 PLANNED REVIEW OF STRATEGY

The Council understands the scale of the problem facing it as revealed in the Review, the importance of this strategy and how the operation of it will affect other areas of service delivery. It recognises the Government's requirements on the council to deal with all areas of homelessness, not simply those where it has a statutory duty. Sevenoaks District Council aims to work towards finding appropriate solutions within resources that become available.

It is accepted that this strategy and the Action Plan are the first stages in a process to ensure that this Council is reacting in a positive way to the challenges it faces in relation to homelessness. In the initial stages a significant amount of the work that is required will relate to gaining information and investigating possible solutions.

As a result the Council is committed to undertaking a substantive review of the strategy within 3 years of its publication as well as annual reviews of the priorities for action and the action plan.