

Strategic Review of Homelessness in Halton 2008

Executive Summary	4
1 Homelessness & Prevention: definitions and measurement	12
What is homelessness?	12
The statutory definition of homelessness	13
Measuring homelessness	13
Homelessness Prevention	14
2 Context for the Homelessness Strategy	15
The borough's profile	15
Housing supply & demand	16
Halton's strategic development	17
Regional Homelessness Strategy	19
Government Policy & Performance Framework	19
Conclusions & Recommendations	21
3 The 2003-2008 Strategy	23
Goals	23
Achievements	23
Conclusions & Recommendations	26
4 The Extent of Homelessness in Halton	27
Households using the Statutory Service	27
Households using the HHT Options & Advice Service	34
Households using Halton's Prevention Service	36
Overall level of homelessness	38
Conclusions & Recommendations	41
5 Halton's provision for those facing - or most at risk of – homelessness	43
The Council's homelessness services	43
Homelessness and Debt Advice Services	46
Support during family breakdown	48
Domestic abuse response	49
Support for young people	51
Anti Social Behaviour cessation	52
Drug & alcohol support	52
Support for those with mental health problems	53
Outreach support for general risk groups	54
Registered social landlords' support for tenants at risk	55
Support from Housing Benefit	55
The Council's Enforcement Service	56
Conclusions & Recommendations	57
6 Short Term Accommodation	61
Current strategic context	61

Sources of accommodation.....	61
Support provision in short term accommodation.....	63
Gypsy & Traveller accommodation.....	63
Conclusions & Recommendations.....	63
7 Settled Housing	65
Access to Social Housing.....	65
The Private Rented Sector.....	66
Low cost home ownership.....	68
Gypsy & Traveller sites	68
General access considerations	68
Conclusions & Recommendations.....	69
8 Forecasting future homelessness	72
Historical pattern of homelessness in Halton.....	72
Current risk levels and the impact of strategies and new services.....	73
Emerging risks	73
Strategic resources	75
Conclusions	75
Appendix 1 Review & strategy development methods.....	77
Appendix 2 Strategic priorities and planned activity in the 2003-2008 strategy.....	78

Executive Summary

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. Accordingly, Halton's first Homelessness Strategy was published in 2003, creating a 5-year programme of measures to develop and improve services for those who become homeless and to prevent homelessness in the borough wherever possible.
2. The first strategy delivered an unprecedented collective response from services and housing providers across the borough to reduce homelessness levels and achieve significant improvements in the scope and scale of services.
3. A second strategic review of homelessness was undertaken in 2008 and updated in 2009 to reflect the return of the formerly contracted out homelessness and housing advice service to direct Council control in October 2008. The review has provided a robust evidence base on which to develop the Borough's Homelessness Strategy for 2009-13. This review document details the data and information from service users and stakeholders used to inform the new Homelessness Strategy. Services and delivery models were analysed and gaps or duplications highlighted. Recommendations were made on the basis of the findings of the review process.

Methods used in drawing up this review

4. The review of current need and provision was conducted via desktop research and analysis of primary and secondary data and assessment of existing strategic and performance review documents. Information gathering exercises were carried out 6 months apart, with a series of detailed follow up interviews with key agencies. The strategy was also informed by user consultations carried out in relation to the homelessness services and provision for young people. A range of service users and stakeholders attended these events across all the collective 'homelessness' services. Further details can be found at Appendix 1.

Definitions

5. This review has used the CLG¹ definition of homelessness as "a lack of secure accommodation that can reasonably be occupied".
6. The main reasons for people losing their homes in England are:
 - Parents/friends/relatives no longer willing to accommodate.
 - Breakdown of relationships.
 - Loss of private rented homes – usually at the end of fixed term tenancies.
7. Structural problems- such as the shortage of affordable housing - turn home loss into homelessness. Additionally, a number of personal factors can predispose people to the risk of homelessness – e.g. debt, domestic abuse, drug or alcohol addiction, and living in insecure or poor quality housing.

¹ Communities & Local Government – the government department with responsibility for homelessness

8. Under the Housing Act 1996², each local authority has a duty to help those who are homeless. The law defines homelessness broadly, and specifies the categories of people entitled to help. Only those who are most vulnerable [e.g. those with dependent children] and who have not caused their own homelessness are entitled to help with what is known as 'the main housing duty' i.e. assistance with accommodation.
9. The national measurement of homelessness is the level of this statutory homelessness- i.e. the number of people who apply for help under the Housing Act.
10. Whilst this is a valuable indicator of the scale of the problem amongst some of the most vulnerable, it does not capture all those who are homeless but not entitled to help, or those who do not seek rehousing under the law.
11. The Government has actively encouraged local authorities to introduce early intervention and prevention measures to avoid households being assisted at the point of crisis. Measurement of prevention has inevitably concentrated on the reduction of statutory homeless applications and acceptances. It is important to consider this when assessing the overall demand for 'homelessness services' in Halton.

Local strategic context

12. Halton is reversing a long-term decline in its population and in its economic and social conditions. However, it is still clearly one of the most deprived boroughs in England – the 10th most deprived in the northwest. Its decline created a legacy of poverty and social exclusion, which are significant factors in the risk of homelessness. The Housing Needs Survey found that there is an annual shortfall in affordable housing of 176 homes. It was recommended that this figure should be split between rent and shared ownership properties.

The 2003-2008 Strategy

13. Halton's first Homelessness Strategy met the majority of its aims. Key developments included:
 - **Establishment of a Homelessness Forum.**
 - **Multi Agency Monitoring** - a common data collection system.
 - **A Deposit Guarantee Scheme** – to help people secure privately rented accommodation.
 - **A mediation service** to prevent young people becoming homeless.
 - **Increased access to hostel accommodation.**
 - **A Common Nomination scheme** to settled housing provided by Registered Social Landlords.
 - **A Homelessness Prevention Service**, working with those at high risk of or actually homeless to reinstate them in their home, or get speedy access to settled accommodation.

² As amended by the Homelessness Act 2002

15. Some initiatives set out in the 2003 strategy are still to be delivered and remain pertinent and will be carried over to actions required in the new strategy.
16. Consultation highlighted a desire for stronger user consultation processes and more 'routine' consultation. The Borough's new Homelessness Strategy 2009-13 will also address this.

The Extent of Homelessness in Halton

17. The review process examined data from the 3 key services provided by or on behalf of the Council in 2007/08. At that time this was– the Statutory Homelessness Service, the Options & Advice service and the Homelessness Prevention Service.
18. In 2007/8, 296 households applied to the Statutory Homelessness Service, a 62% reduction from 780 in 2003/4. 221 households were accepted as homeless through no fault of their own and in priority need for assistance. This is a 14% reduction since 2003/4. These changes also coincided with: a national fall in homelessness after a peak caused by changes in the legislation in 2002/3; changes to Halton's homelessness service practice; the development of the Prevention services and Deposit Guarantee Scheme; and a new system for service access which allowed more filtering of cases.
19. Those accepted in 2007/8 represent 75% of all those who applied, whereas in 2003/4, this figure was 33%. As the number of decisions fell, the rate of acceptance increased. Wider analysis suggests that this pattern is linked to more appropriate use of the service by those who need it and are entitled to help.
20. Data from all three services suggests that households seeking help because they were facing home-loss in 2007/8 numbered 1,093.
21. There is concern - backed by evidence from the Multi Agency Monitoring project- that more people are now seeking help who have multiple problems, including mental illness and drug or alcohol addiction, and that the majority of those using the services lack the skills to enable employment, and better housing prospects.
22. Across the three principal services 46 clients had slept rough or were of no fixed abode in 2007/8. Multi Agency Monitoring for Halton shows that 97 people reported sleeping rough in 2007/8. Halton carried out a rough sleeper "street count" in March 2008 where one person was officially counted.
23. Evidence from the review of these services suggests a number of challenges that need to be addressed by the new Homelessness Strategy:
 - The level of homelessness arising from the parental home.
 - Levels of homelessness amongst those with dependent children – over 600 children and 70 expected children were homeless or at risk of homelessness in 2007/8.
 - Levels of homelessness amongst young people under 24yrs.

- Debt related homelessness and the potential for this to worsen over the coming years, requiring early assistance.
 - Street homelessness reported amongst some key need groups.
 - The prevalence of domestic abuse as a cause of homelessness.
 - The employability of many who are at risk of home loss.
 - Multiple needs amongst those seeking help.
 - The higher levels of repeat enquiries – around 7% - for service users of the Prevention and Options & Advice services.
24. The merger of the 3 principal homelessness services in October 2008 into the Council's Housing Solutions Team should result in a comprehensive and a more proactive approach to those at risk of homelessness.

Homelessness & Debt Advice Services

25. The Citizens Advice Bureau, Shelter and the Council's own Welfare rights service offer a mixture of legal advice and practical support to households at risk of homelessness and debt, including representation at court.
26. The CAB handled 3,000 debt advice cases in 2007/8. Around 500 households were already in direct danger of losing their home due to rent or mortgage arrears. 1,500 had debt problems, which if not dealt with would put at risk their ability to pay for day to day living, potentially leading to home loss.
27. There is also a Court Duty Desk scheme, which provides free, independent advice to households at Court Hearings to try to avert homelessness as a result of mortgage or rent arrears. Take-up rates are low and the new strategy will need to consider ways to increase take-up such as effective marketing strategies.

Specialist Support

28. A wide range of services offer support to those who have been or are at risk of homelessness in Halton. Many of these are commissioned through Supporting People [SP]. The SP funded services alone assisted 400 people in 2007/8.
29. The support provided – both in the community and via accommodation such as hostels, involves helping clients to set up a home, live independently, manage their affairs and increase employment prospects.
30. Most provision targets key groups most at risk of homelessness, including:
- **Families at risk of relationship breakdown.**
 - **Households risking evictions due to anti social behaviour,**
 - **Those experiencing Domestic abuse.**
 - **Young people.**
 - **Those with drink and drug addictions.**
 - **Those with mental health problems.**
31. Mainstream providers also work to assist homelessness prevention. For example

- **Registered Social Landlords:** most have in place early intervention mechanisms that provide support to tenants.
 - **Housing Benefit Section:** including the mobile Benefits Express facility - and Discretionary Housing Payments [DHP] which can assist those who might otherwise suffer hardship – including homelessness.
32. There is general satisfaction with provision, but consultation revealed the need for better coordination between services, with streamlined access, improved information and more joint work, e.g. with assessments and delivery. There was also a desire for more user involvement in service development and design.
33. There are strong concerns about the needs of those with lower level mental health problems and those with chronic addictions.
34. The majority of services are located at the crisis end of the homelessness risk process, intervening after problems have escalated. Prevention is a lower cost option, both financially and personally for those at risk. A challenge for the strategy will be to ensure more efficient take up of existing services and also to shift focus over time to earlier intervention that will yield a higher rate of successful prevention.

Short term accommodation

35. Short-term accommodation in Halton consists of hostels, specialist temporary accommodation and bed & Breakfast hotels. Statutory homeless households are generally referred to the Grangeway Court complex in Runcorn; whilst single homeless people have access to hostels. B&B is used by the statutory homelessness services as a stopgap of last resort. A refuge is available for women and children escaping domestic abuse.
- In 2007/8, 138 households were placed in B&B hotels, including 61 families; 94 households were placed in Grangeway Court.
 - **Hostels** A total of 128 bed-spaces are available across the four hostels in Halton. This includes 6 direct access bed spaces (not direct referral). Access is usually subject to a waiting list.
 - **Women's refuge:** Halton Women's Aid offers 16 bed-spaces.
 - **Grangeway Court** offers 32 self contained units
 - In all types of short term accommodation support is provided.
36. Short term housing in Halton is oversubscribed. 92% of hostel accommodation is in Runcorn, which can create problems of access and retaining family and community contact for those who become homeless from Widnes. The new strategy will need to address this imbalance. Potentially there is scope to build on the feasibility studies that the YMCA has undertaken regarding expanding their base to Widnes. There is also a need for more emergency provision that removes the requirement for B&B use. Provision is also lacking for those with very complex needs, who cannot cope with or would be excluded from mainstream accommodation.
37. Halton has a shortfall of between 10 and 15 spaces for immediate access by people without dependent children. Consideration should be given to move on practice; and to the provision of non-traditional accommodation– e.g. supported lodgings for young people and accommodation that can cater for ongoing substance abuse.

38. There is scope to remodel short term accommodation provision, to route people to the most appropriate forms of temporary accommodation, secure settled homes, and reduce the need for homelessness applications.

Settled housing

Social housing

39. The Housing Register offers the principal rehousing route for those accepted under homelessness legislation. In 2007/8 there were 1,720 households on the register. Just over 380 were offered accommodation and 55% of these offers were made to homelessness households.
40. There is a tension between meeting the needs of those who are at high risk of homelessness because of the unsuitability of their housing, and those who have actually become homeless. Halton's main cause of homelessness is family breakdown, and a particularly high proportion of households during 2007/08 remained "homeless at home" for long periods awaiting an offer of settled housing. It could be argued that the Allocations Policy offers an incentive for homelessness applications to be made in order to speed up rehousing.
41. This does not suggest that levels of need are not high amongst this group, or that living arrangements are reasonable, but it does indicate a need for broader preventative approaches. It is anticipated that Choice Based Lettings³ will be introduced from 2010 in line with government targets. Until Choice Based Lettings is introduced, there is a need to review the allocation of housing under the register to create a more preventative focus, affording more priority to those at risk.
42. Mechanisms are being developed to increase access to affordable housing. The Housing Strategy addresses the need for additional affordable housing with plans to provide 500 new homes, and 176 affordable units split between rent and shared ownership.

The private rented sector

43. The 2003-2008 Homelessness Strategy enabled the development of a Deposit Guarantee Scheme (DGS), which assisted tenants to secure a private tenancy by providing the landlord with a deposit on their behalf.
44. In 2007/8 314 households were referred to the DGS, and 114 households assisted to take up private rented sector tenancies. Over 100 households referred to the scheme by the Prevention service were families with dependent children. This has now evolved into a Bond Guarantee Scheme (no physical transfer of funds takes place unless there are issues in the first 12 months of a tenancy). This will permit the funding available to assist more households.

³ A single scheme replacing housing registers, where vacancies are advertised and where prospective tenants can "bid" for (i.e. express an interest in) the vacancies.

Forecasting

45. Whilst levels of statutory homelessness have reduced, the current pattern suggests that need is reaching a plateau. Demand for housing options and preventative services appear to indicate that overall, up to 800 households a year will remain at acute risk of homelessness without further interventions.
46. The future is complicated by uncertain economic prospects, which suggests an increase in debt related homelessness. House purchase, the development of new affordable housing and the expansion of the private rented sector will possibly all be hampered by recession.
47. It is too early to predict the success of government attempts to remedy some of the economic problems, or the impact of many new initiatives, such as the Government's Mortgage Rescue Scheme (aimed at assisting homeowners with mortgage arrears to remain in their home); although clearly there are further opportunities to reduce risks and reinvigorate markets.
48. It will be vital to ensure that the capacity to forecast is delivered in the future, so that the setting of measurable outcomes and attention to monitoring and evaluation processes will generate authoritative information for service delivery.

