

Vale of White Horse District Council District Council

Homelessness Strategy 2008-13

Executive Summary

The Vale of White Horse District Council is committed to preventing homelessness in the District. We published our first Homelessness Strategy in 2003. Since then, there have been significant steps taken to tackle homelessness in the Vale.

- We have reduced homeless acceptances by 54% over the last five years
- We have halved the number of households in Temporary Accommodation, meeting our 2010 target two years early
- We have established a comprehensive Housing options service and secured additional funding dedicated towards preventing homelessness
- We have prevented 630 households from becoming homeless over the last three years

This is our second strategy which will build on these successes and take action where there are still gaps in services. The Homelessness Strategy 2008-13 has been produced as a result of a review of homelessness in the District. As part of the review, the Council:

- Analysed progress made on action points of the first homelessness strategy
- Analysed homelessness data collected by the Council
- Reviewed homelessness services using the model developed by the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG)
- Identified existing services for homeless people in the Vale
- Consulted with key stakeholders, staff and service users

The homelessness review has shown key areas on which the Council needs to focus its efforts in order to continue to build on the achievements that have already been made.

These priorities can be grouped under six main headings as follows:

1. Improve partnership working to prevent homelessness
2. Improve and develop prevention services for young people
3. Target homeless prevention initiatives effectively
4. Further professionalisation of the housing advice service
5. Improve and reduce the provision of temporary accommodation
6. Maximise the supply of affordable housing

Full action plans have been developed to show how we will implement these priorities. The implementation will be monitored by the Vale Homelessness Forum and the Council's Senior Management Team.

Introduction

The Council's first Homelessness Strategy was produced in 2003. Since then, there have been major changes to how homelessness services are delivered in the District. There has been a deliberate shift in resources away from the more traditional approach of assisting homeless households through the statutory framework once they become homeless to one in which the Council works in partnership with people at risk of homelessness to enable them to resolve their situation.

The most visible sign of this new approach has been the development of housing options services aimed at preventing homelessness by early intervention, appropriate advice and the provision of a range of prevention initiatives. The primary objective of this approach is to prevent individual households from suffering the trauma of homelessness. However, the reasons for people becoming homeless are complex and unfortunately in some cases we cannot prevent homelessness. In re-focusing our services, we have also worked hard to improve the experiences of those people who do become homeless in the Vale.

In producing this second Homelessness Strategy the Council aims to put into practice the lessons learnt from both developing and implementing its first strategy. This new strategy will build on successes by identifying what has worked well and ensuring these services are maintained and developed. This second Strategy will importantly identify areas where there are still gaps in service provision, and develop action plans to tackle this.

Achievements Since 2003

1. A 54% reduction in the number of homelessness acceptances over the last five years
2. A comprehensive 2010 Temporary Accommodation Action Plan produced
3. A 50% reduction in the number of households in temporary accommodation
4. The housing advice team restructured to provide a comprehensive, caseworked approach to homeless prevention
5. The Housing Advice Team gained ISO9000:9002 accreditation
6. A dedicated fund for front- line staff to use to prevent homelessness has been introduced
7. An additional £40,000 of central government funding has been secured for the next three years to further develop homeless prevention services
8. The appointment of a full-time Private Lettings Officer to enable people to access private rented accommodation
9. The production of a Housing Services Directory
10. An increase in the number of Deposit Guarantee Bonds issued from 11 in 2004 to 49 in 2007
11. 630 households prevented from becoming homeless over the last three years
12. A programme of home visits introduced for people threatened with family evictions
13. All staff have received training in mediation and negotiation skills
14. The successful launch of the Council's Choice Based Lettings scheme
15. Recognition from the Audit Commission of how the Council's model of linking homeless prevention to Choice Based Lettings is an example of good practice
16. The introduction of a Sanctuary Scheme to enable victims of Domestic Violence to remain at home
17. Funding for four refuge spaces across Vale and South secured as part of Supporting People programme
18. The introduction of a common assessment and referral form across Oxfordshire for young people with housing and support needs
19. The opening of The Abingdon Foyer, a supported housing scheme for young people offering training and employment opportunities

District Profile

The Vale of White Horse District is a rural area located to the south and west of Oxford City with a resident population of 116,000. The District contains three market towns together with urban areas to the west of Oxford City. The area is generally affluent, with low unemployment and relatively high wages.

