
HOMELESSNESS SERVICE

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. This report describes the way that the Council's Housing Options Team deals with homelessness and how it performs in delivering these services.

Summary

2. Homelessness can have a devastating impact on those who experience it and can have long lasting effects. The consequences of homelessness also create very significant costs that reach beyond housing to other services such as Health, Children's Services and the Police. The Government has therefore encouraged Local Authorities to adopt a preventative approach to homelessness. In Darlington there has been ongoing work to develop preventative approaches in partnership with statutory and voluntary sector organisations. Unfortunately there are still occasions when temporary accommodation is necessary and a second element of the approach is to limit the use of this type of accommodation. This report provides information on performance and describes the various aspects of the service.

Recommendation

3. It is recommended that Members are asked to note and comment on the content of this report.

Paul Wildsmith
Director of Neighbourhood Services and Resources

Background Papers

Housing Act 1996 Part V11
Homelessness Act 2002
Making every contact count - A joint approach to preventing homelessness (Aug 2012)

Ken Davies : Extension 2435

S17 Crime and Disorder	Reducing homelessness and the risk of homelessness can help to reduce crime
Health and Well Being	There are very significant links between homelessness and poor health
Carbon Impact	N/A
Diversity	Homelessness can affect anyone but the risks are considerably greater for those on low incomes
Wards Affected	All wards are likely to be affected at some point
Groups Affected	The risk of homelessness can affect any one
Budget and Policy Framework	No change is proposed to the budget or policy framework
Key Decision	This is not a key decision
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent decision
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	The delivery of an effective Housing Options service supports the vision and outcomes of the One Darlington Perfectly Placed by seeking to make sure that those that are at risk of homelessness and those who become homeless are given housing choice that rapidly improve their situation.
Efficiency	Preventing homelessness results in significant saving in housing, health, social care and Policing

MAIN REPORT

Legislative framework

4. The Housing Act 1996 Part V11 and the Homelessness Act 2002 form the main legal framework. Over time the emphasis of successive Governments has shifted towards a preventative approach. In its first national housing strategy, *Laying the Foundations: A Housing Strategy for England* (2011) the current Government outlined its approach to homelessness prevention, meeting the needs of vulnerable people, managing the consequences of those made homeless and addressing rough sleeping, including the development of the *Vision to End Rough Sleeping: 'No Second Night Out'*. (2011). The Localism Act 2011 allows Local Authorities to discharge their homelessness duty, by using an offer of private rented accommodation. Subsequently the Ministerial Working Group on Homelessness published their National Homelessness Strategy, *Making every contact count - A joint approach to preventing homelessness* (Aug 2012) which includes a number of challenges for local authorities.
5. The Homelessness Act 2002 requires Local Authorities to produce a Homelessness Strategy at least every five year and a draft new strategy is scheduled to be produced in 2015/16 with consultation beginning in January 2015.
6. The five key legal decisions that need to be made are found in Housing Act 1996:
 - (a) Eligibility: Is the applicant eligible for public funds?
 - (b) Homelessness: Is the applicant Homeless or Threatened with homelessness?

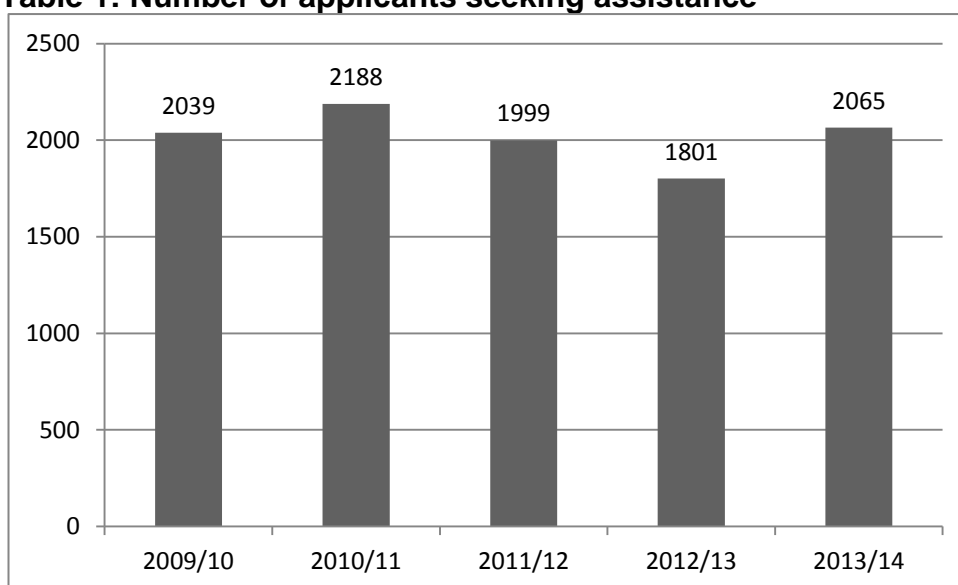
- (c) Priority Need: Is the applicant more vulnerable than a normal member of society?
- (d) Intentionality: Did the applicant cause their homelessness?
- (e) Local Connection: Does the applicant have a connection with the area?