Key Recommendations for the Strategy to address

- Provide mechanisms to enable those at risk of homelessness or using homelessness services to contribute to the review of progress and the development of new solutions.
- Ensure a comprehensive approach to intelligence gathering and analysis to inform future strategic developments and outcome based assessments of services.
- Embed evidence based good practice and national prevention initiatives in development activity.
- Deliver a new approach to service provision which aims for a comprehensive response to homelessness and risk and which enables the earliest possible targeted interventions.
- Enable specific service developments and interventions focused on those who are most at risk including young people, families with children, those at risk of debt, and those facing multiple problems – particularly mental health and substance abuse.
- Combine homelessness services with measures to improve employability; linking with employment and training services.
- Support RSLs in the development of prevention strategies, and work with them to learn from and proliferate financial inclusion and worklessness reduction.
- Ensure mechanisms for cross departmental and organisation work to improve service delivery and development and the encouragement of joint planning to resolve barriers to rehousing for :

- Young people.
 - Those with drug & alcohol problems.
 - People with mental health problems.
 - People experiencing domestic abuse.
-
- Consider research or specifically commission local research into the homelessness-related needs of those with mental health problems and dual diagnosis; encourage greater links between services and the development of appropriate provision.
 - Deliver a Temporary Accommodation (TA) Strategy to meet the Government target to reduce TA use: including the potential for new provision.
 - Scope the feasibility of appropriate accommodation and day centre provision for those with chronic substance misuse and street homelessness.
 - Enable provision for dedicated transition placements for care leavers– scoping the potential for a supported lodgings scheme
 - Review and revise the Council's Allocation Policy.
 - Support the expansion of the existing recycled furniture scheme.
 - Enable capacity for pro-active assessment - anticipating trends and need by developing coherent baseline data and a model of forecasting the need for 'homelessness services'.

1 Homelessness & Prevention: Definitions and Measurement

What is homelessness?

- 1.1 This strategy uses the Communities & Local Government⁴ definition of homelessness as “a lack of secure accommodation that can reasonably be occupied”.
- 1.2 Homelessness is caused by a variety of factors. The main reasons for people losing their homes in England are:
 - Parents/friends/relatives no longer willing to accommodate.
 - Breakdown of relationships.
 - Loss of private rented homes – usually at the end of fixed term tenancies.
- 1.3 A shortage of affordable housing plays a major part in turning home-loss into homelessness when people are forced to leave their homes and cannot find another long-term option.
- 1.4 Homelessness can affect anyone from any walk of life. However, there are factors which can predispose people to the risk of homelessness – debt which might lead to eviction, living in violent relationships; behaviour such as drug or alcohol addiction which reduces a person’s capacity to take responsibility for their home; living in poor quality or insecure housing with fewer rights; living for long periods in institutions such as prisons or the armed forces which make independent living harder.
- 1.5 A substantial body of research consistently highlights that those who face economic and social deprivation are far more likely to become homeless – due to the greater number of risk factors leading to homelessness and the inability to find a new home which is affordable.
- 1.6 The impact of homelessness on the community is substantial. Homelessness increases the risk of physical and mental ill health for all those affected – including children, and can lead to increased abuse of drugs and alcohol. The disruption it causes puts pressure on health, social and education resources and the criminal justice system. It increases the risk of relationship breakdown and unemployment, and the social and economic cost of resolving those problems. There are also costs to landlords and housing agencies – both in the process of eviction and in the provision of emergency housing to accommodate those who become homeless. For the individual, homelessness robs them of the stability from which to take an active part in society and develop their potential.

⁴ The government department with responsibility for homelessness

The statutory definition of homelessness

- 1.7 Under the Housing Act 1996⁵, every local authority has a duty towards those who are homeless. This includes: people who have lost their home or cannot gain access to it; those who have a home but cannot reasonably be expected to live in it (for example because their health or safety is significantly at risk); and those who have a mobile home, but nowhere to pitch it and live in it. An authority's legal duties vary depending on the circumstances of the homeless person and the reasons for their homelessness. Only those people who fall within specific categories of "priority need"⁶ and in addition, have not caused their own homelessness,⁷ are entitled to have accommodation secured for them – usually via social housing (e.g. council or housing association property), or from a private landlord. Those not entitled to this full rehousing duty but who have a priority need, can be offered a limited stay in temporary housing. Every applicant not entitled to rehousing is also given advice and assistance to find their own accommodation.
- 1.8 Local authorities must operate an allocations policy, which sets out the process for selecting and prioritising homeless applicants for social housing. They must give homeless people who are entitled to rehousing a reasonable preference within those priorities. Authorities are no longer obliged to keep a Housing Register – a waiting list for those seeking social housing. However, many – including Halton – continue to do so.

Measuring homelessness

- 1.9 The only consistent national measurement of homelessness in the England is of those who are considered "statutorily" homeless – ie those who make an application as homeless under the law. Details about households, the cause of homeless, and what happens to them, are only recorded for those accepted as 'statutory homeless' i.e. where the Council accepts a legal duty to provide accommodation. This information is collected quarterly by all local authorities on a voluntarily basis under the "P1E" statistical return to CLG. For this reason there can be a significant divergence between the numbers of those who are actually homeless and those counted in national statistics. However, data based on P1E returns provides an indicator of those who are in the greatest need or most vulnerable.

⁵ http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts1996/ukpga_19960052_en_14#pt7 As amended by the Homelessness Act 2002. There is supplementary guidance provided by the government to which local authorities must have regard. <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/homelessnesscode>

⁶ Priority need is given automatically to household containing a pregnant woman or dependent children, to 16-17; to some groups of care leavers aged 18-21, and to people who lose their home because of an emergency such as a fire or disaster. Other people can be accepted as having priority need if they can show that they are vulnerable as a result of their age, illness, disability, domestic violence, or was previously in care, in the armed forces or in prison.

⁷ Intentionally homeless– eg those who have been evicted for failing to pay their rent, when they were able to do so.

Homelessness Prevention

The prevention agenda and the development of good practice

- 1.10 The Government now encourages local authorities to reduce the extent of homelessness by taking a preventative approach to tackling homelessness. A number of prevention initiatives have been developed and encouraged nationwide, including “tenancy sustainment” services to support people in managing their affairs and avoiding risks that might cause them to lose their homes; schemes to improve home security and support for those who suffer domestic abuse; payments that will enable people to move directly into a new home; advice to help people who are in debt, or facing other risks to their housing; and help to increase access to the private rented sector.

Measuring prevention

- 1.11 The measurement of homelessness prevention nationally has inevitably concentrated on reducing levels of statutory homelessness applications and acceptances. However, whilst reductions may indicate prevention, they may also indicate reluctance amongst homeless households to follow the statutory route, or changes in homelessness practice which reduce applications, or manage demand in a different way – e.g. awarding points on the local housing register to a homeless person in a hostel to guarantee re-housing, without the need for a homelessness application.
- 1.12 This strategy defines prevention of homelessness as successful measures which enable someone to stay in their home or to move directly from one settled home to another.

2 Context for the Homelessness Strategy

The Borough's profile

- 2.1 Halton is reversing long-term decline in its population and economic and social conditions. Growth in the 1970's arose from the development of Runcorn in particular, with the creation of large scale council housing settlements, encouraging migration from surrounding urban areas in the expectation of continued growth for the local chemical and manufacturing industries. The subsequent decline of those markets, the poorly designed housing provision and a lack of amenities, created a legacy of emigration and of large-scale unemployment for those remaining. The population is now relatively young, there is little inward migration, and the ethnic minority population is less than 2% of the whole (although this figure may well be higher or rise following the accession of A8 European countries).
- 2.2 Halton's decline created a negative impact on the health, education and skills of a large section of the population. Such levels of poverty and social exclusion are significant factors in the risk of homelessness, generating debt, the breakdown of relationships, problems with alcohol and drugs, and disengagement within communities leading to anti social behaviour and crime.
- 2.3 Economic downturn in Halton reduced investment in housing conditions or new affordable housing. Right to buy sales and a small private rented sector have limited choice for new households and those needing to move.
- 2.4 Halton is tackling these fundamental problems, resulting in a substantial movement since 2004 from 16st to 30th in the deprivation ranking of 354 districts in England⁸. However, Halton is still clearly one of the most deprived boroughs in England – the 10th most deprived in the northwest. This position will continue to have an impact on levels of homelessness.

2.5 Characteristics of this level of deprivation include

- ◆ **Unemployment** - claimant unemployment is the 5th highest amongst neighbouring authority areas in northwest.
- ◆ **Economic inactivity**- only 68.2% of Halton's potential workforce are employed.
- ◆ **Poverty** – almost a third of households have an annual income of less than £10,000 and almost 50% of household receive some form of financial assistance from the state.
- ◆ **Health** – Halton is in the bottom 6% of districts in the country in respect of positive health indicators.
- ◆ **Mental health**– extrapolating from national averages, the likely incidence of mental illness in Halton⁹ will be over 400 people with severe and enduring

⁸ 1st being the most deprived

⁹ Taking into account socio-economic factors affecting mental illness

mental health problems and 15,000 people experiencing depression, anxiety and phobias¹⁰.

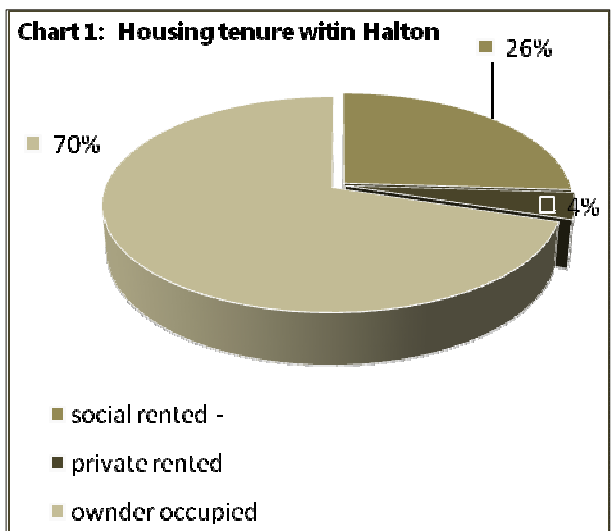
- ◆ **Drug and alcohol abuse** – estimates¹¹ suggest that there are over 1,700 problematic drug users in Halton, and research shows over 800 hospital patient admissions identified an alcohol-related illness.
- ◆ **Domestic violence** – the police recorded over 1,400 offences in 2004.
- ◆ **Ex offenders** – over 100 offenders return or are referred to Halton each year¹²

- 2.6 It is important also to note that some areas within Halton are considerably more disadvantaged than others, and that 8 “super output areas”¹³ in Halton are in the top 35 most deprived areas in England.

Housing supply & demand

- 2.7 The correlation between the lack of affordable housing and homelessness is clear. The principal source of affordable housing is the social rented sector¹⁴. In Halton, this housing stock has reduced by over 5% since 2003 as a result of regeneration demolition and sales.

- 2.8 On the housing market, prices are low compared to national and regional averages, and combined with income levels, suggest that house purchase in Halton is affordable. However, the Housing Needs Survey¹⁵ uncovered a developing affordability gap for a significant number of households. Around 76% of new households formed in the last two years were below the income level necessary to buy the cheapest properties available. This also applies to 70% of “concealed households” (ie adults living for example with parents and wanting to move). For these and many existing households, affordability is also threatened by a relatively low level of savings from which to afford deposits.



- 2.9 The very small private rented sector also highlights affordability problems – with 61% of new households being unable to afford market rents. Added to this is the unpopularity of the sector – preferred by only 1% of those seeking to move to new housing.

¹⁰ Halton Mental Health & Accommodation Strategy

¹¹ Liverpool John Moores University 2004

¹² Cheshire Probation Service

¹³ These are smaller geographical areas used for census analysis.

¹⁴ le provided by councils, and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) -housing associations and trusts

¹⁵ Halton Borough Council Housing Needs & Market Assessment Survey – DCA 2006

- 2.10 The Survey found that there is an annual shortfall in affordable housing of 176 homes, with a recommendation that this should be split between rented and shared ownership housing.

Halton's strategic development

- 2.11 The Council has in place a number of strategies designed to improve the life and prospects of Halton's population.
- 2.12 **The Community Strategy 2006-2011** contains the overarching vision and plan for the borough, and is led by Halton's Local Strategic Partnership – a body which brings together representatives from all sectors of work and life in Halton vital to its future prospects. It sets out five priorities areas for action and investment to improve and develop Halton.
- A Healthy Halton
 - Halton's Urban Renewal
 - Halton's Children and Young People
 - Employment, Learning and Skills in Halton
 - A Safer Halton
- 2.13 The strategy tackles problems, which are also risk factors for homelessness. Action includes commitments to increase employability and access to employment, reduce drug and alcohol abuse, increase support to people in debt and increase access to affordable housing.
- 2.14 This is supported by the Corporate Plan –detailing how strategy will be delivered, with progress measured across every section of the Council. Flowing from the Community Strategy, there are also a number of strategies for specific areas of work.
- 2.15 **The Housing Strategy 2008-2011** details the plans to improve and develop the supply and condition of housing and the environment in which people live. Specific priorities for action include
- Continued regeneration of declining areas in Halton
 - Ensuring that homes are of a decent standard across all sectors
 - Improving conditions in the private rented sector.
 - Increasing the levels of affordable housing
 - Ensuring that there are enough homes for an increasing elderly population.
 - Developing facilities for Gypsies and Travellers.
 - Introducing Choice Based Lettings to replace the current social housing allocations system – to increase options for those seeking social housing and movement for existing tenants.
- 2.16 Factors, which influence the success of the Housing Strategy, include the allocation of funding from central and regional government to enable house building and development, which is uncertain at the time of writing.
- 2.17 **The Supporting People Strategy 2005-2010** - sets out the provision, funding and evaluation of housing-related support services commissioned by the Council, which enable people to live independently. These services avert homeless or the need for people to live in residential accommodation. The types of service include

developing living skills such as managing finances, understanding responsibilities and rights, claiming benefits and managing or changing behaviour, such as addiction and offending - along with developing employment and education opportunities and access to vital health and support services.

- 2.18 Many Supporting People (SP) services are aimed at preventing institutional care eg for elderly people or those with learning difficulties. Some are directly concerned with supporting homeless people – including families - to re-establish themselves in the community and avoid repeat homelessness. Others that help young people or people who have mental health problems, drug addiction or offending behaviour are clearly helping to tackle some of the root causes of homelessness. Further details on services are found in Section 5.
- 2.19 Priorities within the current SP Strategy which will impact on the Homelessness Strategy include
- Expanding support for single homeless people with support needs- including young people at risk and those leaving care.
 - Developing services to people with mental health problems.
 - Converting more of the generic support services provided for vulnerable households into targeted work with specific groups.
- 2.20 **The Children & Young People’s Plan** - Halton’s strategy for Children & Young People follows the strategic framework set out in the Government’s Every Child Matters programme. Halton’s priorities for children which link to homelessness and its prevention include the following:
- Be Healthy**
- Improve physical health and increase opportunities to lead healthy lifestyles.
 - Enhance emotional, psychological and physical wellbeing.
- Stay Safe**
- Extend prevention and early intervention.
 - Increase targeted support for vulnerable children.
- Enjoy & Achieve**
- Improve educational outcomes for all children.
- Make A Positive Contribution**
- Increase young people’s participation and community engagement.
 - Reduce offending and anti-social behaviour of children and young people.
- Achieve Economic Well-Being**
- Improve access to suitable accommodation.
- 2.21 **The Safer Halton Partnership** – accountable to the Local Strategic Partnership, this has developed objectives to tackle domestic violence and drug and alcohol abuse by:
- Increasing the number of drug treatment places.
 - Developing a multi agency strategy to combat alcohol abuse.
 - Increasing provision for people escaping domestic violence.
 - Reducing repeat homelessness by people fleeing domestic violence.

Regional Homelessness Strategy

- 2.22 The Northwest Regional Housing Group (NWRHG) which is accountable to the Northwest Regional Assembly has set out a strategy for homelessness reduction in the region, with the following priorities
- Prevent homelessness.
 - Increase access to a choice of settled homes.
 - Develop plans and activity based on a robust understanding of homelessness and housing need.
- 2.23 Its position within the region will enable NWRHG to influence other key strategic developments, such as affordable housing development. As a strategic body, it has produced an action plan largely focused on supporting and enabling local authorities to carry out and develop homelessness-related work, which will achieve the 3 priorities. Practical activities include
- Developing an understanding of the problem via research, intelligence gathering and information exchanges between authorities.
 - Providing information– for example a regional directory of services tackling homelessness.
 - Providing support to local authorities by developing and promoting protocols and other mechanisms that will deliver greater levels of success.
 - Collating evidence of good practice and sharing this across the region.