The total number of dwellings in the district as of 31 March 2007 was 48,717. The level of owner occupation is at 77%, higher than the national average of 74.4%.

Owner Occupied	77%
Private Rented	7%
RSL	13%

The cost of housing in the Vale, both for home ownership and renting, is above the national average with average entry costs for first time buyers being in the region of £220,000.

Housing Need In The Vale

The most recent Housing Needs Survey (2005) concludes that that the Council needs to enable the development of 845 affordable lets each year to meet the level of need in the District.

There are currently 3701 households on the Council's Housing Register, with 145 assessed as being in urgent need and 608 assessed as being in high need. On average, 350 relets of social housing become available each year, with approximately one third of these being elderly designated.

Main Findings Of The Review

Main reasons for homelessness – 2007/08

Reason	National	Regional	Vale
Parents, family or friends exclusion	35%	38%	35%
Domestic violence	12%	9%	16%
End of Assured Shorthold Tenancy	16%	13%	13%

Main reasons for priority need - 2007/08

Reason	National	Regional	Vale
Dependant child	58%	44%	64%
Pregnancy	11%	25%	16%
16/17 year olds	7%	9%	6%

Main findings of the stakeholder consultation

The majority of customers accessing the housing advice and homelessness service found the service to be easy to access and informative. Of those living in temporary accommodation, 80% were satisfied with the accommodation.

The consultation with stakeholders showed worrying gaps in awareness of what the Council currently does to help prevent homelessness. Some of the services currently being offered that partners were not aware of include:

- The financial assistance that is offered to enable people to access private rented accommodation
- Floating support services available for young people

Consultation with stakeholders also showed a lack of awareness of some of the initiatives by the Council to tackle gaps. These include:

- Development of refuge provision in the District
- Development of supported housing schemes
- Development of accommodation for people with high support needs
- Reconfiguration of floating support and resettlement services across the County to meet need

There are gaps in partnership arrangements which are more visible for certain client groups, including:

- people leaving prison
- young offenders
- tenants at risk of homelessness
- people returning from drug rehabilitation
- people leaving Armed Forces accommodation

Despite successes there are some serious gaps in provision. The housing advice service at present does not have a formal service level agreement (SLA) with a mediation service after the previous supplier closed. There is no formal SLA with providers of temporary accommodation. Consultation with service users is weak.

The Development Of The Homelessness Strategy

The strategy has been produced based on the findings of the Council's homelessness review. The review was carried out over the winter of 2007-08 and was made up of five main parts:

- Analysis of progress made on action points of the first Homelessness Strategy
- Analysis of homelessness data collected by the Council
- Review of homelessness services using the model developed by the DCLG.
- Identifying existing services for homeless people in the Vale
- Consulting with key stakeholders, staff and service users

A copy of the Council's Homelessness Review can be obtained by visiting the Vale of White Horse District Council's website www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk or by telephoning 01235 520202.

Strategic Links

The Council's Homelessness Strategy should not be viewed in isolation, the strategic aims and actions contain links to both national and regional priorities.

At a national level, the DCLG's emphasis is on reducing homelessness by offering a comprehensive range of prevention initiatives, enabling more people to access a settled home and halving the numbers living in temporary accommodation by 2010.

Clearly, the supply of affordable housing and the mechanisms by which this housing is let has direct implications for the level of homelessness within the District. At the centre of the Regional Housing Strategy is the provision of more affordable homes. The development of Affordable Housing is also a key corporate priority for the Vale.

The Council's Housing Strategy describes the need to assist homeless people by developing homeless prevention initiatives, including mediation services and ensuring support is available to enable people to manage their tenancies.

Key performance indicators have been established to measure the effectiveness of the Council's prevention work. These include:

- preventing 100 households per year from becoming homeless due to prevention work
- preventing homelessness in at least 60% of all households approaching the council for assistance

There are close links between the Council's Homelessness Strategy and the 2010 Temporary Accommodation Plan.

The Community Strategy contains a commitment to provide more and better facilities for the homeless.

We also work in partnership with our Oxfordshire neighbours to prevent homelessness. Oxfordshire Housing Partnership is a forum of Members and senior officers tasked with forming effective partnerships to tackle housing issues. At front line level, homeless managers meet as part of the District Homeless Group. Supporting People and other key stakeholders are represented at these forums.

