
PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY 2015-17

**Responsible Cabinet Member -
Councillor Veronica Copeland, Adult Social Care and Housing Portfolio**

**Responsible Director -
Paul Wildsmith, Director of Neighbourhood Services and Resources**

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To seek approval for the Preventing Homelessness Strategy 2015-17 (**Appendix**).

Summary

2. The Homelessness Act (2002) requires all local authorities to develop a Homelessness Strategy every five years, based on a review of the local homelessness situation. The current Homelessness Strategy for Darlington was produced to cover the period 2010 to 2015 and therefore a new strategy is now due. The new strategy covers a period of two years to bring it in line with the Housing Strategy which is due to be renewed in 2017.
3. The Government published Making Every Contact Count: A joint Approach Preventing Homelessness 2012 which set the Government's strategic direction. Since its publication new homelessness strategies have been generally called "Preventing Homelessness" strategies to reflect the main aims of the national strategy.
4. The key aims and objectives of the Darlington Preventing Homelessness Strategy focus on further strengthening the Council and its partners approach to prevention. The Council has made very significant progress during the life of the current Strategy in improving its performance on prevention. However, the numbers of new applicants who are approaching the Council for help has been showing a consistent but small increase over the past five years presenting a key challenge for the new strategy.
5. Darlington was invited to take part in the Government's Gold Standard. The first stage was a comprehensive Peer Review of the service conducted by National Practitioner Support Service. The review found the service to be a high performing service. The recommendations from the review support the actions proposed in this Strategy.

Recommendation

6. It is recommended that the Darlington Preventing Homelessness Strategy 2015/17 be approved.

Reasons

7. The recommendation is supported by the following reasons :-
 - (a) A new Preventing Homelessness Strategy is required to replace the existing Homelessness Strategy which expires this year.
 - (b) The revised Strategy reflects the recent changes in the national and local housing landscape, including the implications of changes in public finances.
 - (c) The Strategy provides a clear set of objectives and actions to address the challenges of homelessness in Darlington.

Paul Wildsmith
Director of Neighbourhood Services and Resources

Background Papers

- (i) Darlington Homelessness Strategy 2010-15
- (ii) Darlington Housing Strategy 2012-17
- (iii) Making Every Contact Count: A joint Approach Preventing Homelessness 2012

Pauline Mitchell: 5831

S17 Crime and Disorder	The strategy forms an important element in the prevention of crime and assisting in the rehabilitation of offenders.
Health and Well Being	There are very significant health issues related to homelessness and the risk of homelessness.
Carbon Impact	There is no impact.
Diversity	There are significant issues concerning the vulnerability of those who may be affected by homelessness.
Wards Affected	All wards
Groups Affected	Many of the actions resulting from the Strategy will provide services that can be accessed by all members of the public. There are also specific actions for groups identified by the Government as particularly vulnerable such as families potentially suffering from domestic abuse or prison leavers.
Budget and Policy Framework	This report does not recommend a change to the Budget or Policy framework.
Key Decision	The Strategy is a statutory requirement.
Urgent Decision	No
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	The prevention of homelessness is a significant factor in the health and well-being of local people, improving "life chances" including access to training and employment, improving personal safety, and, reducing the likelihood of anti-social behaviour.
Efficiency	The homelessness preventative agenda reduces the damaging effects of homelessness to families, individuals and communities. Positively engaging with local people who are homeless, or, are threatened with homelessness, can reduce the level of expenditure associated with homelessness and deliver positive results for customers.

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

8. The Council is required to produce a Homelessness Strategy every five years as a result of the Homelessness Action 2002. The Current Homelessness Strategy was produced in 2010 and expires in 2015. As the current Housing Strategy is due to be renewed in 2017 the new Homelessness Strategy will cover the period 2015 to 2017 to bring the two strategies into line.
9. In 2012 the Government published Making Every Contact Count: A joint Approach Preventing Homelessness which formed the Governments' National Strategy on Homelessness. The key aim was to focus on prevention, recognising that the social and financial costs of homelessness were very significant. As a consequence Local

Authority strategies that have been published since this time have tended to be renamed Preventing Homelessness strategies to reflect the main strategic aim.

10. This Strategy is produced after a review was completed of housing support related Homelessness Services. The results of this review were implemented in January 2015 and forms part of the foundation of this strategy. An internal review was also undertaken of costs and performance. A review has also been undertaken of the Homeless Service as part of the Governments' Gold Standard that was introduced in 2013. A Peer Review took place in February 2015 and the results were published in March 2015 and they were very positive. The results have influenced the final draft of this strategy and its action plan.