Government Policy & Performance Framework

National performance

- 2.24 According to Government figures the number of households accepted by local authorities under the homelessness law is half that of 2003/04, with annual decreases – including a 2% fall between 2007 and 2008. The Government estimates a 74% reduction in rough sleeping over the past 10 years.
- 2.25 The number of households living in temporary accommodation has fallen: with a 12% reduction between 2007 and 2008, it is now 26% lower than in 2004. This fall includes an end to the use of Bed & Breakfast hotels to accommodate households with children dependent for longer than 6 weeks.
- 2.26 The Government has developed a series of national targets relating to homelessness. Currently these include:
- Halving the number of households living in temporary accommodation by 2010.
 - Measures to tackle youth homelessness including:
 - Ending the use of B&B hotels to accommodate 16 and 17 year olds under the homelessness law, by 2010.
 - Greater access to homelessness mediation services.

- A new national supported lodgings development scheme enabling accommodation, advice and mediation for young people who cannot remain in the family home.

Prevention development

- 2.27 To achieve these reductions in homelessness, the Government has set out a prevention agenda fostering changes in practice and provision. Key elements include the development of more settled homes – currently being implemented through national and regional strategies to increase supply and affordable homes; support to vulnerable people via the Supporting People programme to enable independent living, and tackling some of the key risk factors involved in homelessness.
- 2.28 The Government is also seeking to improve services for people who become homeless – including the transformation of hostels into “places of change”, which develop the skills and abilities of residents to resettle successfully and avoid repeat homelessness.
- 2.29 A cornerstone of the agenda is the encouragement of local authorities to take a strategic approach to prevention and to develop new practices in dealing with homeless households. This has included promotion of “options interviews” where local authority homelessness services explore all possibilities of clients returning to their home or finding alternative housing without necessarily making a homelessness application. This might include making a home safe enough for someone fleeing domestic violence to return, mediating with parents to enable young people to continue living at the family home, negotiating with landlords, or helping people to move into a privately rented home.

Evaluating success in reducing and preventing homelessness

- 2.30 As noted in Section 1, the P1E data on statutory homeless households provided by local authorities is the principal source of information from which to evaluate progress and make meaningful national and regional comparisons. Until 2008 the Government had also assessed progress via a series of performance indicators under the Best Value system, including: the assessment of number of homelessness preventions achieved through options advice and assistance, the number of households in specific types of temporary accommodation; and numbers of repeat homeless cases.
- 2.31 From April 2008, a national set of 198 performance indicators were introduced against which the full range of local authority activities will be audited. Within the new indicators, authorities chose up to 35 as the basis for Local Area Agreement (LAA) targets – which influence the authority’s strategic action, investment and commissioning priorities. The Council is also at liberty to set additional targets and performance indicators which reflect local concerns.

- 2.32 The specific homelessness indicator is
- NI 156 Number of households living in temporary accommodation.

Related national indicators are

- NI 141 - % of vulnerable people achieving independent living.
- NI 142 - % of vulnerable people who are supported to maintain independent living.

Figures

Within Halton's LAA, targets have been set for

- NI 142- % of vulnerable people who are supported to maintain independent living.

- NI 154 - supply of new homes.

- 2.33 P1E data is still collected, and now includes information about those helped via prevention activity in addition to those helped under the homelessness law.
- 2.34 The prevention agenda pursued by the Government has generated a considerable body of good practice evidence and guidance, along with government led initiatives to support prevention – such as the National Homelessness Advice Service which develops community based advice services and the links between the voluntary and statutory sectors to combat homelessness.

Government Funding for homelessness prevention

- 2.35 Local Authorities may use Revenue Support Grant to fund homelessness services and to prevent homelessness. Additional dedicated grants include the Homelessness Grant and the Supporting People grant.

- 2.36 The Homelessness Grant is currently provided until 2011. The Supporting People grant¹⁶ will be amalgamated into the Local Authorities' Area Based Grant from 2009/10. This is a single pot from which local authorities fund activity within their Local Area Agreements.

Figures

Homelessness Grant for Halton

- **£31K** per yr.

Supporting People allocation for Halton

- 2009/10 **£7.2M**
- 2010/11 **£6.8M**

Conclusions & Recommendations

- 2.37 The measurement of statutory homelessness provides a valuable indicator of levels within the borough. However, it does not capture all those who are not entitled to help under the legal safety net, or who do not see it as an effective solution.
- 2.38 Halton's approach to tackling homelessness is to take a robust and creative preventative approach. This must be applicable to and measurable across all groups and categories of homelessness.
- 2.39 Whilst the performance indicators and LAA targets give limited incentives for high performance in homeless prevention, the Homelessness Strategy should be seen as a significant contribution to fulfilling the Council's wider goals for Halton within

¹⁶ Note that this covers a very wide range of services including those for elderly people and adults with learning difficulties, which tend to be aimed at avoiding institutional care.

the Community Strategy such as; the strategic desire to invest in preventative activity;¹⁷ obligations under the homelessness legislation; and alignment with national homelessness policy development.

- 2.40 Halton's Homelessness Strategy must contribute to the overall Community Strategy and dovetail with strategies allied to homelessness prevention.

The Homelessness Strategy must

R1. Take the lead in defining success and setting relevant indicators for services and activity.

- i. Definitions and measurement of homelessness and prevention should include all groups and all types of homelessness.
- ii. Measurements of success in resolving homelessness should include
 - Numbers making homelessness applications.
 - Numbers needing temporary accommodation.
 - Numbers gaining access to settled accommodation.
 - Numbers gaining access to supported accommodation.
- iii. The measurement of prevention should cover all those who are at risk of homelessness but retain their home or successfully move directly from one settled term home to another.

The Homelessness Strategy should

R2. Assist strategic decision making by effective use of existing local and regional intelligence to:

- i. Develop methods of forecasting and enable new solutions planning
- ii. Support the understanding of affordable housing needs in the borough.
- iii. Add value to the services currently in place which tackle homelessness risk factors, eg: by providing intelligence to help key services develop, improve, and make constructive links with homelessness prevention activity.
- iv. Contribute to regional strategic development.
- v. Demonstrate success in relation to the Community Strategy and LAA targets.

R3. Target solutions that take account of the varying levels of deprivation in Halton across communities and particular geographical areas.

R4. Ensure that evidence based good practice and national prevention initiatives are embedded in development activity.

R5. Develop local and regional partnership working to generate new solutions and good practice.

¹⁷ Local Area Agreement for Halton - 2008-2011

3 The 2003-2008 Strategy

Goals

- 3.1. Halton's first strategy concentrated on three main areas
- i. The coordination of the strategy itself and of key homelessness services - this included aims to set up a Homelessness Forum, review and improve homelessness services and develop the capacity to monitor and evaluate provision across Halton.
 - ii. The prevention of homelessness – aiming to introduce new services as alternatives to the Council's statutory homelessness service; target groups at risk of becoming homeless; and improve information about services.
 - iii. Access to accommodation – this included targets to increase units of temporary accommodation and improve access to social rented housing.

Achievements

- 3.2. This strategy achieved the majority of its objectives. Substantial developments and improvements emerged and are outlined below. The overall progress made against the strategy's aims is outlined in the table at Appendix 2.
- **A Homelessness Forum** has now been established which meets quarterly to discuss the direction of homelessness services and understand the implications of wider strategic developments related to homelessness. There are now over 30 members coming from key departments within the council (including Benefits, Community Safety, Young People and Supporting People) and from over 20 services across Halton, including those providing accommodation, support and advice.
 - **Multi agency monitoring** – (MAM) – enables common monitoring of service use for a variety of homelessness related providers. The same sets of data are completed by service providers and collated by Shelter. This enables an understanding of the profile of users, the problems leading to their homelessness and their involvement with various agencies.
 - **A deposit guarantee scheme** – was set up to assist homeless people to access the private rented sector. The Council provided a returnable deposit direct to the landlord on behalf of the client, which insured against non-payment of rent or property damage. (This scheme has now developed into a Bond Guarantee Scheme rather than a scheme based on a cashable deposit).
 - **A mediation service** - offered by the YMCA to help young people return to their family home or restore the contact and support that will enable the young person to live independently.
 - **Increased access to accommodation** – additional units of short-term housing have enabled specific groups– particularly young people – to make the transition from homelessness to long term rehousing.

- **A Common Nomination scheme** has been developed, ensuring that the procedures for access to housing provided by Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) are consistent and more transparent.
 - **A Homelessness Prevention Team** – operating from June 2007, the team offers an advice and referral service, which helps those facing homelessness to retain their home, move to a new home, or access short-term accommodation and support to help them achieve independent living in the future.
- 3.3. The climate fostered by the Homelessness Strategy and by related strategies has created greater scope for homelessness provision and joint working generally. Amongst the most significant additional achievements are:
- **Increase in Supporting People commissioned services** - has enabled greater numbers of people to live independently, manage their risk of homelessness and prevent home-loss.
 - **Raising the profile of homelessness via strategic groups such as Halton's Housing Partnership** – which brings together the Council and RSLs to ensure that there is consistent practice and procedure in access to and development of social rented housing. This also includes good practice in tenant management, reducing the risks of homelessness amongst tenants.
 - **RSL homelessness prevention** – more housing associations and trusts are developing mechanisms to prevent tenants from losing their homes. Earlier intervention in cases of arrears and anti social behaviour is reducing the risk of eviction.
 - **A Nightstop Service** - to enable young people who cannot stay at home to be accommodated by accredited volunteer “hosts” – families who can offer an emergency home as an alternative to running away from home or having to spend time in hostel accommodation. This service was implemented in 2009, following development in 2008.
- 3.4. Further details of services available in Halton can be found in Section 5 of this document.
- 3.5. A significant change in homelessness provision since the 2003-2008 Strategy was the decision to transfer the Council's homelessness and housing advice functions to Halton Housing Trust (HHT). This occurred in 2005, in the context of the Council's transfer of its housing stock and management of the Housing Register to HHT.
- 3.6. In 2007 this decision was reviewed and it was decided that the homelessness service should be brought back under the direct management of the Council. The review took into account the Council's continued liability for service activity set against its lack of operational control; and the viability of provision by an external contractor within the funds available from the Council.
- 3.7. The review also took into account the development of the Council's Prevention Service. Increasingly, the operation of parallel homelessness services caused

confusion about access, some duplication of tasks and uneven usage of prevention measures and accommodation. All parties to the consultation exercise in November 2007¹⁸ felt that the Homelessness and Prevention Services would work better as a joint package. This was reinforced by a growing trend towards users opting out of the statutory homelessness route¹⁹.

Appraisal of the 2003/8 Homelessness Strategy

- 3.8. Housing Quality Network carried out an appraisal in 2004. The review of the strategy was very favourable. However it found that improvements could be made in the monitoring and evaluation of the strategy – including the provision of quantifiable outcomes- and in the management of its progress. It was also noted that wider agency and user involvement in strategic development and better forecasting could deliver a more thorough strategy.

Review of the Homelessness Strategy

- 3.9. The assessment undertaken within this strategic review highlights areas where developments are still outstanding and where there is a need for revision or a fresh approach.
- 3.10. Ambitions for practical change such as access to furnished accommodation, and the delivery of a Choice Based Letting (CBL) process are still to be realised. The proliferation of additional services has also brought to the fore the need for updated information about service provision and access arrangements.
- 3.11. The Homelessness Forum is generally perceived to be working well as a means of relaying information, outlining new developments and creating impetus for change. Review consultations revealed that there is an appetite to strengthen its capacity to deliver change and to find ways of creating action from the areas under discussion at Forum events.
- 3.12. Review consultation also picked up a general agreement that much has been achieved, but some frustration was expressed that certain elements have not improved – for example the shortfall of temporary accommodation in Widnes. This was potentially as much, if not more, about transparency in the Council's prioritisation and decision-making process for homelessness activity, as about the lack of progress.
- 3.13. The Multi Agency Monitoring project (MAM) is seen as a commendable initiative, and has added value to homelessness intelligence in Halton. However, its effectiveness is hampered by periods of low in data returns, reducing the authority of some of its findings. At the same time, agencies struggle to deliver their services and comply with a plethora of monitoring requirements for various performance management and funding purposes.

¹⁸ A review of Halton's Statutory Homelessness Services carried out by CLG and involving service providers and users.

¹⁹ See Section 4

Conclusions & Recommendations

Building on the Current Strategy

- 3.14. There is now a substantial foundation from which to build – including a widespread appreciation of and commitment to preventative working, a structure of support and strategic management and an impetus for further development and improvement.
- 3.15. The remaining initiatives set out in the 2003 Strategy are still pertinent and these will be addressed by the new Homelessness Strategy in respect of service development – for example CBL, furnished accommodation and information about services, and service monitoring – including MAM.

Strategic management & development

- 3.16. Specific measures are needed to ensure the effective progress of the strategy and the evaluation of its success. The Homelessness Forum has demonstrated the value of collaborative working across agencies and sectors and is in a position to adopt a more strategic role in managing the progress of the strategy.
- 3.17. There is a further need to embed strategic priorities for homelessness within the wider council activity, promoting effective processes for moving developments forward, transparent decision making and robust monitoring and evaluation – which should include the views of users and the widest possible group of professional stakeholders.

The strategy should ensure:

R6. The development of clear and quantifiable outcomes.

R7. A robust management process – which includes a review and revision of the role of the Homelessness Forum, a consistent wider input from agencies with a very clear focus for members; clear processes to progress action, and mechanisms to ensure transparency; and feedback about decisions relating to homelessness developments.

R8. Mechanisms to enable those at risk of homelessness or using homelessness services can contribute to the Forum, the review of progress and the development of new solutions.

4 The Extent of Homelessness in Halton

Data sources

4.1. This section assesses the level of homelessness within Halton by examining the data from the 3 key services provided by or on behalf of the Council. This covers:

1. Households officially recorded as homeless under the legal provision of the Housing Act 1996²⁰ and dealt with by Halton Housing Trust (HHT) Homelessness Service) – referred to here as the Statutory Service.
2. Those who did not apply as homeless under the law, but were provided with advice by HHT - referred to here as the Options & Advice service
3. Users of the Council's own Homelessness Prevention Service.

All data relates to the financial year 2007/8.

- 4.2. The extent of homelessness as encountered by each service is dealt with separately below. This approach enables national and regional comparison for the statutory service.²¹ It also enables comparison with the picture in 2003 when the first strategy was implemented.
- 4.3. Meaningful amalgamation of data across the three services is limited due to inconsistency in data fields used. The risk of duplication between those accessing all three services has been accounted for where any figures have been jointly assessed.
- 4.4. The Multi Agency Monitoring (MAM) project data is also used to build a picture of overall homelessness. Whilst the MAM baseline data corresponds with that taken from the three principal services, it is not used in conjunction with that service data, to avoid the risk of client duplication and because of the greater divergence between data fields. However, the MAM figures enable a valuable insight into particular characteristics of households and the extent of self reported street homelessness, which are not captured by the three principal services.

Households using the Statutory Service

4.5. In common with all statutory homelessness services, records include only those about whom a decision was made under the Housing Act 1996 – ie those who apply as homeless and are assessed in terms of whether they are homeless, in priority need and so on. Within these “decisions”, households entitled to the full help with rehousing – also known as the “main duty” – are referred to as “acceptances”. The recording of characteristics such as age, household, and reason for homelessness is only applied to acceptances.