Local Area Agreements are also in place around homeless prevention.

Homelessness services in the Vale are also affected by the Supporting People Strategy. The Council takes a lead role at both senior officer and Member level in the decision making process regarding how services are funded by the Supporting People Team within Oxfordshire.

The Strategy- Identification Of Priorities

The Council's first Homelessness Strategy contained 41 different actions under four broad headings. There was little detail provided of how the Council intended to achieve its objectives or what resources would be available. The Council believes that its first Strategy was somewhat over-ambitious and was more about what it aspired to do rather than what could be achieved with available resources.

Despite this, many of the actions have been achieved. The overarching aim to reduce homelessness by offering better services has been achieved with significant reductions in homelessness and the use of temporary accommodation. The Council's second Homelessness Strategy will continue to develop and build on the successes of the first Strategy, especially in the areas of homeless prevention.

The Review has however shown up clear areas in which the Council needs to focus resources in order to deliver further improvements in outcomes for people threatened with homelessness.

The review of homelessness in the Vale has shown key areas on which the Council needs to focus its efforts in order to continue to build on the achievements that have already been made.

These priorities can be grouped under six main headings as follows:

1. Improve partnership working to prevent homelessness
2. Improve and develop prevention services for young people
3. Target homeless prevention initiatives effectively
4. Further professionalisation of housing advice services
5. Improve and reduce the provision of temporary accommodation
6. Maximise the supply of affordable housing

Priorities

1. Improve partnership working in order to prevent homelessness

The Council believes that effective partnership working coupled with a good range of prevention tools will have the greatest impact on the level of homelessness in the District.

The review showed up many examples of good partnership working that are having a direct impact on the prevention of homelessness.

However, there still remain significant gaps that limit the ability of the Council to achieve its objectives. Links with some key stakeholders are extremely poor, and in some cases, non-existent.

Furthermore, there is no forum of all key stakeholders whose primary function is to tackle homelessness in the District

We will improve partnership working by:

- Ensuring existing protocols are efficient
- Establishing new protocols and arrangements where necessary
- Raising awareness of protocols and partnerships
- Establishing a Vale Homelessness Forum

2. Improve and develop prevention services for young people

The Council is firmly committed to tackling youth homelessness. In developing this as a separate priority, the Council acknowledges that the options toolkit needs to be specialised to meet the particular needs of young people. The Council also believes that there are more significant barriers to young people accessing private rented accommodation.

In 2006/07, fifteen 16-17 year olds were accepted as homeless representing 17% of all acceptances. In 2005/06, the figure for 2005/06 was even higher at nineteen households. This was against regional averages of 9% on 2006/07. We have made significant progress in tackling this issue with acceptances of 16-17 year olds falling to just five in 2007/08 which represents 6% of all acceptances.

It is our intention to build on this progress by:

- Ending the use of B&B for young people by 2010 in line with Government

objectives

- Reducing the use of out-of-area placements for young people
- Continuing to reduce the level of homeless acceptance for this group
- Improving prevention outcomes for young people

We will improve and develop prevention services for young people by:

- Developing a Youth Homelessness Strategy
- Establishing a supported lodgings scheme
- Working with The Foyer and the Supporting People Team to provide accommodation for young people with high support needs
- Establishing and promoting prevention options for young people
- Continuing to work with the Oxfordshire County Council Joint Housing Team to deal with issues.

3. Target homeless prevention initiatives effectively

The Council intends to maintain and further improve its homeless prevention framework. In 2004 we introduced a database to record all prevention and options activity. This has enabled us to more closely monitor statistical data to identify trends or areas of concern which may suggest that gaps in service are leading to rising levels of homelessness among a particular client group.

In the Vale, recent data concerning those homeless due to leaving the armed forces has shown a worrying trend. There is an army base in the District, and in the last year we have seen a marked increase in the numbers of people who are homeless due to leaving the armed forces, from just one in 2006/07 to four in 2007/08. Early analysis of acceptances for 2008/09 show that in just one month (April 08), five households have been accepted as homeless due to leaving the armed forces. Changes to how local connection is defined in relation to armed forces accommodation could have further impact on levels.

Although the Council has not yet seen any impact on homelessness acceptances due to the emerging crisis in the money markets, we have seen increasing numbers of people approaching our options service for advice on mortgage problems. Given the current economic climate, this is a trend we are likely to see continue.