However, the strategic aim is to address the housing needs before there is a need to make these decisions.

Levels of Homelessness in Darlington

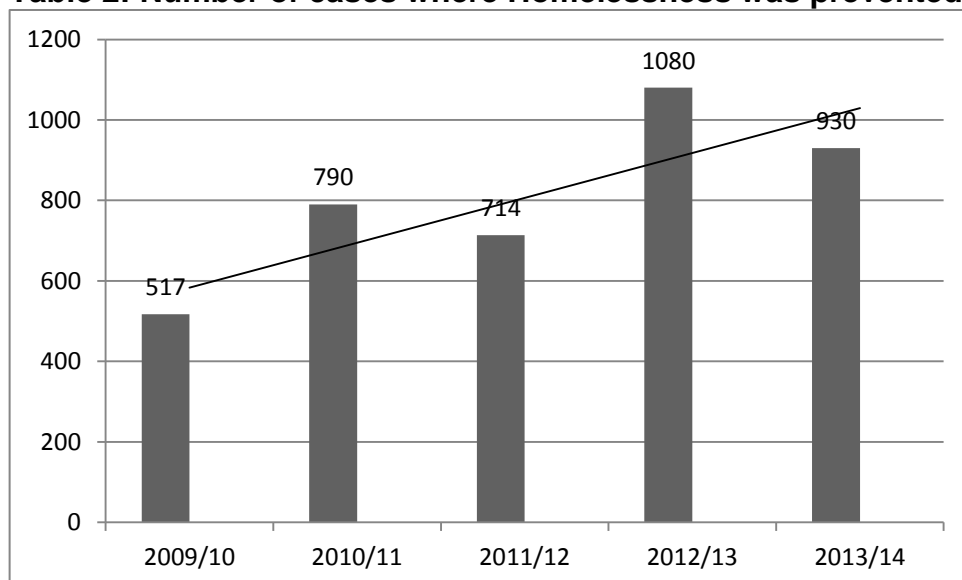
7. The number of people who approach the Housing Options Team for help has been consistent over the past 5 years. In 2013/14, 2065 people approached the Council which is only slightly higher than the average for the past 5 years as shown at Table 1.

Table 1: Number of applicants seeking assistance



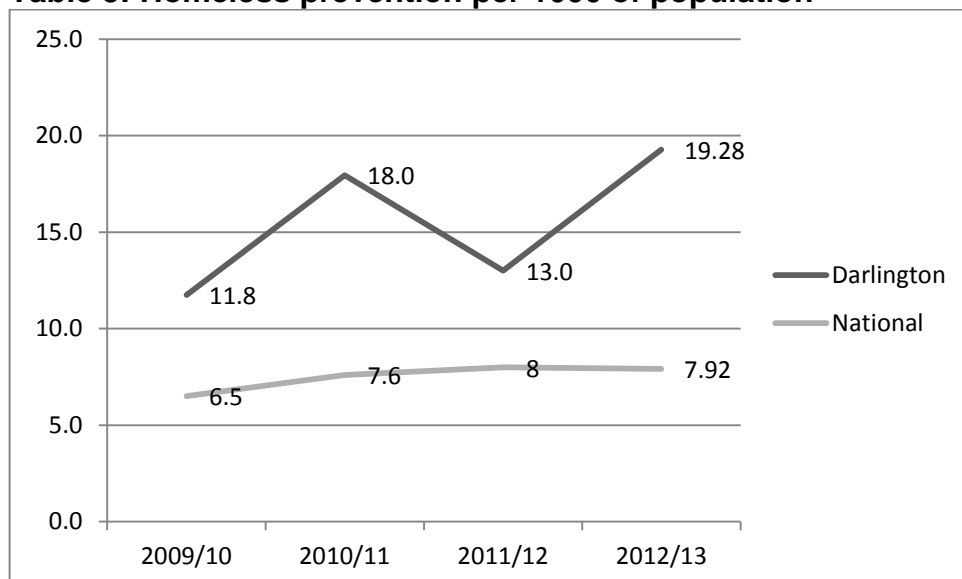
8. For many of those who contact the Housing Options service, basic advice and information can resolve their problems, but around half need more detailed help. A significant number of those who need additional help also have other needs and some of these are complex. A range of preventative actions are in place designed to either reduce the risk of homelessness or break the cycle of homelessness. The trend in the number of cases where homelessness has been prevented by the Council has been steadily upward as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Number of cases where Homelessness was prevented