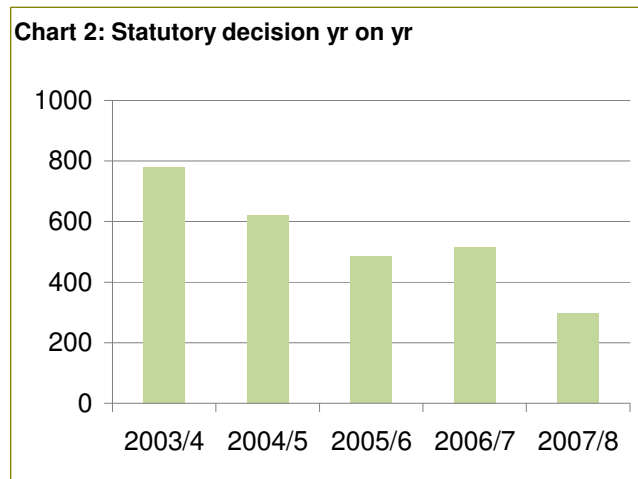
²⁰ http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts1996/ukpga_19960052_en_14#pt7

²¹ The only national statistical information on homelessness is provided by the P1E data from each Local Authority

- 4.6. The “decisions” referred to in this data are therefore those who actually made an application. Whilst this indicates the numbers presenting to the service as homeless, it is not the full picture. As outlined above, some of those who present to the service might not go on to formally apply – for example because they can be helped in alternative ways, or are unlikely to pass the priority need or intentional homelessness tests - and are not counted here.

Homelessness decisions

- 4.7. According to figures for 2007/8²², the service made decisions about 296 households. This is substantially down – 62% - from 780 in 2003/4.

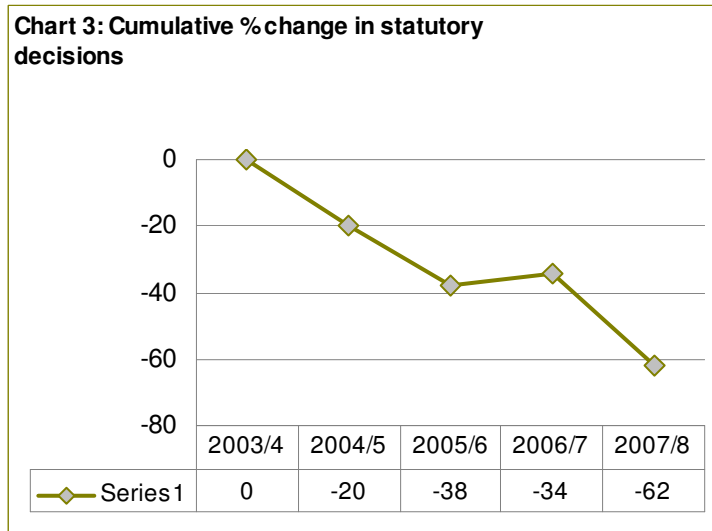


- 4.8. Chart 2 shows a year on year reduction in the number of decisions made regarding homelessness applications in Halton since the first Homelessness Strategy.
- 4.9. Chart 3 shows the rate of reduction year on year for the past four years. Also apparent is the dramatic rate of decrease in 2007/8. With a decline of 39% from quarter 1 to quarter 2. There are several elements at play during these periods.
- ◆ **A change in the law** – the Homelessness Act 2002 expanded the categories of people entitled to rehousing. This encouraged a substantial increase in applications, with most authorities experiencing a high peak in 2003/4. In reality, many of those additional applications were rejected for rehousing - inevitably a factor in the subsequent decline in 2004/5.
 - ◆ **A change in recording of cases.** Following the development of “options interviews” running in tandem with homelessness assessment, households were given wider options and helped by other means. This averted the need to make a homelessness application, and was recorded under the Advice and Options service.
 - **The Council restricted the choice in rehousing.** Those entitled to rehousing were given only one offer of accommodation in the town of their

²² P1E return to CLG

choice. This appears to have reduced the number of households pursuing a homelessness application as route to rehousing.

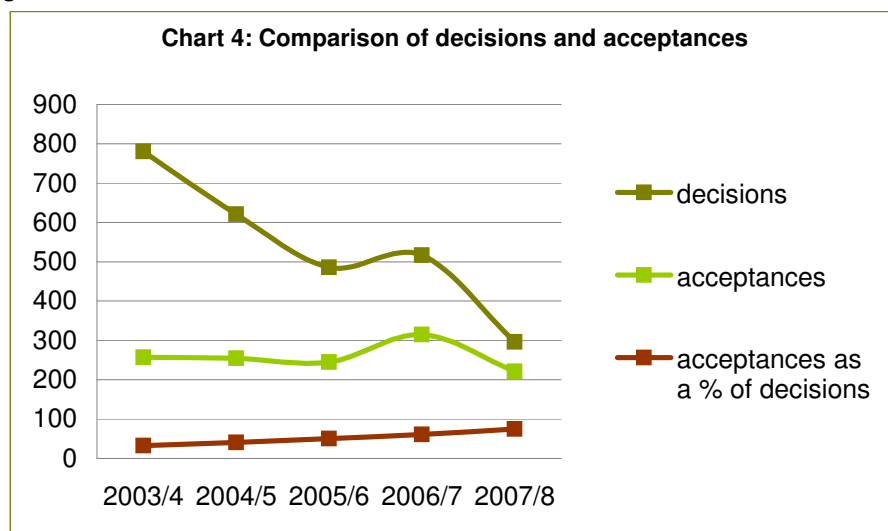
- ◆ **New services.** The 2007/8 reduction also coincided with the implementation of the Council's Prevention Service and its Deposit Guarantee Scheme, which averted homelessness and enabled direct access to homes in the private rented sector.



- ◆ **More filtering of enquiries.** In the light of these service developments, the Council's Halton Direct Link service became the first point of access and referral to the Statutory Homelessness and Prevention Services, enabling a greater level of filtering and targeting for services.

Halton's decisions about those applying as homeless

- 4.10. In 2007/8, Halton accepted 221 people as statutorily homeless, through no fault of their own and in priority need for assistance; a 14% reduction since 2003/4. This is not proportional to the huge reduction in decisions, indeed, those accepted in 2007/8 represent 75% of all those who applied, whereas in 2003/4, this figure was 33%.



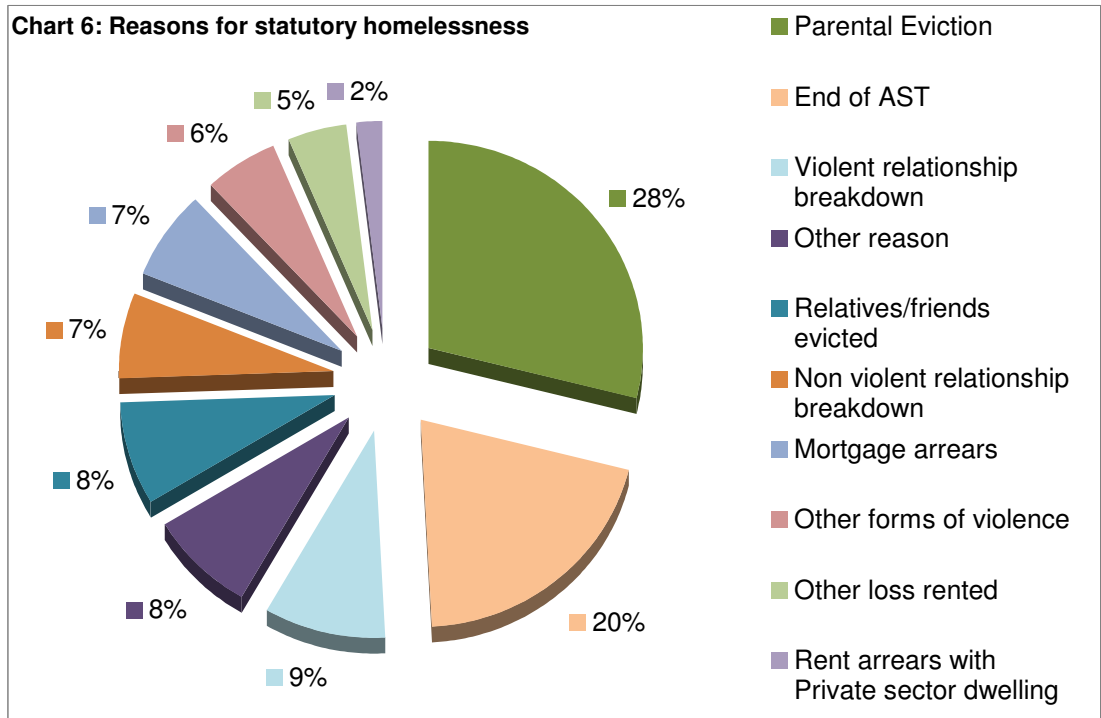
- 4.11. Looking at the proportion of acceptances to decisions, a pattern emerges: as the number of decisions fell, the rate of acceptance increased.
- 4.12. There is no definitive reason for this change. It could reflect a change in approach – e.g. the reduction in pressure of applications encouraged a more generous interpretation of the law. There was also a marked increase in the proportion of applicants in priority need. Again, this may indicate a more liberal approach.
- 4.13. However, the data on decisions shows that the overall proportion of applicants who were assessed to be homeless has grown by 9% since 2003/4, (including those who were not in priority need, or were intentionally homeless). Furthermore, analysis of priority need shows that there has been a significant increase in the “automatic” priority categories, over which the Council has no discretion in their decision-making.
- 4.14. This pattern taken together with the changes adopted outlined above, suggest that the increased proportion of acceptances is linked more to the appropriate use of the service by those who need it and are entitled to help.

Characteristics of households accepted for help with rehousing in Halton

- 4.15. As noted above, details of circumstances and personal characteristics are only recorded when households are entitled to rehousing. The following data therefore excludes a quarter of applicants.

Reasons for homelessness of those accepted in 2007/8

- 4.16. The principal reasons for homelessness amongst this group were:
 - Eviction from the parental home – 29%
 - The end of a short term private tenancy – 20%

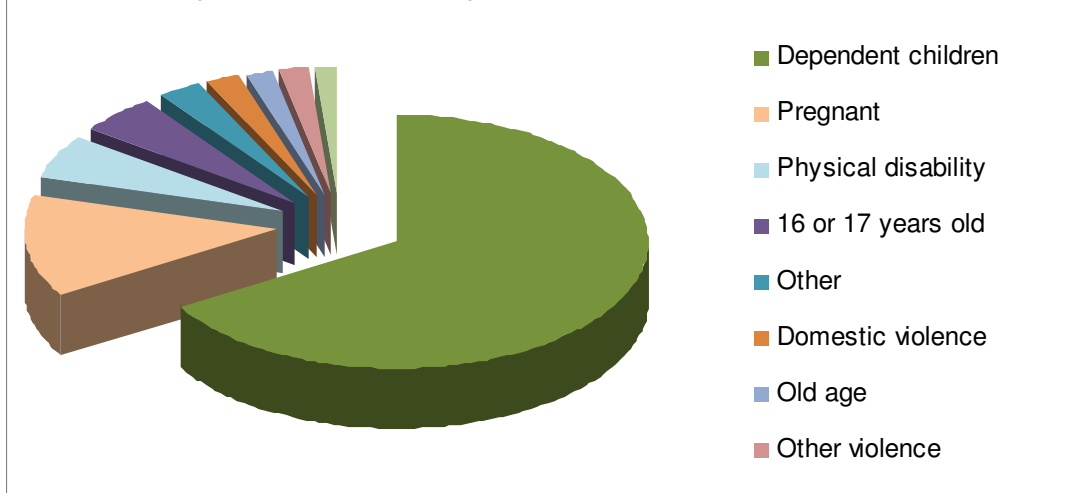


- 4.17. Both of these proportions are higher than the North West Regional average by 10% and 8% respectively. Eviction from the family home reflects the younger population in Halton and the extent of concealed households revealed in the Housing Needs survey. There is anecdotal evidence from professionals consulted, of a trend in parental evictions of 16 year olds when child benefit entitlement ends, this is reported as both a problem of affordability for the family and a factor exacerbating existing tensions with the child.
- 4.18. Private tenancies coming to an end were a major cause of homelessness. Private tenants do not enjoy high levels of security. Tenancies are often of limited duration and landlords can easily terminate them after 6 months, regardless of the tenant's conduct. The trend in Halton has reduced slightly since 2003/4. This may be attributable to the Council's work with private sector landlords and greater confidence that their financial risk is limited.
- 4.19. Relationship breakdown involving violence was the third most common cause amongst this group, but is half the northwest's proportion and has reduced by 6% since the first Homelessness Strategy. This reflects the substantial work that has taken place in assisting those facing domestic violence through support and prevention work. (See Section 5)
- 4.20. Mortgage arrears were an increasing cause of homelessness, following the economic downturn in early 2008. Halton's proportion for 2007/8 mirrored the regional average. Taken together with arrears in private tenancies, there was a 5% increase in the proportion of homelessness caused by financial problems since 2003/4. Clearly, the current economic climate will exacerbate these trends.
- The "priority need" of those accepted**
- 4.21. The reasons for priority need in 2007/8 are shown in chart 7. In common with most other authorities, the largest proportion of those accepted are caring for or expecting children.
- 4.22. Most (83%) of those accepted had an automatic priority need status²³. The rest were granted priority need on the basis that they were more vulnerable than the 'average homeless person' if homeless.
- 4.23. The proportion of those accepted as vulnerable because of a physical disability increased in both proportion and total number. There were fewer acceptances for reasons of age – particularly under 18's, which reflects the reduction in this age group making applications after 2003/4. The reduction in priority need as a result of domestic violence appears to mirror the reduction in domestic violence as a reason for homelessness.
- 4.24. The homelessness data shows that at least 244 children were amongst the households accepted for help with rehousing, and it should be noted that this undercounts the number for families with more than 3 children. There were at

²³ Those with dependent children, or who are pregnant, or who are 16-17 yrs old or who have lost their home as a result of an emergency – such as a fire or flood

least 28 pregnancies counted (those who are pregnant but also have children are only counted within the children category).

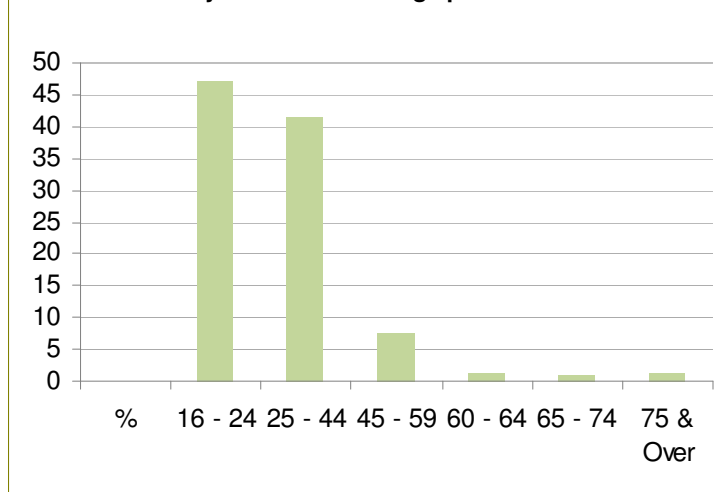
Chart 7: Statutory homelessness -Priority need



Age of those accepted

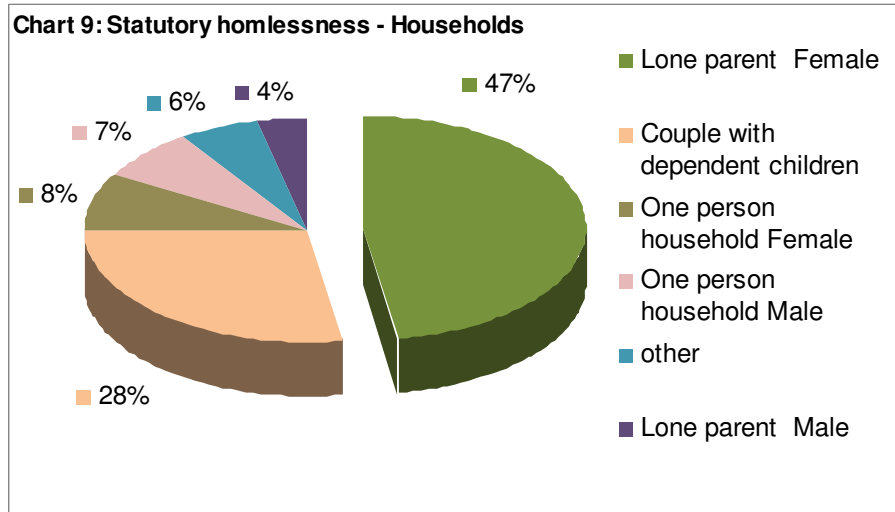
- 4.25. Whilst there was a reduction in the proportion of 16-17 yr olds found to be in priority need, young people under 25 were still the highest age group being accepted for rehousing. 90% of those accepted were under 44yrs. This was slightly higher than the national average, which may reflect Halton's younger population.

