Scrutiny Committee Report

Vale of White Horse District Council

Report of Head of Development and Housing

Author: Phil Ealey

Telephone: 01235 547623

E-mail: phil.ealey@southandvale.gov.uk

Cabinet member responsible: Roger Cox

Tel: 01367 243360

E-mail: roger.cox@whitehorsedc.gov.uk

To: Scrutiny Committee

DATE: 26 March 2015

Draft Homelessness Strategy 2015-2020

Recommendation

Scrutiny Committee is asked to consider and comment on the objectives and key actions of the homelessness strategy prior to going out for consultation in May.

Purpose of Report

1. To inform scrutiny of the content of the new Joint Homelessness Strategy for 2015-2020 and to seek the views of Scrutiny committee, in particular on the proposals to tackle homelessness in Vale of White Horse district.

Background

2. The Council has a statutory duty under the Homelessness Act 2002 to publish a Homelessness Strategy every five years. The Council's previous Homelessness Strategy expired in 2013.

3. It is a corporate objective of the council to meet housing need. This strategy aims to address housing need by successfully tackling homelessness over the next five years.

4. The previous Vale of White Horse Homelessness Strategy was published in 2008. It identified six priorities for tackling homelessness and produced a 25-point action plan focussed upon homelessness prevention.

5. The key measures of success for the strategy were an increase in homelessness prevention and a reduction in the use of temporary accommodation.

Percentage of homelessness prevention cases

Year	% homelessness prevented
2008/09	77%
2009/10	86%
2010/11	87%
2011/12	89%
2012/13	87%
2013/14	80%*

The percentage of successful prevention fell during 2013/14 during a period of chronic staff shortages, however the figure recovered to 89% by quarter 1, 2014/15.

Number of households in temporary accommodation at the end of the financial year:

Year	Number of households in temporary accommodation
2008/09	58
2009/10	31
2010/11	21
2011/12	24
2012/13	22
2013/14	23

6. These figures demonstrate that the council has overall maintained high levels of homelessness prevention and significantly reduced the number of households in temporary accommodation. The number of households in temporary accommodation as of February 2015 is only 15.

7. It has however become increasingly difficult to prevent homelessness during the last five years. This is as a result of wider changes that have affected the availability of affordable housing in Vale of White Horse.

Housing benefit reform

8. From January 2012 the maximum Local Housing Allowance (housing benefit) rate was reduced from 50% to 30% of the average market rent. The age a claimant could claim for a self-contained property, rather than a room, was also raised from 25 to 35 years old. The impact of these reforms was that the number of rented properties affordable to housing benefit claimants was significantly reduced.

Localism Act

9. In April 2012 registered providers were granted the power to issue fixed-term tenancies rather than assured (lifetime) tenancies. Local authorities were granted the power to discharge their homelessness duty into the private rented sector. The impact of these reforms was that some registered providers now issue fixed term tenancies. The housing needs team has also adopted the power to discharge the homelessness duty into the private rented sector.

Welfare Reform

10. The spare room subsidy was introduced in April 2013. Social housing tenants of working age receive a deduction to their housing benefit if they are assessed as having a spare bedroom. The initial impact of the reform was that 616 households in Vale of White Horse had a deduction from their housing benefit.

11. The benefit cap was introduced in July 2013. Working age families who are not in employment have their total benefits capped at £500.00 per week. The initial impact of the reform was that 25 households in Vale of White Horse had their housing benefit capped.

12. The welfare reform changes have led to increasing debt and rent arrears amongst low income households. However, due to the successful homelessness prevention approach adopted by the housing needs team, this has not been reflected by an increase in homelessness. The number of new statutory homeless households has been reduced from 63 in 2013/14 to 38 at the end of March 2015.

.

<u>Supply of affordable housing</u>

13. The number of affordable lettings each year contributes to meeting the demand for affordable homes. However over the last two years the number of applicants on the housing register has increased.

