

REPORT TO: Executive Board
DATE: 24 September 2009
REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director – Health & Community
SUBJECT: Homelessness Strategy
WARD(S) Borough-wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 To seek Executive Board's approval to ratify a new Homelessness Strategy for the Borough.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That Executive Board agrees the adoption of the new strategy.

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 The Homelessness Act 2002 requires each local authority to review the extent and nature of homelessness in their area and to produce a strategy and action plan to prevent and tackle the problem. Halton's first Homelessness Strategy was published in 2003 which included measures to prevent homelessness and to develop and improve services for households who become homeless.

3.2 The new Homelessness Strategy builds on the progress made from the previous Homelessness Strategy and focuses more heavily on prevention and early intervention strategies.

4.0 KEY FINDINGS AND STRATEGY RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Key findings of the Review include:

- Achievements include the setting up of a Homelessness Forum, rent deposit scheme, and a Homeless Prevention Service.
- In 2007/08 296 households applied to the statutory homeless service, of which 221 households were accepted as having a priority need and being homeless through no fault of their own. This represents a 14% reduction since 2003/04.
- In total the homeless service (including prevention work) dealt with 1,093 customers.
- More households seeking help have multiple problems such as mental health, and substance misuse.
- Homelessness due to parental evictions remains high.
- Levels of homelessness amongst those with dependent children also remains high.

- Debt related homelessness requires earlier intervention.
- A wide range of support services are available for those who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness.
- Consultation highlighted a desire for service user involvement to shape service delivery.
- General satisfaction was expressed regarding provision, but services needed to be better co-ordinated.

4.2 Key recommendations include the following:

- Provide mechanisms to enable service users to contribute to service development.
- Ensure a comprehensive approach to intelligence gathering and analysis.
- Enable specific service developments and interventions focused on those most at risk and those facing multiple problems.
- Combine homelessness services with measures to improve employability, linking with training and employment services.
- Ensure mechanisms for cross departmental and organisation work to improve service delivery and development of joint planning to resolve barriers for re-housing, particularly for those with drug and alcohol issues and mental health problems.

5.0 CONSULTATION

5.1 A formal consultation exercise was carried out in March 2009, to seek views on the draft documents referred to above. The Council received 6 formal responses of which 3 were from external sources, 1 from an Elected Member and 2 from internal officers.

5.2 However it should also be noted that the 'blue print' for developing the draft Homelessness Strategy was presented to the Borough's Homelessness Forum. The Homelessness Forum also had the opportunity to consider and comment on the findings and draft strategy on several occasions ahead of a wider consultation exercise.

5.3 The Council also consulted with service users regarding the Homelessness Service as part of the options appraisal, which informed the Council's thinking on the most appropriate service delivery model for the operational service. The views of young service users aged 16-25 years were considered during a Youth Homelessness Conference in October 2008. The views from these consultation events have been fed into the review findings and addressed via the strategy action plan. The general public has also had the opportunity to comment via the Council's web site.

5.4 Specific service user consultation regarding the Homelessness Strategy (as opposed to the operational aspects of the Housing Solutions service) has also taken place. This will provide a credible

foundation on which to proceed.

- 5.5 The majority of comments received from the formal consultation exercise relate to presentational issues, or the need to update some information due to a time lag from the documents being written and the consultation exercise-taking place. One of the respondents, (Halton Housing Trust,) felt that some comments contained within the documents required further expansion or clarification. These comments have been acted upon accordingly and any factual inaccuracies corrected. The Homelessness Strategy will also be complemented by a recently drafted Repossession Action Plan which is a new requirement imposed by the Government reflecting the current economic climate.
- 5.6 The key thing to note is that the respondents were supportive of the preventative emphasis of the new strategy, its general strategic direction and the objectives and recommendations contained within the draft strategy.
- 5.7 The Review and Strategy were presented to the Urban Renewal Policy and Performance Board on the 17th June 2009 and endorsed its content.
- 5.8 The draft documents have now been revised taking account of all appropriate comments. Where possible the recommendations have been rationalised in order to clarify and prioritise strategic thinking and to aid delivery of resulting actions.

6.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Homelessness is a statutory function and directly contributes to several of the Council's Corporate Priorities. The Homelessness Review has mapped linkages to the Council's strategic priorities and the new strategy will complement existing corporate strategies.

7.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 It is anticipated that a significant proportion of the actions identified can be achieved within existing budgets. However some additional expenditure may be required over time as projects develop. The effective use of existing resources, including service re-configuration where necessary and any potential new funding streams will be explored to fund these areas.

8.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

8.1 Children & Young People in Halton

Most of the referrals to the Housing Solutions Team relate to

households with dependent children. An increasing number of referrals relate to young people under the age of 25.

8.2 Employment, Learning & Skills in Halton

The new strategy emphasises the need to look holistically at services and to link homelessness services with measures to improve employability, linking with training and employment services.

8.3 A Healthy Halton

Improving the performance of the statutory homelessness service and ensuring a strategic focus on early intervention and prevention will reduce the negative effects that being homeless can have on an individual's health and well being.

8.4 A Safer Halton

A significant proportion of households seek the assistance of the Housing Solutions Team because they have lost their last address due to harassment or domestic abuse. A range of preventative options such as the sanctuary scheme and floating support schemes are potentially available to prevent homelessness. The early intervention approach and improved communication between agencies should tackle this issue more effectively in the future.

8.5 Halton's Urban Renewal

None identified.

9.0 RISK ANALYSIS

9.1 Failure to adopt a new Homelessness Strategy will be in breach of the Homelessness Act 2002 and would hinder the Council's efforts to reduce homelessness in the Borough. This could impact on the operational aspects of the Housing Solutions service resulting in the following:

- Poor inspection ratings.
- A negative impact on the CAA rating.
- Increased bed and breakfast expenditure.
- Poor outcomes for service users.

10.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

10.1 The new Homelessness Strategy seeks to address inequality of access to services and life opportunities experienced by many homeless people who are amongst the most marginalised members of our community.

11.0 REASON(S) FOR DECISION

11.1 To adopt a new fit for purpose Homelessness Strategy for the Borough covering the next five years.

12.0 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

12.1 The Action Plan prioritises a number of developmental activities. The actions highlighted are considered to be the ones which would optimise the potential to improve outcomes for homeless households and those at risk of homelessness.

13.0 IMPLEMENTATION DATE

13.1 With immediate effect.

14.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

Document	Place of Inspection	Contact Officer
Homelessness Strategy Executive Board Report 24/07/03	Municipal Building Widnes	Strategic Director Health & Community