Chart 8: Statutory homelessness - Age profile



Household composition of those accepted

- 4.26. As might be inferred from the priority need categories, the majority of households were those with children or pregnant (just over 79%). This was 12% higher than the national average (where there are larger proportions of single and single male applicants accepted). Halton also had 9% more couples with children/pregnant than the national average, and 4% more single parents.



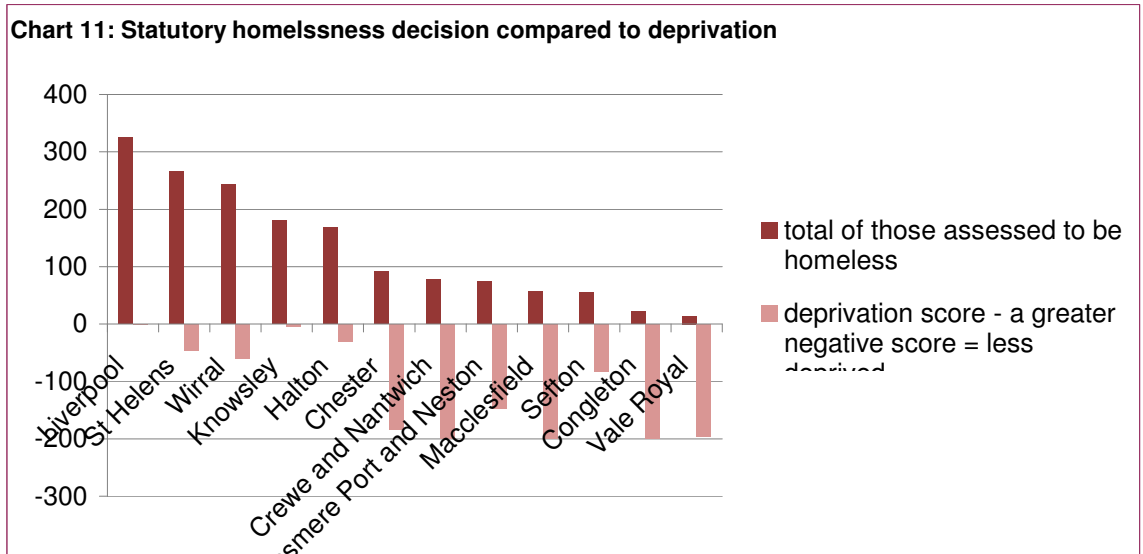
Repeat homelessness

4.27. Halton's proportion of repeat statutory homelessness is below the national average at less than 1%.

Regional comparisons

4.28. In addition to the comparisons made above, setting the data in the context of regional experience in Merseyside and Cheshire, Halton appears to have a relatively high level of both decisions and acceptances, given its population size, and a relatively high ratio of acceptances to decisions made.

4.29. Halton is closer in trend to its Merseyside neighbours than to Cheshire Authorities, which reflects its more urban context and levels of deprivation. Indeed when viewed alongside the deprivation ranking of local authorities, the trend is for the least deprived authorities to assess fewer people under the Housing Act.



- 4.30. Chart 11 shows the total number of those found to be homeless (whether or not in priority need or intentionally homeless) per 1,000 households compared to the deprivation ranking of the authority. This suggests that Halton's level of homelessness could simply reflect the level of need in the area.
- 4.31. It is also important to consider the rates of acceptance for help with rehousing, given that this represents those cases considered most deserving. It seems that the least deprived authorities have lower levels of acceptances, with those authorities ranked in the top 60 most deprived areas accepting the highest proportions of homeless applicants.
- 4.32. The two authorities that deviate from this trend are Liverpool and Sefton. Liverpool, whilst having a high level of homeless decisions, rejects over 70% of all those it assesses. 60% of those rejected are nonetheless assessed to be homeless, but over half are deemed not in priority need. This might suggest that the characteristics of those applying for help in Liverpool are significantly different to Halton – eg fewer families with dependent children.
- 4.33. Sefton on the other hand has a relatively high level of deprivation, but a lower level of decisions and acceptances, with almost 50% of all applications being rejected because the person is not considered homeless. It will be important over the course of the strategy to assess whether this is a feature of Sefton's prevention success or of the characteristics of those approaching the Statutory Service.

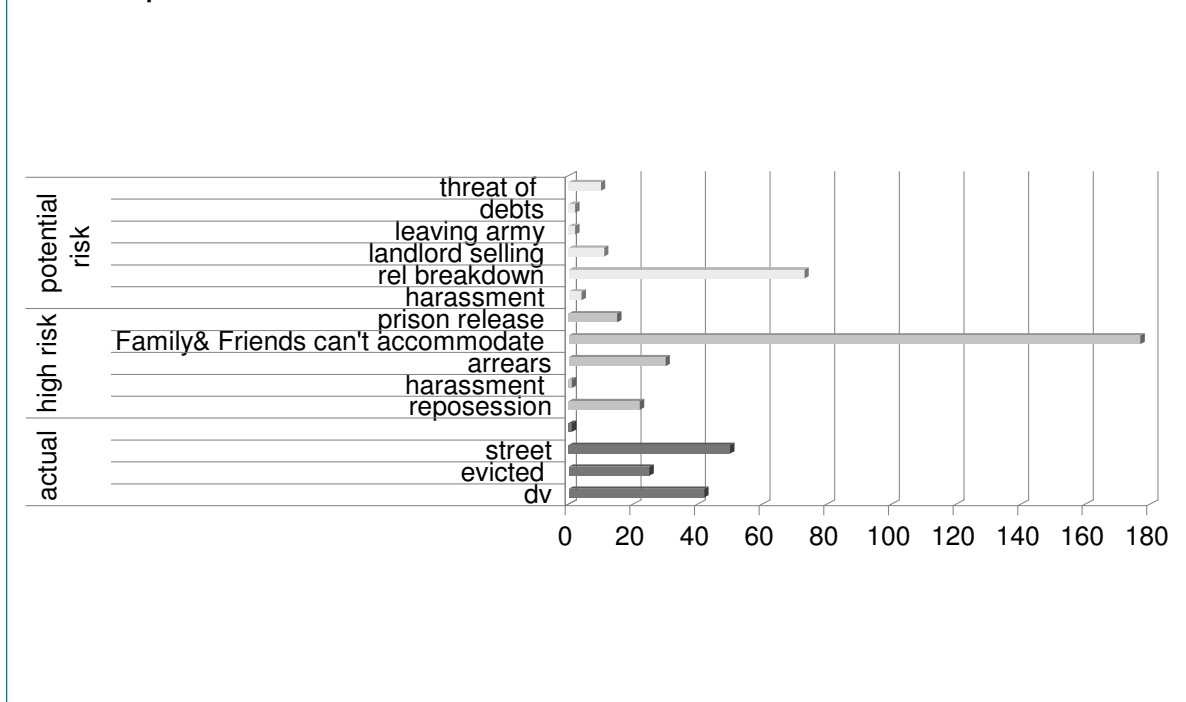
Households using the HHT Options & Advice Service

- 4.34. For those who do not wish or are not entitled to help under the homelessness legislation, there is a legal requirement to provide advice and assistance. The advice provided aims to enable the person to return to their home, and/or to understand what options they have for long or short-term housing.

Referrals to the service

- 4.35. In 2007/8 Just over 500 people approached the service and received assistance (without making a homelessness application). Of these, 6% were repeat enquiries - most of which took place within 6 months of an initial enquiry.
- 4.36. Based on the reasons given for their homelessness, it is possible to deduce that 21% of this client group could be classified as homeless under the legal definition. A further 42% could be deemed high risk – ie home loss would quickly follow without intervention, but remedial action or securing fresh accommodation could prevent homelessness. 19% could be categorised as at risk at some stage if no action was taken but there were remedies or time to resolve the problem. The method of assessment used here cannot give a completely accurate picture, but it gives some indication of potential homelessness if the reported risk goes unchecked.

Chart 12: Options & Advice - Level of homelessness risk

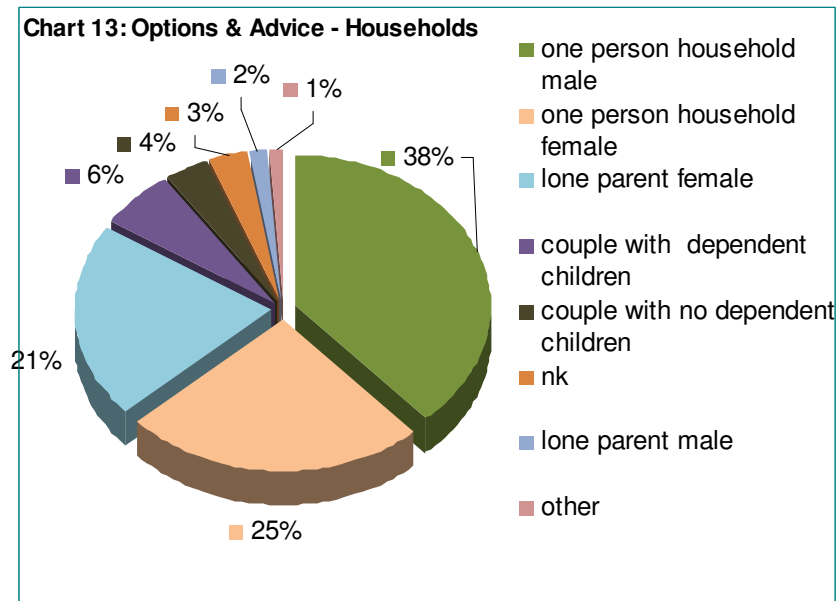


Reasons for homelessness amongst those using this service

- 4.37. The largest single cause of homelessness was eviction by family or friends. This mainly affected the under 25's, who accounted for over two thirds of such evictions. The overall proportional profile of causes was broadly similar to those making statutory homelessness applications, but for Options & Advice service users, there was a greater level of relationship breakdown and general debt problems. There was also a higher proportion of street homelessness recorded under this service. These trends indicate the larger proportion of single men and those without children in this client group.

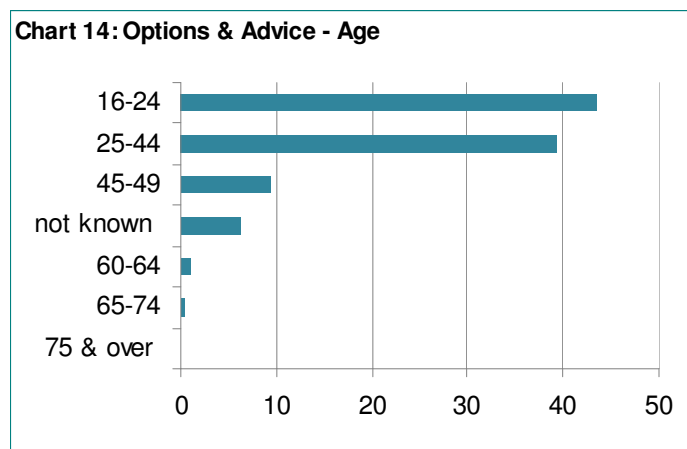
Households using this service

- 4.38. Unlike the group making homelessness applications who often have a priority need, most of the Advice and Options service users were single people or couples without children (67%), and single men in this client group was far higher at 38% (compared with only 7% for homelessness applicants).
- 4.39. However, it is notable that almost a third of advice and assistance service users were parents with dependent children. The number of children amongst the households helped by the service was 235. 26 pregnancies were also recorded.



Age of those using this service

- 4.40. The age range of service users was similar to that of homelessness applicants, with a slightly higher proportion of people aged over 40. Almost half of those seeking help were under 24 yrs. There was a high rate of unknown ages, which is often the case for services providing one-off advice where full details are not always captured.

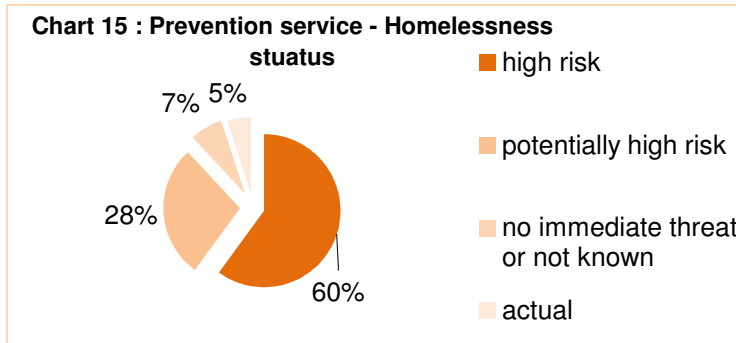


Households using Halton's Prevention Service

- 4.41. Halton's Prevention Service began in June 2007. It works with those who are at risk of homelessness, and aims to avert homelessness or to secure settled housing as soon possible.
- 4.42. Whilst the service is dedicated to preventing homelessness, it remains the option for many of those who are homeless but are not entitled to 'the main housing duty' under the homelessness law. The service also provides the access point to the Council's Rent Deposit Guarantee scheme (now Bond Scheme).

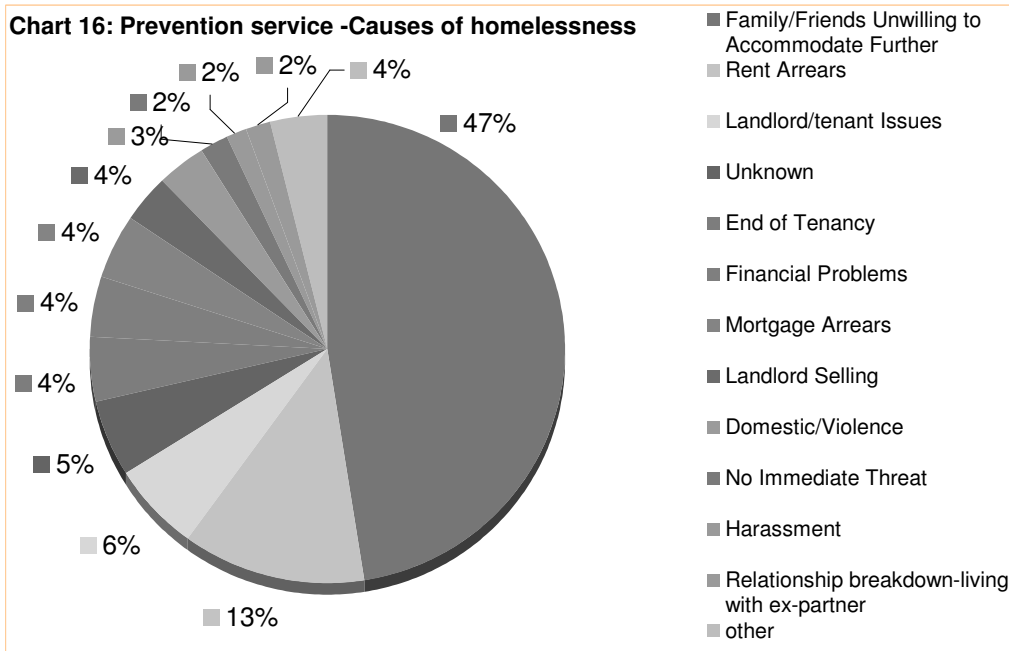
Referrals to the service in 2007/8

- 4.43. In ten months of operation, 380 households were referred to the service. This takes into account 36 repeat approaches from 17 individuals - most of whom used the service twice within three months of their previous appointment.
- 4.44. Using the method of assessment for the Options & Advice service, about 6% of Prevention Service households could be classified as homeless under the legal definition. Most cases involved accommodation, which could possibly be saved. About 55% of households had a high risk of homelessness and 33% a potential risk.