Current Position

11. The review of Homelessness Services identified that the Council is either meeting or exceeding national performance standards. Throughout the life of the current strategy the performance on preventing homelessness has been among the best in England while costs of delivering the service are amongst the lowest.
12. This performance has been achieved during a period of considerable change. In 2011 the Government made changes to Homeless legislation in the Localism Act 2011 that allowed Local Authorities to discharge their homelessness duties by finding suitable private sector housing. Reforms to the welfare system have also been an important factor with changes to housing allowances, the introduction of the Bedroom Tax and ongoing changes to other benefits all having an impact. These changes were introduced against a background of the down turn in the economy and reductions in public sector funding. Combinations of these pressures are the drivers of an increase in the numbers of people approaching the council for help. In 2009/10 a total of 1761 approached the Council and by 2014/15 this had risen to 1996. However, as a result of preventative actions this has translated into small numbers who need statutory rehousing. In 2009/10 a total of 13 applications were rehoused as statutory homeless while in 2014/15 the number had risen to 28. For most of those who approached the Council for help their issues were resolved through a range of preventative measures that for example included negotiating for applicants to remain in their current home while their application for rehousing was dealt with to the use of mediation.
13. The single largest reason for people seeking help was as a result of domestic issues- people being asked to leave the home of family and friends and relationship breakdowns. About 15% of those approaching the Council fall into these categories. This is consistently the largest group seeking help both in Darlington and nationally.
14. 2014/15 saw a noticeable reduction in the numbers who are approaching who are "sofa surfing". In total there were 109 who fell into this category (5.4%) and these contrasts with 153 in the previous year 2013/14.
15. There has been a year on year increase in the use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation. In 2009/10 B&B accommodation was used on a total of 82 days while in 2014/15 it had increased to 428 days. Part of this increase can be explained by the introduction of two Government initiatives :
 - (a) No second Night Out - no one who is identified as street homeless should spend a second night out

- (b) Cold Weather Provision - when temperatures fall below zero no one should spend the night on the street.
16. Although the use of B&B's has increased this has not been reflected in the costs to the Council. By ensuring applicants claim Housing Allowance and manage any shortfalls in addition to effective management of how long people stay in B&B's there has been no noticeable increase in costs. However, the general increase in numbers is a key issue for future action.
17. The review of homeless housing related support services took prevention as its key theme and the delivery of support in a focused and timely manner as key objectives. As a consequence the balance of support was further shifted towards supporting people in their own homes and reducing the numbers who are housed in supported housing. This was achieved by the more efficient use of supported housing and floating support. The review was completed in 2014 and changes implemented in January 2015. The changes were introduced in close cooperation with providers and other partners.

Aims and Objectives

18. Although the performance on homelessness has been very good a number of significant changes need to be addressed:-
- (a) The numbers seeking help are increasing.
 - (b) There will be continued reductions in public sector funding through the life of the strategy and beyond.
 - (c) There are a small number of people with complex needs who are now excluded from most forms of housing. They are known to multiple agencies and require considerable resources to manage their needs.
 - (d) There are a growing number of people with mental health issues seeking help.
 - (e) Domestic abuse continues to grow in terms of numbers seeking help.
 - (f) There is a need to limit the use of B&B's.
19. The Preventing Homelessness Strategy identified two broad aims that reflect the partnerships understanding of the damage homelessness can do to the individual and the costs to services :-
- (a) Find a solution before it happens by building on the existing work on prevention that avoids the worst effects of homelessness.
 - (b) Find a quick solution if it does happen-recognising that some people will become homeless and for these people it is critical to their wellbeing that a solution is found as quickly as possible. Finding the right solution quickly will also help to save money.

20. These translate into four Objectives:-

- (a) Early intervention - A series of actions that build on the preventative activities already taking place. They are formed around the ten challenges contained within the Gold standard.
- (b) Rehouse as quickly as possible - Finding suitable and stable housing includes work to ensure that there are decent standards of accommodation and housing management outside of regulated social Housing.
- (c) Building the partnership - Recognising that a strong partnership is essential to the delivery of the actions from this strategy.
- (d) Strive to ensure no one is in homeless crisis for a second night - The numbers who experience 'homelessness crisis' are comparatively small but it is important to ensure that they do not fall into the vicious circle of homelessness. No second night out is one of a number of actions within this objective designed to prevent this.

Financial Implications

21. The resources required to deliver the homeless functions as described in the Strategy are subject to the conditions set out in the Medium Term Financial Plan 2015/16 to 2019/20 that was agreed by Cabinet on 17 February 2015.

Consultation

22. Consultation was carried out extensively as part of the review of housing related support services and there was no need to duplicate this work although additional consultation was necessary to deal with areas not covered in the review. Two workshops took place with stakeholders on the development of this strategy. As a consequence a group is going to be formed to support progress on the strategy Formal public consultation will take place on the final draft of the strategy in April/May 2015.

23. Both Adults and Housing Scrutiny and the Tenants Board have had the opportunity to comment on the first draft of the strategy.

24. An Equality Impact assessment has been produced to support the Strategy.

Outcome of Consultation

25. Comments have supported the direction and actions within the Strategy.

26. The Equality Impact assessment identified that this strategy will have a direct impact on some of the most vulnerable within the community. A preventative approach supported by building a strong partnership should reduce the risks of homelessness for these groups.