End of financial Year	Number of affordable housing lettings	Number of households on the housing register	Number on the housing register by priority band
2009/10	431	3518	Not available
2010/11	289	2730	Not available
2011/12	364	2949	Not available
2012/13	469	3065	Not available
2013/14	366	2868*	Band 1 - 41 Band 2 - 217 Band 3 - 779 Band 4 - 1831
February 2015	394	3322	Band 1 - 51 Band 2 - 230 Band 3 - 915 Band 4 - 2126

*The number of households on the register was reduced by 743 in December 2013 following the introduction of the new allocations policy which excluded homeowners and applicants with no local connection. The policy also introduced new priority bands from 1 to 4. Records of the number of applicants in each band started from April 2013.

Band 1: Exceptional reasons for housing
This band includes applicants where there is an imminent risk to the health and safety of the applicant; where there is statutory overcrowding, or where a demolition notice has been served.

Band 2: Urgent need for housing
This band includes applicants with urgent health or disability needs; who are overcrowded by two or more bedrooms; the statutory homeless and where there are serious environmental hazards at the property.

Band 3: Significant need for housing
This band includes households overcrowded by one bedroom; applicants under notice to vacate and applicants with significant health or welfare needs.

Band 4: Adequately housed
The applicant is considered to be reasonably housed.

14. The most common reason for homelessness in 2013/14 was the loss of a private tenancy. This reflects a national trend of landlords withdrawing from the affordable (housing benefit level) private rented market. There was also an increase in army discharges resulting from a programme of redundancies.

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
Parents or friends can no longer accommodate	9	13	13	10
Loss of private rented or tied accommodation	7	12	23	21
Discharged from Armed Forces	2	5	10	14

15. During the last two years the average rent increase for a 2-bedroom property across South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse was 5.5%. Over the same period the Local Housing Allowance only increased by 2%.

16. This has two negative impacts for the prevention of homelessness. Firstly it is more difficult for low-income households to secure properties within the Local Housing Allowance rate. Secondly it is increasing difficult to persuade private landlords to rent their properties at Local Housing Allowance levels.

17. The increasing numbers on the housing register is an indicator of the sustained demand for affordable housing. The option of affordable housing is becoming the only viable housing option for low income households who are becoming increasingly excluded from the private rented sector.

18. Vale of White Horse District Council therefore faces an increasingly difficult task to tackle homelessness. In 2013/14 the housing needs team prevented 245 households from becoming homeless. By 13 March 2015 they have already prevented potential homelessness for 305 households.

19. The general demand for affordable housing in Vale of White Horse has therefore not resulted in higher levels of statutory homelessness. The team's success in tackling the acute demand for housing has meant the number of homeless households in the Vale continues to fall. This is not the case nationally, where the number of homeless households increased by 6% between September 2013 and September 2014.

20. The purpose of the new strategy is to build upon the success of the previous strategy and to meet the new demands presented by an increasingly challenging affordable housing environment.

21. The 2015-2020 Homelessness Strategy is the first joint strategy for South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse district councils. It is both the most comprehensive and the most detailed strategy ever produced by Vale of White Horse District Council.

22. The process began by undertaking a strategic review of the council's housing advice and homelessness services.

The strategic review

23. The review considered six areas of the current and future service provision:

- Our achievements during the lifetime of the previous strategy
- Actions remaining outstanding from the previous strategy
- Our current provision
- The demand for our services
- The unmet demand for our services
- Future challenges facing our service

24. The main achievements identified during the lifetime of the previous strategy was the establishment of the shared housing needs team across both councils; the maintenance of a high success rate in the prevention of homelessness; a significant fall in the number of households in temporary accommodation and the introduction of a new joint Allocations Policy.

25. The key strengths of the team were comprehensive and case-worked housing advice to residents; the experience and knowledge of Housing Officers; strong working relationships with stakeholder agencies and a clear focus upon the prevention of homelessness.

26. The analysis of current service provision and demand helped identify areas for development. The main areas identified were better consultation with service users; maximising the use of supported accommodation; improving the provision of temporary accommodation; increased focus upon the most vulnerable households; better accessibility to tailored advice and information; raising awareness of our services and engagement with the local community to prevent homelessness.

27. The future challenges facing the housing needs team reflect both the wider economic environment and the forthcoming changes to welfare provision There is an increasing demand for affordable housing and housing costs are rising for both rental and home purchase.