Reasons for homelessness or risk amongst those using this service

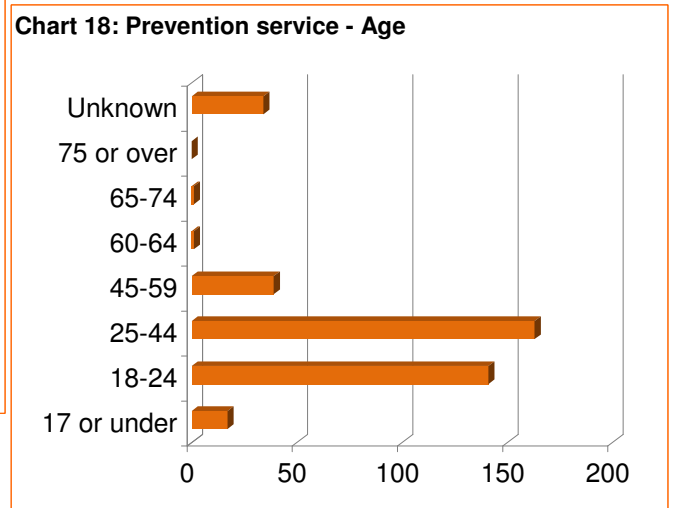
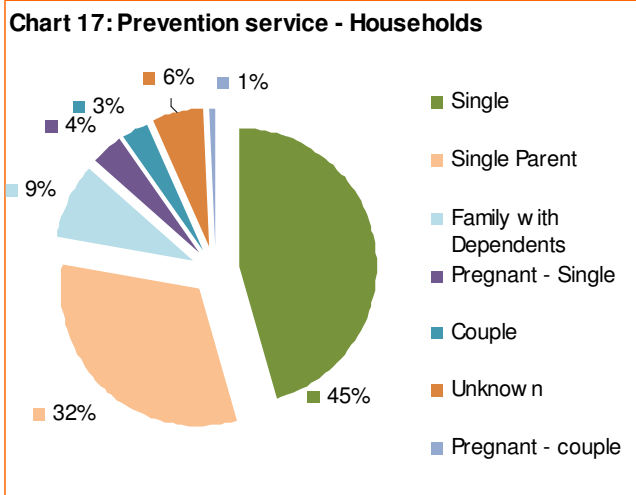
- 4.45. Almost 50% of households faced homelessness because family (including parents) and friends were unwilling to continue to accommodate - around 16% higher than for the Statutory Service. It is interesting to note that only 5% of those evicted by family and friends were under 18yrs and 44% were over 25yrs.



4.46. There was a higher rate of rent arrears amongst this client group, and more problems with private rented accommodation. This was most prevalent amongst the over 25's.

Gender, age and household type.

4.47. The age of service users showed a similar proportion of 18-24 to 25-44 yr olds. 60% of the whole client group, and 64% of the 18-24yr range was female.



4.48. 45% of those using the service had or were expecting children. 49% of female service users were single parents. There is no specific data on the number of children involved, but if each household with children is taken to represent one child the overall number of children was at least 162. The number of pregnancies recorded was 18.

4.49. 75% of those who were single and without children were male.

Overall level of homelessness

4.50. Those recorded across all three services as seeking help because they were facing home-loss in 2007/8 numbered 1,093²⁴. (The Multi Agency Monitoring (MAM) figures show a total of 1,077 homeless households for 2007/8).

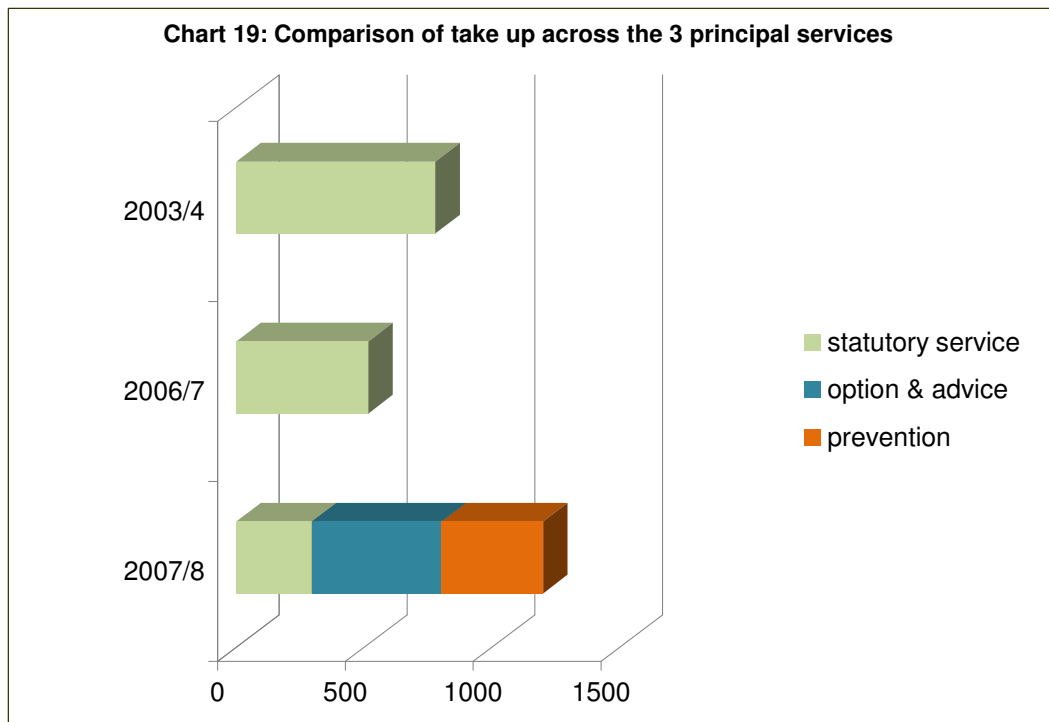
4.51. One cannot make a direct comparison between this figure and the 780 people making homelessness applications in 2003/4. The two sets of data clearly relate to several different types of service and the lack of consistency between data provided also limits the capacity to provide a consolidated picture.

4.52. However, analysis of both the Options & Advice and Prevention services does suggest that a significant proportion of those seeking help across all three services were indeed at risk of homelessness. Potentially 73% of the overall

²⁴ Note that this analysis uses figures adjusted to remove duplication of cases between the three services.

total – or 800 households - faced imminent home loss if no intervention was provided. Around 37% could fall under the statutory definition of immediate homelessness²⁵. 19% could be categorised as at risk without intervention, and 8% as facing no discernable risk, or risk was not recorded.

- 4.53. Whilst all of those seeking help from the statutory safety net are considered the most vulnerable and less able to fend for themselves, it is interesting to note that almost a third of those using non-statutory services would be classified as in priority need because of dependent children or pregnancy.



Overall notable characteristics

- 4.54. A common finding in the consultation across the three services and beyond, was the concern that there are now more people seeking help who have multiple problems, including mental health problems and drug or alcohol addiction, and that the majority of those using the services lack the skills to enable employment, and better housing prospects.
- 4.55. MAM figures for 2007/8 show that drug or alcohol abuse were cited by service users as one of the top 4 factors contributing to their homelessness. Lack of “life skills” where households cannot meet their own basic needs was the 5th most commonly reported contributory factor. 12% of service users had some form of social services involvement in the previous year – mainly relating to time spent in care. 20% reported that they had received help from GPs, counsellors or mental health services for mental health problems in the previous year. 16%

²⁵ As opposed to the threat of homelessness within 28 days

had some involvement with the criminal justice system (probation, prison or anti social behaviour order)

- 4.56. MAM also reports that income levels for the vast majority of service users (97%) was below £20,000 a year, with 86% living on less than £10,000, and around 80% reliant on benefits as their sole source of income.
- 4.57. The ethnic origin of those using the three services and recorded by MAM is predominantly White British, with around 1% of users coming from black or minority ethnic communities. This is slightly lower than the borough averages. As people from some BME communities tend to face more homelessness risks, it is worth considering whether those in Halton are not making use of services or are not experiencing homelessness. Only two of the three principal services collected information on ethnic origin, and both show a 50% “not known” rate.

Street homelessness

- 4.58. National data about street homelessness levels is now collected via periodic street counts.²⁶ Halton carried out a street count in 2004, when no people were found to be sleeping rough, and in March 2008 where one person was officially counted.
- 4.59. Street counts are important, to understand the extent of chronic and/or extensive and consistent rough sleeping in the borough. However, the anecdotal information from services assisting those most at risk of this type of homelessness is that actual levels of rough sleeping are masked, particularly amongst those who sleep out intermittently – alternating between makeshift sleeping arrangements at the homes of friends and acquaintances, (so called “sofa surfing”) and sleeping on the streets. Street homelessness that is either chronic or intermittent is cited as a major obstacle to tackling underlying substance abuse and mental health problems.
- 4.60. The data considered across the three services suggests that 46 people had slept rough or were most at risk of doing so because they reported having no fixed abode in 2007/8. Multi Agency Monitoring for Halton shows that 97 people reported sleeping rough in 2007/8.
- 4.61. Those services catering for people with complex and chaotic lifestyles – principally concerning drug and alcohol abuse – suggest that there is a core group of around 13 people who sleep rough on a more or less permanent basis. Agencies working with this group cite a number of barriers to resettlement, including past experiences, which make hostel living too challenging. Many are excluded from both short and long term accommodation due to chronic substance abuse, past behaviour or arrears, and are more at risk of being found intentionally homeless.

²⁶ A council-led exercise to literally go out at night to places where rough sleeping takes place and count the number of those sleeping out.

- 4.62. Whilst nothing about the duration of each episode of rough sleeping has been captured in available data, it is still evident that this type of homelessness remains a significant problem.

Conclusions & Recommendations

- 4.63. Although statutory rates have clearly reduced, the overall level of homelessness, the degree of homelessness risk and the vulnerability of those in need remain relatively high. There is still a problem of "statutory" homelessness in Halton and a continuing need to provide a safety net.
- 4.64. There is also a very real sense that the establishment of the Prevention Service and the provision of Options & Advice support previously unmet demand. This suggests a wider need for support for those who cannot or will not pursue the statutory homelessness route to rehousing, but are nonetheless homeless or at imminent risk. It is also clear that such volume will require careful service targeting.
- 4.65. The combining of the 3 principal services in 2008 gives an opportunity for a comprehensive response and the development of a more pro-active approach to those at risk. It will also enable more sophisticated data to provide enough depth of analysis to target prevention activity effectively.
- 4.66. There will also be lessons to learn from similar and contrasting authorities, which manage their services and prevention approaches differently, and these should be explored throughout the life of the strategy.
- 4.67. Across the range of homelessness and prevention services there are some clear priority areas of concern that need to be addressed:
- The levels of homelessness arising from the parental home.
 - Levels of homelessness amongst those with dependent children – over 600 children and 70 expected children were homeless or at risk of homelessness in 2007/8.
 - Levels of homelessness amongst young people – under 24yrs.
 - Continued homelessness as a result of short-term tenancies ending.
 - Debt related homelessness and the potential for this to worsen over the coming two years.
 - Street homelessness.
 - The continuing prevalence of domestic abuse.
 - The employability of many who are at risk of home loss.
 - Multiple needs amongst those seeking help.
 - The higher levels of repeat enquiries – around 7% - for service users of the Prevention and Options & Advice services.
- 4.68. For those at risk because of family eviction there is potential for earlier intervention, with a planned approach to moving home and living independently.
- 4.69. Early assistance and the building of strong relationships with housing providers to limit evictions will also be critical to prevent escalation of debt problems and arrears.

The strategy should deliver:

- R9. A new approach to service provision which aims for a comprehensive response to homelessness and risk, enabling**
 - i. The earliest possible targeted interventions.
 - ii. Planned movement from one settled home to another.

- R10. Specific service developments and interventions focused on those who are most at risk** including young people, families with children, those at risk of debt, those facing multiple problems and those escaping domestic abuse.

- R11. Links with employment and skills development services** to deliver better prospects of employability, financial security and housing choice for those experiencing homelessness and its risk.

- R12. A comprehensive approach to intelligence gathering and analysis,** including a review of the use of MAM and service statistics- to enable
 - i. A coherent set of data.
 - ii. Deeper understanding of homelessness causes, risk factors and communities affected.
 - iii. Targeting of households where risk trends are developing.
 - iv. Tracking and recording outcomes and reducing “not known” entries.

5 Halton’s Provision for Those Facing - Or Most at Risk of Homelessness

5.1. This section gives an overview of the provision available in Halton in 2007/8. It does not detail every project or provide a critique of services, but offers an outline of the provision, its range, scope, and the value to those at risk of homelessness.

5.2. Since the first Homelessness Strategy, Halton has seen the emergence of new projects and the development of many existing services, which have had a positive impact on homelessness and supporting those at risk. In addition to the council’s homelessness services, provision has been greatly bolstered by the Supporting People (SP) programme, commissioning a range of independent living and risk reduction services.

Figures

In 2007/8

- The Supporting People programme in Halton provided over **400** people with access to intensive one to one support, dealing with a range of problems that placed them at risk of homelessness.

5.3. Accommodation-based services commissioned by SP are dealt with in Section 6.

The Council’s homelessness services

5.4. This section deals with the three principal services provided by or on behalf of the Council.

The Homelessness Service

5.5. As noted elsewhere, the Homelessness service - provided by Halton Housing Trust (HHT) between December 2005 and September 2008- fulfilled the Council’s legal duty to assist those who became homeless. (The service has now transferred back to direct management by the Council and has been re-branded as the Housing Solutions service in order to emphasise the focus on prevention of homelessness.)

5.6. Access is now principally via the Council’s Halton Direct Link service (HDL). In addition in 2007/8 access was provided directly by phone, email or visiting one of HHT’s offices, (although these avenues were not publicised). Clients were also referred via the emergency services and GPs or other primary care professionals.

5.7. All those presenting to the Homelessness Service are offered an “options interview” where the possibilities for resolving their problem or finding a new home are explored. The service user is advised of opportunities to improve their current housing situation or find an alternative home. One of the options – depending on circumstances – is to complete a homelessness application (see below). Service users who opt out of homelessness applications or are not entitled to rehousing are helped under the Options & Advice service.

5.8. **Options & Advice:** is aimed at helping to get the household back into their home: eg: challenging wrongful evictions or negotiating with landlords; or getting help to overcome problems which put them at risk of homelessness, such as

securing debt advice. Service users receive assistance with access to emergency and short-term housing, legal advice and support services, along with advice about their long-term options.

Options & Advice 2007/08	
Take Up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 509 households used this service in 2007/8. ■ Detail on the take up of this service is found in Section 4
Action & Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The main action taken on behalf of Options & Advice clients was to provide advice, with almost a third also being referred to hostel or short-term accommodation – including women’s refuges.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 16% were referred or signposted to the Council’s Deposit Guarantee Scheme.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 11% of clients abandoned their enquiry before any action could be taken to assist them.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Data on outcomes is not available for this service. The fact that nothing is known about the success or otherwise of the advice and help provided is important to bear in mind in the planning of the new service and data collection by the strategy.

5.9 **Statutory homelessness applications.** In accordance with the law, all those whom the service has reason to believe may be homeless are entitled to be assessed and a decision made about their right to specific types of assistance. The table below gives the detail of who qualifies for what sort of help.