In the area of domestic violence, the Council has established a Sanctuary Scheme. However, people homeless due to domestic violence is the third highest reason for homelessness and there are still gaps in service provision for this group.

We will ensure that prevention initiatives are targeted effectively by:

- Maintaining the current options toolkit
- Spending prevention funds effectively
- Entering into a new SLA with a company providing mediation services
- Marketing housing options for people leaving armed forces
- Ensuring staff have appropriate expertise in dealing with mortgage repossessions

- Establishing refuge provision in the area
- Agreeing common policies and procedures with our main housing association partners for people at risk of domestic violence

4. Further professionalisation of the housing advice service

The housing advice service has worked with 1053 households over the past three years achieving successes in 60% cases. To maintain and build on these successes we will ensure that the service is properly resourced and managed in order to ensure the best possible outcomes for homeless people.

We will develop housing advice services by:

- Introducing individual performance monitoring for officers both in housing options and private sector lettings.
- Introducing a framework for customer service feedback.
- Introducing a rolling training programme for housing advice staff.
- Setting up and maintaining a central library for housing publications.
- Producing new literature for White Horse Lettings and developing a marketing campaign to attract new landlords.
- Providing an enhanced service to homeless households.

5. Improving and reducing the provision of temporary accommodation.

The focus of the Council's Homelessness Strategy is undoubtedly on prevention and reducing the numbers of households in temporary accommodation. The Council's 2010 temporary accommodation target was to halve the number of households in temporary accommodation from 180 to 90, which has been achieved two years early. We aim to further reduce this to 62 by 2010. The Council's 2010 Temporary Accommodation Plan sets out how we will achieve this target.

Even though the Council is committed to its 2010 target, some households will continue to be placed into temporary accommodation. The adverse effects of temporary accommodation, particularly on children, are well documented. Consultation with residents in our temporary accommodation demonstrated the majority were happy with that accommodation. However, there were also comments that reflected improvement is needed.

It is therefore important that the Council takes steps to ensure that people's experiences of temporary accommodation are positive. It is also important that the Council adopts procedures to ensure that people are supported in temporary accommodation so as to prevent repeat homelessness and enable them to move on to permanent housing.

We will both improve and reduce the provision of temporary accommodation by:

- Undertaking a comprehensive review of temporary accommodation, to include value for money, best service provider, service level agreements, and the type (size, tenancy and location) of temporary accommodation

- Submitting proposals and a subsequent action plan following the comprehensive review
- Producing a new Temporary Accommodation Reduction Plan
- Proactively managing housing need for households in temporary accommodation, to ensure that they are bidding for permanent accommodation and provide them with regular advice and assistance on their housing options
- Improving support for households in temporary accommodation.
- Introducing a service contract with a local removal company.

7. Maximising the supply of affordable housing

The table shows new builds of affordable housing over the previous three years.

Year	Completions
2005/06	131
2006/07	42
2007/08	160

Demand for affordable housing continues to outstrip supply. Both the supply of affordable housing and the mechanism by which it is let has a direct impact on homelessness levels in the District.

The Council has committed to a target of enabling 100 new units per year of social housing. The Council also expects developers to produce 40% of all new building as affordable housing. In addition to this, as part of a Local Area Agreement, the Council hopes to see an additional 36 units built over a three year period.

The current Allocations Policy and Choice Based Lettings scheme were introduced in 2004. The percentage of permanent lets going to homeless households has increased slightly over the same period that the number of acceptances have been falling, meaning more lets are going to statutory homeless. Amendments to the Council's Allocations Policy will be implemented in summer of 2008. It is crucial that these amendments continue to support the council's homelessness objectives.

We will maximise the supply of affordable housing by:

- Working with planners, developers and housing associations to meet new-build targets for affordable housing
- Implementing and reviewing the effects of the new Allocations Policy
- Introducing and reviewing a sub-regional Choice Based Lettings scheme

Taking The Strategy Forward

As part of our consultation with key stakeholders undertaken as part of the review, we asked for expressions of interest to form a Homelessness Group to oversee the implementation of this Strategy and to address emerging issues throughout its lifetime.

We received a high level of interest and this group will meet twice a year. The Group will be made up of representatives of all key stakeholders.

In addition to this, progress on the implementation of the Homelessness Strategy will be reported to Senior Management Team and the Executive as part of the service monitoring processes.