To provide a benchmark for this performance Table 3 compares Darlington's performance with the national performance.

Table 3: Homeless prevention per 1000 of population

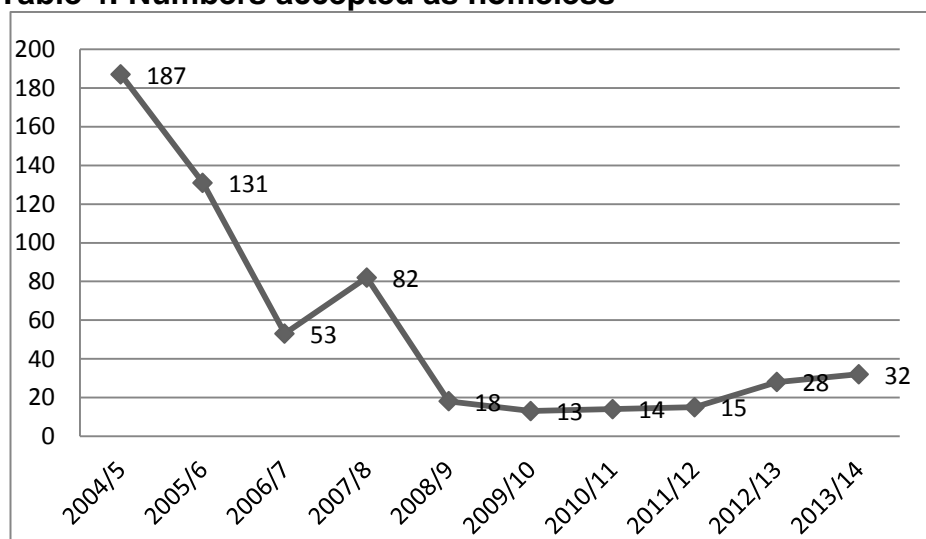


Darlington is among the best performing authorities both in the region and nationally. By successfully preventing homelessness significant savings are being made. A model developed by Heriot-Watt University that was used in research published by Shelter¹ suggests that on average £5300 per case is saved by preventing homelessness.

9. Although the level of preventative activity is generally increasing there has also been a gradual increase in recent years in the numbers that are accepted as homeless. This increase, at least in part can be attributed to the financial recession however the numbers are still small compared to previously as shown in Table 4.

¹ Demonstrating The Cost-Effectiveness of Preventing Homelessness 2007

Table 4: Numbers accepted as homeless



Preventative action

10. The reason that help is sought is varied as illustrated in the Table 5 below.

Table 5: Range of needs for 2013/14

Need	Numbers
16/17 year old	18
Unsuitable/disrepair	51
Child protection issues	6
Domestic Abuse	70
Drug/alcohol issues	17
End of Tenancy	120
Financial Difficulties	9
Leaving Family or Friends home	171
Mental Health Issues	46
Mortgage Arrears	31
Non-domestic violence/ ASB	18
Overcrowding	25
Physical Health Issues	18
Possession proceedings	15
Prison Leaver	25
Relationship breakdown- non violent	101
Rent Arrears	43
Sofa Surfing	49
Street Homeless	34
Other	123

11. The single largest group who needed additional help were people leaving family or friends, followed by the end of a tenancy. However the need listed is the main need and many have secondary needs. For example, mental health is identified as

a main need for 46 but it is a secondary need for a much larger group of people. Drug and Alcohol abuse is also a common secondary factor.