Decision Under Homelessness Law	Help Given
Those who are found not homeless – e.g. there may be some homelessness risk, but it is not within 28 days.	<input type="checkbox"/> Helped via the Options & Advice service.
Those who are homeless but have no priority need for help	<input type="checkbox"/> Advised about their housing options; referred to further advice or support and sources of rehousing.
Those who are in priority need but have caused their own homelessness (<i>intentionally homeless</i>)	<input type="checkbox"/> Provided with temporary accommodation where necessary, for up to 28 days.
Those who are accepted for rehousing	<input type="checkbox"/> Provided with temporary housing, as needed, until offered a property through the Council’s Housing Register.
	<input type="checkbox"/> If the client has a connection with another local authority area, they can be referred there for rehousing.
	<input type="checkbox"/> Only one offer of accommodation is made. For more detail on access to accommodation see Section 7.

5.10 In general terms those who have a priority need for help and are homeless through no fault of their own are given top priority on the Housing Register.

5.11 People using this route to rehousing are entitled to have decisions about their application or the suitability of any accommodation offered reviewed or appealed, including via the courts.

Homelessness Service 2007/08	
Take Up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 296 people opted to make an application. ■ 221 households were accepted for rehousing.
Action & Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 51% of all those accepted for rehousing were placed in a temporary home or hostel. ■ 49% of those accepted remained in their homes classified as “homeless at home” – (usually this is with family or friends, until an offer of settled housing is made)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Most clients were rehoused within six months (76%), the majority being offered a property within 3-4 months. ■ A further 9% were rehoused between 6 months and a year after their assessment ■ 12% made arrangements of their own (usually within 6 months).
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Of those rehoused, the vast majority were offered a property via the Council Housing Register. They were nominated to one of several local RSLs including Halton Housing Trust.

The Prevention Service

- 5.12 This service is provided by the Council to assist those at risk of homelessness to retain their accommodation or to get access to fresh housing without becoming homeless. In reality the service also responds to those who are actually homeless, but who cannot, or chose not to pursue the statutory homelessness route. Access is principally via the Council's Halton Direct Link service (HDL).
- 5.13 Following initial assessment, the service offers a range of options including advice on rights to occupy their home and provision of or referral to legal advice and representation for enforcement of rights; support to reinstate the client in their home – through mediation with family or friends or negotiation with landlords; work with the client to reduce arrears and understand their responsibilities as a tenant; referral to the Bond Guarantee Scheme (see Section 7) and referral for longer term support to develop skills and manage their affairs and sustain tenancies.

Prevention Service 2007/08	
Take Up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 380 people used the service in the ten months of operation.
Action & Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ In 48% of all cases it is known that the client either retained their existing home or secured a new one. ■ Almost 40% of those helped were referred to the Deposit Guarantee Scheme. ■ 17% were helped via mediation or negotiation to reinstate them in their homes. ■ The remainder were provided with advice and support usually through a referral to further help. ■ The greatest success rate for home retention was amongst private tenants seeking to stay in their tenancy. ■ Of those securing a new home, only 6% lost their current home before taking up the new one. ■ 4% of the total client group were recorded as still homeless on case closure (they were referred on to other services for assistance). ■ In over 40% of cases, outcomes are unknown. There is a high rate of contact lost following one-off advice. This will be resolved by the Council's new IT database. However the strategy needs to ensure more robust data collection across all services. ■ Almost a fifth of clients did not keep their appointment or pursue the case. This was most prevalent amongst those facing eviction from friends and family.

Future Services

- 5.14 There is an ongoing legal requirement for HBC to provide a homelessness service – including advice & assistance, homelessness assessment and temporary and long-term accommodation for those who qualify.
- 5.15 The return of the Statutory Homelessness and Options & Advice Service to direct Council management facilitated the three principal services to combine to deliver an efficient and coherent service, laying the foundation for the new Homelessness Strategy in developing a comprehensive prevention focus for those at risk of homelessness.

Figures

- In 2007/8 almost **1,100** people approached the combined services.
- The new Housing Solutions Service (post October 2008) is staffed by 3 homelessness assessment officers, 3 prevention officers and the service manager.
- The Bond Guarantee Scheme officer also works within the team.

Homelessness & Debt Advice Services

- 5.16 There are three specialist advice providers²⁷ operating in Halton whose services have a direct impact on people facing or at risk of homelessness. Two are independent of the Council - Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) and Shelter; the third is the Council's own Welfare Benefits Service.

Citizens Advice Bureau

- 5.17 The only provider of generic, independent advice based permanently in the borough is the CAB, with two offices in Halton at Widnes and Runcorn.
- 5.18 Access is direct and wide - via open surgeries, appointments, telephone and email. There is an electronic referral and appointments system, available to a wide range of agencies across the borough. Referral arrangements via Sure Start children's services enable parents to access a dedicated Sure Start CAB team for support with claiming benefits, managing money and other welfare related work.

Figures CAB Debt Advice Service

- In 2007/8 almost **3000** households used the CAB debt service – with problems ranging from bankruptcy to catalogue debts.
- Around **500** households were already in direct danger of losing their home due to rent or mortgage arrears.
- **1,500** had debt problems, which if not dealt with would have a serious impact in income, ability to pay for day-to-day living and potentially to home loss.

²⁷ ie services specifically set up primarily to provide advice as opposed to offering it as part of a wider range of services.

- 5.19 The CAB covers an extensive range of legal advice issues including consumer, family, employment, tax, immigration, benefits, debt and housing. The main services provided are information and legal advice, advocacy, negotiating with third parties, providing or securing legal representation for clients at court or in tribunals, helping clients to fill out forms and claims entitlements, and referral to other specialist agencies.
- 5.20 The wide scope of the CAB's service is essential in preventing homelessness by averting or resolving problems that might lead to homes becoming unsuitable, unaffordable or being repossessed. Critical to this prevention role is the CAB's provision of financial advice, ensuring that clients are getting the right levels of income, including benefits, and using the most appropriate financial products. They also assist people to manage their money and avoid or tackle rent or mortgage arrears, loans secured on their home, or other debts which force the sale of their home. The CAB provides assistance to those with the most complex debt-related cases – usually characterised by multiple and high-risk debts.
- 5.21 The CAB is funded by a combination of grants, including £139K from the council, contracts e.g. through the Legal Services Commission and voluntary donations. During 06/07 and 07/08 the CAB suffered a loss in funding of over £180K as a result of funding changes, the inability to replace pilot funding and grant cuts. However the CAB was successful in securing funding from the Primary Care Trust in 2009, which enabled four debt advisers to be employed.

Shelter

- 5.22 Shelter is a national campaigning charity, providing advice, information, advocacy and support services to people who are homeless or badly housed. Shelter's provision in Halton is via weekly surgeries at the CAB offices in Halton and a Housing Aid service based in Chester, which offers a Cheshire-wide telephone advice service. Shelter also operates a national freephone helpline providing housing advice and emergency advocacy.
- 5.23 Shelter advisers will offer a range of support including Court representation. They will also represent those who are not satisfied with the handling of their application under the homelessness law, seeking to review decisions and in some cases to assist in any resulting Court appeal or judicial review proceedings.
- 5.24 Shelter also provides the National Homelessness Advice Service - offering consultancy advice and training on housing law, free of charge, to independent advice providers. The service is a partnership with Citizens Advice and the department for Communities & Local Government. The aim is to build the capacity of frontline community based services to provide advice, which prevents homelessness.

Figures

- In 2007/8, **169** people from Halton sought advice from Shelter about homelessness or the threat of homelessness

One of its objectives is to work with local authorities, developing cooperation and joint working between statutory and voluntary sector services on homelessness prevention.

- 5.25 Shelter receives funding from donations and contracts. Advice services are funded largely via the Legal Services Commission.

The Council's Welfare Rights Service

- 5.26 The take up of benefits is a critical element in preventing homelessness, ensuring that people can pay for their homes and manage their household finances.
- 5.27 The Council's Welfare Rights Service provides advice and support about any welfare benefit. Access is very wide – including telephone, appointments and drop in surgeries at HDL one-stop shops in Runcorn and Widnes. A surgery is also provided at the Brooker Centre, which supports people with mental health problems.
- 5.28 The service has two key goals: to promote take up and to ensure that people receive appropriate benefit payments. It conducts proactive targeted campaigns to help people understand their entitlement and to make claims. The service also supports those who have problems with their benefits, to claim the right level of benefit and challenge decisions and deal with over and underpayments.

- 5.29 Advice and support is comprehensive, from help completing benefit claim forms to advocating for claimants in reviews and appeals, and representing at tribunals.

Figures

- The Welfare Rights service secured **£2.8** million in benefits for Halton residents in 2007/8
- **84%** of this figure relates to benefits associated with disability

- 5.30 Where claimants are also experiencing debt problems, the service can offer debt advice including Court representation. This specialist provision is limited by the resources available and is not advertised, but provides those seeking help about benefits with vital support to prevent further financial disadvantage.

Court Services

- 5.31 There is currently a Court Advocacy Service provided for Runcorn residents, attending the County Court at Runcorn. Warrington Law Centre has Legal Service Commission funding to provide a Court duty scheme i.e. free legal advice on the day of possession hearings. Widnes residents attend the County Court at St Helens and a local firm of solicitors provide the Duty Scheme at this court.

Support during family breakdown

- 5.32 As noted earlier – family breakdown is the primary cause of homelessness – increasingly arising from problems between parents and adult children. This trend is particularly pronounced amongst the homelessness recorded in Halton.
- 5.33 Family breakdown has increased, as the shortfall in affordable housing has not kept pace with expectation of independent living for young people. An increase in

single parents with no independent housing options has also created multi generational households, with problems of overcrowding, affordability and relationship stress. A number of services are available to assist families - those intervening in cases of abuse (see below), and those that mediate between family members to get relationships back on track.

- 5.34 **Mediation Service:** Provided by the YMCA since September 2007, this assists young people (under 25yrs) to re-establish relationships with their families and to return home if this is appropriate. The scheme is intensive and demanding of all participants, and whilst it is successful in assisting those who take up the service the greatest challenge is in gaining agreement from parents to participate. It is accessible via referral from other support services.

Figures

- Between September 2007 and April 2008, **70** young people were referred for help with mediation.
- **48** entered the mediation programme.

- 5.35 **Parenting Support:** The Council's Community Strategy encourages the development of parenting support services in the context of the national Every Child Matters agenda (which seeks to safeguard children and promote their welfare and potential); and in the drive to develop safer and stronger communities by reducing anti social behaviour. Halton Council's Children and Young People's services enable access to parenting support through Children's Centres and a dedicated Family Support Team. Specialist support is also available to parents where children's behaviour is of concern (see below) .

Domestic abuse response

- 5.36 Domestic abuse typically affects women, who often leave the family home with their children in response to physical danger. The abuse also causes homelessness for women without children and for men; and the abuse may be psychological – nonetheless causing severe harm. The principal consideration for most of those escaping is to find safety, and this is most often provided via a refuge, offering a secure and confidential place to stay. For those who leave home to escape, the majority (over 60%) will not feel safe to return, and the act of leaving in itself places them in considerable danger.²⁸
- 5.37 As outlined in Section 4, statutory homelessness in Halton as a result of domestic abuse is 50% lower than regional average and 4% lower than the national average. However domestic violence remains the third largest reason for statutory homelessness in Halton; and demand for refuges spaces typically exceeds supply.
- 5.38 Halton has established a multi agency Domestic Abuse Forum, and a strategy to guide the development of prevention and response work across the borough. This is established via strong links between the Relationship Centre (based in Warrington), the local Women's Aid refuge, the Police, Social Care and Health Care

²⁸ Daly & Wilson (1998) abusive people who kill their partners are more likely to do so when the partner is planning to or has just moved out of the home.

professionals. The work is part of Halton's Safer Halton Partnership, and enables an effective emergency response, efficient referral processes and the development of solutions aimed at prevention of abuse and the ability to remain safely in the family home where appropriate. It also facilitates a joint assessment and information sharing procedure to assist those most at risk. The services offered across Halton include:

- 5.39 **Halton Women's Aid refuge:** provides 16 bed spaces for women and children (boys must be under 13yrs). The service offers advice and advocacy regarding legal and housing issues; ensures emotional and practical support for residents, assists them to overcome the trauma of abuse, and helps them develop confidence and achieve independence in setting up and maintaining a new home. It also supports the development of skills and access to employment, and refers residents to additional forms of support – e.g. for drug abuse or mental health problems.
- 5.40 Many of the women placed in the refuge will have a priority need for assistance under the homelessness law – either because of their children or because they are considered vulnerable as a result of the abuse, and many will be rehoused via the Housing Register.
- 5.41 **A 24 hour helpline:** provided by the Relationship Centre offers advice on a range of issues including finding accommodation; support in assisting with the prosecution of their abusive ex- partner; access to help for children to overcome the effects of witnessing abuse; and referral to support similar to that provided by Women's Aid. Couples can also get assistance to stop abuse in their relationship.
- 5.42 **A Sanctuary Scheme:** provides the option of remaining in the home, with enhanced security measures in place to deter an abusive partner who has been excluded from the property, (usually following an injunction). There are two elements to the scheme: structural security measures for the home, including additional locks, reinforced doors and emergency alarms; and the provision of support and practical help to overcome the emotional effects of the abuse and develop new skills and knowledge (which is currently provided by the Relationship Centre).
- 5.43 **Community outreach support** – practical help, advice and emotional support is also offered by SHAP. Their Halton Domestic Abuse Support Service assists those who have experienced or witnessed domestic abuse to recover their self esteem and avoid isolation, providing similar services to the Women's Aid refuge - enabling access to opportunities that improve their emotional, social and economic prospects, and reduce the risk of homelessness.

Figures

- In 2007/8 **49** households were helped by Halton Women's Aid
- **46** women were helped via the Sanctuary Scheme
- Over **250** people were provided with regular emotional support from the domestic abuse telephone helpline.

Support for young people

Local Authority services

- 5.44 Halton's Young People's Team (YPT) delivers the Council's statutory duties to support care leavers and Children in Need.²⁹ The team supports children in need, those evicted by parents and those who leave care or whose placement breaks down, to get access to mediation services or to accommodation. Their strategy seeks a 15% reduction in the number of such children in temporary accommodation by 2009.
- 5.45 The YPT provide support, advice and guidance and act as brokers with other agencies. They work closely with local hostels to develop a plan of support to achieve independent living, and liaise with providers of other support services such as employment and skills, Youth Offending Teams and alcohol and drug abuse support.
- 5.46 Consultation with the service revealed that whilst it would be desirable for young people to remain in their placements until they reach 18, having gained appropriate life skills. The reality is that many leave at 16 or 17, but then find the living arrangements and regulations at hostels challenging, some are unable to cope leading to eviction and the potential to be found "intentionally homeless" as a result. Access to longer-term accommodation is also problematic because of the reluctance to grant tenancies for young people under 17yrs.

Figures

- A snapshot at the end of March 2008 showed **10** care leavers and **4** Children In Need in hostel accommodation in Halton

Accommodation and community based support

- 5.47 A range of hostel-based support is available generally to homeless young people – this is detailed in Section 6.
- 5.48 Carr Gomm provides support and a specific project for young people & teenage parents - offering guidance and advice to teenagers at risk of becoming homeless. Services are geared towards helping with emotional and practical issues to enable independent living, with a strong emphasis on building confidence, developing skills and entering training and employment. Young people are referred for support to deal with problems such as childhood abuse or addiction.

Consultation with young people

- 5.49 A consultation event³⁰ with over 20 young people aged 16 to 25 identified additional service needs:

²⁹ These groups cover those between the ages of 15½ and 21 yrs, and the team usually works with 16-17 yr olds. Children in Need include those whose health or development are significantly at risk without the provision of services

³⁰ Youth Homelessness Forum 2008

- More publicity about what services are available.
- Access to health services – particularly GP and dentist.
- Financial management and debt services.
- More easily understood information on benefits.
- Practical support getting access to training – for example subsidised /free travel to college.
- Help with clothing for job interviews.
- Access to subsidised physical fitness activity.