28. There are further reductions planned in welfare spending that will have an impact upon housing. The introduction of Universal Credit, with rent being paid direct to the tenant, will be a challenge to homelessness prevention. It will also become increasingly important to build strong working relationships with private landlords to help secure and maintain tenancies.

The Strategy

29. The homelessness strategy has two overarching strategic aims:

    • To maximise the prevention of homelessness and to minimise the use of temporary accommodation.

    • To tackle the causes of homelessness in the community.

30. In order to achieve these strategic aims an action plan has been developed with five objectives:
    • Improved partnership working to prevent homelessness;
    • minimising the use of temporary accommodation;
    • further developing our homelessness prevention service;
    • improving access to private rented accommodation; and,
    • to provide community outreach to address homelessness.

31. The action plan contains **60** actions for completion over the next five years to achieve the five objectives. The strategy will be reviewed on an annual basis to both ensure that it remains an active document and that the objectives are achieved. The success of the strategy will be measured against key performance indicators. These indicators include the percentage of successful prevention cases; the number of households in temporary accommodation and the length of stay in nightly charged (B&B) accommodation.

32. The following tables in Appendix 1 summarise the objectives and key actions that will be taken to achieve the key objectives of the Homelessness Strategy 2015-2020.

Next steps

33. A four week consultation period in May will provide an opportunity for all interested parties, including service users, stakeholders, staff and councillors to comment upon the draft strategy.

34. A written response to any comments will be produced before a final version of the strategy is forwarded for cabinet approval. The strategy will then be published on the council's website.

Conclusion

35. The Homelessness Strategy 2015-2020 provides a comprehensive framework to successfully tackle homelessness in Vale of White Horse over the next five years.

36. This paper is to inform scrutiny committee of the objectives and key actions of the draft homelessness strategy and to invite any comments with particular regard to Vale of White Horse.

Appendix 1 Objectives and Key Actions

<u>Objective one: Improved partnership working to prevent homelessness</u>

Objective	Key Actions
• Strengthen partnership working with stakeholder agencies	• Work closely with supported accommodation providers to promote rapid progression for clients into independent living. • Actively focus upon homelessness prevention at multi-agency meetings. e.g. public protection meetings and Social Services case conferences. • Maintain regular meetings with key registered providers with a renewed emphasis on tackling potential homelessness. • Assist supported housing providers to increase their move-on options for their clients. • Work with other Local Authorities to secure additional funding for the prevention of homelessness. • Develop closer links with armed forces leavers and their representative agencies.
• Increase the available tools to promote financial inclusion	• Establish referral protocols and procedures with key agencies providing financial support to households. • Investigate the benefits of working more closely with Credit Unions. • Link homeless households into opportunities for education, training and employment.
• Improve the services available for young persons at risk of homelessness.	• Assess the value of introducing external mediation services to prevent family relationship breakdowns. • Expand the services available to young people through the re-commissioning of the Young Persons Pathway.

	• Investigate expanding the assistance offered to under 35's to access private rented accommodation.
• Improve the services available for adults at risk of homelessness, including rough sleepers	• Re-commission the Adult Homeless Pathway to provide the most effective services for reducing single homelessness. • Ensure effective working with partner agencies to provide Severe Weather Emergency Provision.
• Review existing procedures and protocols to concentrate upon tackling homelessness.	• Refocus service providers on either the prevention of homelessness (floating support) or quick, successful re-housing outcomes (accommodation based support).

Objective two: Minimise the use of temporary accommodation

Objective	Key Actions
• Minimise the number of households placed in temporary accommodation	• Focus upon early intervention to prevent homelessness in the first instance. • Maximise the opportunities for households at risk of homelessness to secure alternative accommodation. • Early identification of at risk households with specific housing requirements. eg disabled household members or large families.
• Ensure households move quickly through temporary accommodation into settled housing.	• Proactively work with households in temporary accommodation to pursue their options for moving into settled accommodation. • Liaise with accommodation providers to ensure households do not remain longer than necessary in their temporary accommodation. • Implement our private sector discharge policy where appropriate to end our homelessness duty.