12. Many clients also have other needs that can have a significant impact on how their case is dealt with. As an example, some victims of domestic abuse will want to return to their home and actions are required to ensure that they are safe to return. For others their needs are such that they will need some form of ongoing support to remain in their own home. In dealing with individual clients there is often a need to work closely with a range of other organisations, such as the Family Intervention Team (FIT) or Mental Health Services. A significant amount of work is based on working with other organisations who are involved. This can range from child protection matters, to health problems, or crime and financial issues. A key challenge has been coordinating responses from agencies working with people with complex needs and often chaotic lifestyles. Although comparatively small in number these cases can be time consuming, typically involving 5 or 6 organisations.
13. There are a number of standard actions with any case:
 - (a) Ensure that they are registered on Compass
 - (b) Check on their housing history and identify any barriers to housing
 - (c) Check on their financial position and if necessary refer to another service for more advice
 - (d) Identify other organisations who may already be working with the client
 - (e) Identify any health problems.
14. Set out below is the range of preventative activities that the Housing Options service provides directly or in partnership:
 - (a) Mediation with Relatives**

Many of those who seek help have been asked to leave by their family. The team work with the families to negotiate to allow time for suitable alternative housing. Support for mediation for 16/17 year olds is currently provided by Foundations.
 - (b) Mediation with Landlords, including Housing Management**

There is a relatively small number of cases in this category and not all are related to a breach of a tenancy agreement but can be a lease coming to an end. Negotiations take place with Landlords to avoid eviction proceedings and find solutions. This may involve also working with other agencies that for example may provide money advice.
 - (c) Liaison with Mortgage Companies**

There are a number of avenues to explore including the use of the Government's Mortgage Rescue Scheme. Housing options receive letters from Banks & Building Societies regarding mortgage repossessions and then contact potential clients and invite them in for an interview. There is a government funded Repossession Fund that can be utilised.

- (d) **The Prevention Fund**
Set up by the previous Government this Fund is intended to allow local authorities to make small loans, on a discretionary basis, to households facing eviction. In Darlington the loans are made to applicants who are in priority need and to prevent rough sleeping. At the beginning of £2014/15 there was £20,000 in the fund. Families can loan up to £300 and single people £150. In exceptional circumstances £500 can be loaned where mortgage repossession is involved. A fundamental principle behind this type of loan is that spending a small amount to prevent a family being evicted could save a local authority the far greater cost of having to re-house them.
- (e) **Referrals for floating support or the Council's Housing Plus service**
The Council, in partnership with First Stop, operate the Key Point of Access (KPA). This provides a means of assessment and then access to various support services. A strategic review of support contracts was carried out by the Council and new contracts have been awarded that will reshape the way services are provide from 2015. This is the subject of a separate report on this agenda.
- (f) **Prison leavers**
The Council works with Shelter who have a contract to work within prisons Foundations made a successful bid for "Through the Gate" funding to enable prisoners to be met at the gates of the prison and assisted to find accommodation. Housing staff also attend Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) meetings.
- (g) **Hospital Discharge**
A number of people who are discharged from hospital sometimes do not have accommodation to return to. Housing Options have built up a relationship with the Hospital Discharge Officer to gain early warning where this may be a problem and put suitable arrangements in place.
- (h) **Bond Scheme**
The Bond Scheme is run by the 700 Club. The Bridge2Home Bond Guarantee Scheme aims to help people who are either homeless or vulnerably housed, to find private rented accommodation in Darlington. Most private landlords require tenants to pay a bond before allowing them to take over a tenancy. This bond insures against any loss or damage caused during the term of the tenancy. Many people who are homeless, or on low incomes are unable to afford a bond, and therefore find it difficult to access suitable housing. By guaranteeing a bond to landlords for a period of 12 month, the scheme gives people time to save their own bond. If damage is caused during the first 12 months of the tenancy, Bridge2Home reimburses the landlord to the agreed bond level. Any costs incurred by the scheme are covered by voluntary contributions. During the last financial year 459 people were accepted onto the scheme, and 130 new homes were established.
- (i) **Severe Weather Protocols**
The Council have signed up to the Government initiative to find suitable places for clients during severe weather conditions, including temperatures below

zero, high winds, flooding etc. Government guidance requires the temperature to be below zero for 3 consecutive nights before action is taken. At present the Council acts on the first night.

(j) Rough Sleeper Initiatives

As part of the Government's No Second Night Out programme a bid for funding was successfully made for a bed to be made available in an agreed Bed and Breakfast establishment for a year. First Stop is responsible for responding to alerts from Street Link. Where people are identified the main aim is to reconnect them to services and support and eventually to suitable housing.

(k) Raise awareness in schools, parenting groups and communities

First Stop is currently receiving short term funding to go into schools to talk about homelessness. The Housing Options service has helped produce the scripts and the intention is to learn from the project and develop an action plan.

Assisting those who are Homeless

15. There are occasions where there is a need to provide emergency accommodation but every effort is made to limit the use of temporary and bed and breakfast accommodation as shown in Tables 6 and 7.

Table 6: Use of Temporary Accommodation

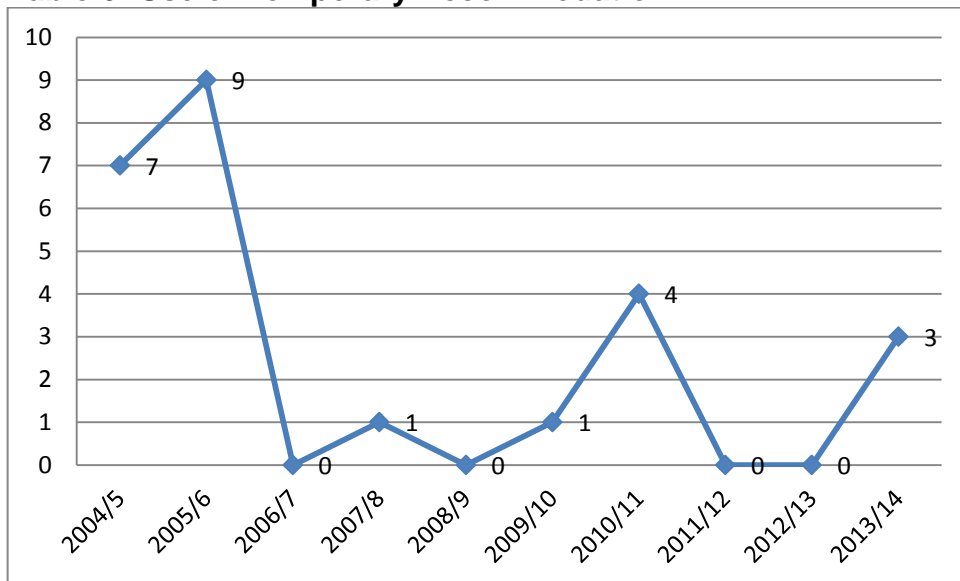
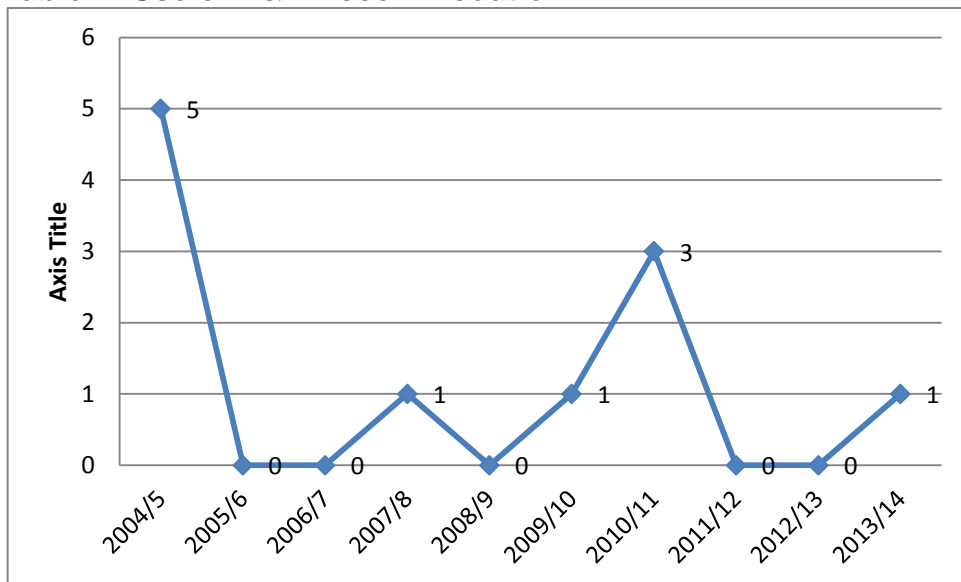


Table 7: Use of B&B Accommodation



16. Where emergency accommodation is made use of the time spent in it is kept to an absolute minimum. Housing options will work with Private Sector Landlords and Social Landlord Providers to find the best solution in the shortest possible time.

Conclusions

17. The approach to homelessness in Darlington has been very successful in minimising the numbers who actually become homeless. There are challenges ahead as homelessness has begun to grow in recent times and more complex cases are being dealt with. Increasingly there is a need to build a team around the individual in order to provide effective support. However, work is ongoing to develop preventative approaches and the new Homelessness Strategy to be published next year will build on this approach.