• Improve the provision of temporary accommodation	• Complete an assessment of the future provision of temporary accommodation. • Reconfigure the provision of temporary accommodation in line with agreed recommendations.
• Develop the management of own-stock temporary accommodation	• Review and update all policies and procedures. • Review and update maintenance schedules.

Objective three: Further development of our homelessness prevention service

Objective	Key Actions
• Improve the housing options offered to customers through the provision of enhanced housing advice. *Developing High Performing Teams through continuous improvement*	• Introduce a Housing Needs staff development programme. This would be tailored to the individual needs of the team member but with a wider benefit to the whole team. • Encourage an environment for knowledge-sharing both within the Housing Needs team and with partner agencies.
• Improve our service to customers by communicating with them using the most effective method.	• Commence implementation of the "Channel Shift" strategy to introduce more efficient communication to resolve customer's housing need. eg. improved housing advice on council websites. • Work with the Housing Needs Manager to prepare for the Enhanced Housing Options module on Abritas. • Focus upon vulnerable and complex households able to engage with self service options.

• Continue preparations for Welfare Reform and the introduction of Universal Credit	• Provide training for the Housing Needs Team in preparation for the introduction of Universal Credit. • Liaise with stakeholders to ensure they are prepared for the impact of Universal Credit. • Ensure regulate updates are received from housing benefit concerning changes to Universal Credit and its progress towards implementation. • Establish links with the DWP as a liaison for the implementation of Universal Credit
• Achieve the bronze level award for the Government's Gold Standard challenge for Housing Services.	• Work with our partner councils to complete the assessment process and initially achieve the bronze level Gold Standard. • Use the National Practitioner Support Services self-diagnostic toolkit to assess our services and their value for money.
• Improve the evidence base and recording of homelessness within the districts.	• Identify the range and detail of data collection required for preventing homelessness within the Housing Needs team. • Create framework to ensure cases of partnership working to prevent homelessness prevention are recorded. • Introduce a monitoring procedure for repeat homelessness.
• Maintain a customer feedback framework that supports continuous improvement. *Achieving Customer Service Excellence through listening and learning from customers*	• Maintain ongoing procedures for collecting and monitoring customer feedback. • Ensure actions are taken and monitored as a result of the customer feedback.

• Establish a benchmarking group to promote best practice and value for money	• Investigate comparable local authority housing services to form a benchmarking group. • Reach agreement on the comparative data to be collected and a process for collating, monitoring and analysing the information.

Objective four: Improve access to suitable private rented accommodation

Objective	Key Actions
• Improved customer assistance to access the private rented sector	• Review the range and level of services offered by the private lettings team. • Implement the agreed recommendations following the options appraisal. • Approach landlords of Houses in Multiple-Occupation to assess whether they would be able to provide shared rooms for under 35 year olds.
• Improved support to private landlords	• Develop a marketing strategy with the communications team to publicise our services. • Review the level and type of incentives offered to private landlords. • Implement the agreed recommendations following the options appraisal. • Establish an annual Housing Needs landlord's forum.
• Develop internal private lettings procedures	• Further develop our internal referral processes to ensure properties are quickly matched to the most appropriate customer. • Investigate recycling rent-advance loan repayments back into the homelessness prevention fund.

Objective five: Provide community outreach to address homelessness

Objective	Key Actions
• Increase engagement with the community to identify and help vulnerable people	• Organise talks with GP's and health workers to help identify persons in urgent housing need. • Improve liaison with internal and external partner agencies to identify and address hidden homelessness in the community. • Establish links with local societies and religious groups to identify and tackle hidden homelessness.
• Raise the profile of homelessness issues within the community	• Work with the communications team to raise awareness of the Housing Advice service in the community. This will include establishing a baseline survey for measuring public awareness of our homelessness service. • Attend council meetings to provide briefings and updates on tackling homelessness. • Attend stakeholder meetings to provide information on homelessness issues.
• Enhanced liaison with Registered Providers to prevent homelessness	• Ensure early identification of households at risk of homelessness. • Support Registered Providers to sustain tenancies for vulnerable households at risk of homelessness.