Anti Social Behaviour Cessation

- 5.50 Tenants or their household members who perpetrate neighbour nuisance and other acts of anti social behaviour are at risk of eviction. Considerable national and local government attention to community safety has increased the prevalence of zero-tolerance initiatives to reduce anti social activities. Where homes are lost because of anti social behaviour and a homelessness application is then made, a finding of intentional homelessness will invariably follow.
- 5.51 **The Anti Social Behaviour Floating Support Service** intervenes to ensure that those who carry out anti social activity are assisted in altering their behaviour, developing skills to prevent homelessness such as household management and budgeting, reducing debts, and gaining access to other forms of advice and support. The service has links to other preventative provision such as: counselling, anger management therapy, mental health support, parenting support, the Youth Offending Team, and the Council's Prevention Service and Bond Guarantee Scheme.
- 5.52 **A Family Intervention Project** is available in Halton, to work with those families with a strong likelihood of eviction because of anti social behaviour across all housing sectors. This will offer intensive interventions with families in their own homes, and also to those who have been evicted or are in the process of losing their homes. The services will enable families to establish routines, develop parenting skills, organise their affairs and finances, and encourage family activities and behavioural change.
- 5.53 **A Senior Parenting Practitioner** ensures the availability of appropriate support via parenting programmes delivered in the community, for parents whose children are at risk of poor outcomes relating to their behaviour.

Drug & alcohol support

- 5.54 Those with drug and alcohol problems run the risk of homelessness when their addiction disables the ability to manage their affairs or exacerbates behaviour that might lead to eviction. Those who become homeless have a higher risk of developing drug or alcohol problems, which in turn makes sustaining long-term housing more difficult.
- 5.55 The pattern of homelessness amongst those with substance misuse problems is often a downward spiral where underlying problems – for example poor early life experiences, abuse and neglect – and the effects of addiction combine to create or exacerbate mental ill health, reduce physical health and create chaotic lifestyles.

- 5.56 The Safer Halton Partnership – through the Drug & Alcohol Action Team (DAAT) delivers a range of strategic initiatives, funding and direct services to help people avoid harm in their drug and alcohol consumption, and reduce or stop their addiction.
- 5.57 Ashley House is a one ‘stop shop’ commissioned by the DAAT, which provides a range of health related, social care and advice services, and enables access to treatment, housing advice, training and education services. The project also provides counselling and advice for those who care for or live with people abusing alcohol or drugs. Examples of homelessness–related outreach services linked to Ashley House include:
- Addaction outreach and helpline: providing practical and emotional support for people experiencing drug problems, including harm reduction, alternative therapies, support for those undergoing treatment, leaving prison or coming out of treatment.
 - SHAP: providing an outreach programme offering support advice, advocacy and access to services, helping people set up or maintain their home, develop the skills to manage their affairs and access other support services and social networks. SHAP work with education services to develop training that is accessible for this client group, for whom mainstream provision is often problematic.
- 5.58 These and others agencies operating in the borough assist those without a home to get into hostel or longer-term housing or to access mental health services and liaison with criminal justice services.
- 5.59 Halton agencies in this field report an absence of day care facilities - for example washing and laundry - which could assist people to engage with services and develop connections that reduce chaotic behaviour; and a lack of specialist housing options that can accommodate the challenges posed by long term substance misuse (see Sections 6&7).

Figures

- Addaction report that up to **22** of their clients are habitually rough sleeping, with a core group of around **13** who sleep on the streets more or less permanently.
- **60%** of SHAP’s drug and alcohol service clients have their own tenancies, **20%** have some form of roof over their heads – eg on friends’ floors, whilst **10%** are generally living rough.

Support for those with mental health problems

- 5.60 As noted earlier, 20% of those recorded via Multi Agency Monitoring had sought support for mental illness in the previous year. Research suggests that between 30% and 50% of those who experience homelessness have suffered from a mental health problem in the past. According to anecdotal evidence from those consulted in the field of drug and alcohol support, a significant proportion of those seeking help with housing are also affected by mental ill health. It is clear that people with

mental health problems will find it harder to manage their affairs and are more prone to problems such as debt and arrears and to abandoning accommodation.³¹

- 5.61 Halton provides for those with severe and/or enduring mental health problems through a combination of second tier health care and social care, offering medium and long term supported housing alongside community based and outreach services, which enable people to live in the community and to resettle after hospital discharge.
- 5.62 Consultation with agencies supporting people with mental health problems, revealed concerns about those who might have lower level mental health problems, or whose mental health problems are accompanied by substance misuse (referred to as “dual-diagnosis”), which can create problems in both diagnosis and treatment. These concerns centred on the greater risk of such people falling through the net of provision, developing multiple problems, and not being perceived as vulnerable enough to warrant intervention by the Statutory Homelessness service. It is interesting to note that statistics provided by the YMCA highlight that 25% of residents in 2008 had a mental health issue albeit minor. The YMCA is working on a mental health and well being strategy.
- 5.63 The Supporting People Strategy recognises the need to increase services to this group. The Mental Health Accommodation Strategy recommends both an in-depth analysis of those with dual-diagnosis, and a greater understanding of the needs of people with mental health problems who are homeless.

Outreach support for general risk groups

- 5.64 There are a number of so-called “generic” services assisting those who are vulnerable to home-loss. These “floating support” or community-based services are available to ensure that people are able to manage their affairs and their tenancies. Those who access this type of support have often been homeless before, or have been referred by other welfare services to ensure that their homelessness is prevented.
- 5.65 For example, Halton Tenant Support Service (provided by SHAP) helps clients to set up or maintain a home, which includes advice, support and skills development, concentrating on increasing the users’ capacity to live independently, avoid social isolation, develop their ability to manage money and increase their employment prospects.

Figures

- In 2007/8 SHAP assisted **38** people with general tenancy support (in addition to the 32 people who needed help with substance misuse) - providing an average of **8 months** support per person.

³¹ Ravenhill, M., Routes Into Homelessness, London, 2000.

Registered Social Landlords' support for tenants at risk

- 5.66 As the major providers of rented housing in Halton, the role of RSLs is critical in the prevention of homelessness amongst tenants. Their rationale for addressing prevention includes: the reduction in voids and costs caused by evictions; their role as a *social* housing provider - often with a mission to support individual and social advancement; and their increasing role in community development.
- 5.67 Those consulted are engaged in a number of activities aimed at reducing evictions and abandonment.
- 5.68 **Arrears reduction** Most RSLs have early intervention mechanisms in place that provide support to those who fall into arrears. In some cases a single missed payment will trigger an alert to the tenant. A further missed payment will result in a home visit with help to support budgeting and debt management, including access to debt specialists.
- 5.69 **Tenancy sustainment work** - there are increasingly early interventions with tenants who start to display anti social behaviour or who might be at risk in managing their tenancies. RSLs link into floating support schemes to ensure that their tenants have assistance to keep their homes.
- 5.70 With the increasing importance of RSLs as the providers of affordable housing, Government initiatives seek a strategic homelessness response from RSLs. A programme of work is now expected of RSLs to deliver homelessness prevention strategies, develop financial inclusion and create initiatives to reduce worklessness amongst tenants.

Support from Housing Benefit

- 5.71 The Housing Benefit (HB) Department fulfils a major role with regard to homelessness prevention – the provision of subsidy to enable people to afford their rented homes and the provision of Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) to prevent hardship by covering a shortfall between benefit levels and rent. The amount of funding regarding DHP is a relatively small sum of money (£30,000 in 2007/08), but can prove effective in preventing homelessness.
- 5.72 Delays in HB payments, problems with under and overpayments and failures to renew claims create arrears, which in many local authority areas have resulted in evictions. In Halton the HB service has an excellent record in timely processing of applications. This is supported by the Benefits Express service, a high-tech, mobile facility, which travels to pre-advertised community locations to receive and process claims and refer claimants for welfare rights advice. As a result claims usually take less than two weeks to administer. In addition the team works very closely with the Council's Welfare Rights Officers, further reducing the likelihood of claimant problems.
- 5.73 Consultation with young people identified that good communication with the benefits service and easily understood information on entitlements would be helpful to them in reducing the risk of arrears.

- 5.74 From the 1st April 2008 the Housing Benefits provision for private tenants changed to Local Housing Allowance (LHA), which is paid to the tenant rather than the landlord for all but the most vulnerable tenants. This is designed to encourage - amongst other things - greater levels of tenant responsibility, and greater certainty over what they will be expected to pay. Changes in the calculation of the allowance will actually provide some tenants with a small surplus (up to a maximum of £15) after rent is paid.
- 5.75 LHA does open up the risk of tenants defaulting on rent payments; although the scheme allows for direct payment to landlords for tenants who are unable to manage their finances or fall into arrears. Halton's Housing Benefit Department have stated their intention that those who are considered at risk - eg many of those in receipt of Supporting People funded services – will have their LHA paid direct to the landlord.
- 5.76 The LHA regime remains problematic for single private tenants without children who are under 25yrs old.³² They are subject to the “shared room rate” regulations - where it is assumed that younger people will share part of their homes with others and the benefit level is therefore set at the rate for a single room with shared facilities, regardless of the type of housing actually occupied. The LHA regulations are less restrictive than the previous regime, however there is still a risk of insufficient benefit for under 25's. The shortfall in Halton between the shared rate and the rate for a one-bed property is £40 a week.
- 5.77 DHP can assist those who might otherwise suffer hardship – including homelessness. The Halton budget for DHP is £29,500 for 2009/10. DHP is always fully used each year, providing support to around 200 claimants

The Council's Enforcement Service

- 5.78 As part of the Council's role in protecting all tenants, there is an enforcement service, which ensures that the conditions of tenancies do not fall below the legal standards, and also that tenants are not evicted illegally. This service largely helps to prevent homelessness by improving conditions, which might otherwise force tenants to abandon their home.
- 5.79 As far as possible the service works informally to persuade landlords to make improvements, as the ability to evict tenants legally is relatively easy, and a more aggressive approach could increase evictions.
- 5.80 The service also refers clients to the Homelessness Prevention services so that clients can get assistance to avoid wrongful evictions.

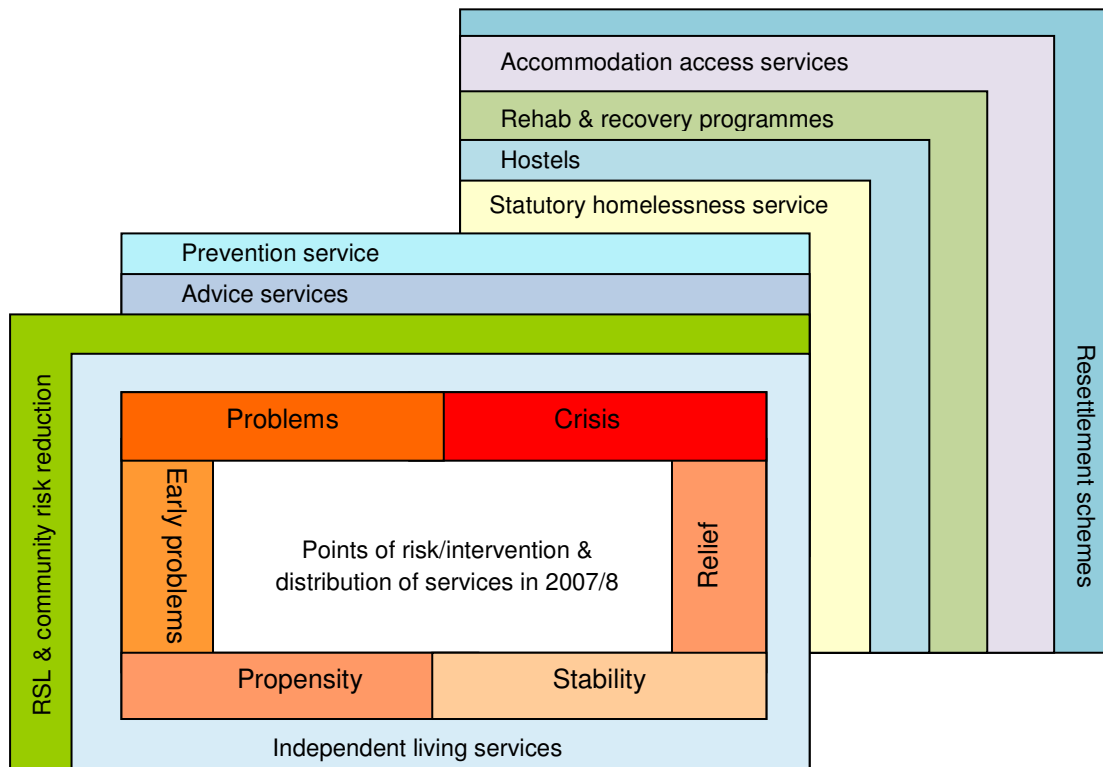
Figures

- In 2007/8, **127** households were helped by the service to enforce their rights to decent standards of accommodation.

³² There are some exceptions for example those under 22 who have left local authority care.

Conclusions & Recommendations

- 5.81 Government policy and the strategic direction, which Halton has taken in its homelessness provision since 2003, have enabled a significant array of services to combat the risks that cause or exacerbate homelessness. The rebranded Housing Solutions service will provide a basis for a comprehensive prevention and assessment service.
- 5.82 The strategic review and consultation exercises highlight a number of themes in provision and development. There is general satisfaction with provision, but concern about access, in particular the need to develop:
- Better knowledge of services – publicity and communication about what is available.
 - Streamlined access to services and a single point of access.
 - More joint work– e.g. with client assessments and referrals.
 - More user involvement in service development and design.
 - Earlier intervention.
- 5.83 Currently the majority of services are located at the crisis end of the homelessness risk process, intervening once problems have escalated. The diagram overleaf highlights this. Prevention is a lower cost option financially and also personally for those at risk. A challenge for the Strategy will be to ensure more efficient take up of existing services and also to shift focus over time to earlier intervention that will yield a higher rate of successful prevention.



- 5.84 There is scope to capitalise on the successful outcomes across current services which tackle risk factors and which enable people to plan re-housing without

enduring homelessness. In particular, models and tools from national and local RSL initiatives and some of the generic SP services could be promoted with other providers and will be applicable in a wider context to enable early risk reduction.

5.85 In addition to the general themes referred to above particular service areas were identified for development work or ‘marketing.’

- a) **Advice & Court representation services** - There is an ongoing need to provide and publicise homelessness advice services. A greater emphasis on prevention requires that more people know about their rights and entitlements and can gain support in pursuing these.

The current economic climate will result in an increase in problems concerning arrears and debt related home loss, requiring financial advice and support and intervention prior to dedicated Court representation services.

- b) **Family support** The shortage of housing and desire for independent living will continue to exacerbate tensions within families and generate evictions. The new strategy should support the continuation and extension of parenting and child welfare support.

It is also notable that up to 50% of those who are statutorily homeless and accepted for rehousing remain at home until settled accommodation is secured. This indicates scope for a new approach, which involves greater ‘move planning’ potential for families with adult children and the need to revisit the Council’s Housing Allocations Policy to award a degree of priority to households threatened with homelessness.

- c) **Support for young people**- Support with planned moves will help young people to move more successfully to independence. This could be backed by expansion of mediation services. Measures are also required to address the complex levels of risk for young people who have become Children in Need or who have left the care system.
- d) **Support for those with complex and multiple needs.** New interventions are needed to support those with lower level mental health problems – particularly when combined with drug or alcohol abuse; and for those with enduring homelessness linked to chronic drink and drug addiction.
- e) **Employment and training** There is also considerable need to link homelessness and prevention services to employment, training and skills development services, to ensure greater financial and housing prospects.
- f) **Skills to sustain settled housing** The continuing patterns of home loss in Halton will require ongoing support to those who find it difficult to manage their affairs and who might otherwise abandon their homes.
- g) **ASB Cessation** The services which tackle anti social behaviour will enable greater levels of homelessness prevention, which the strategy should support and develop further. It may be possible to learn from some of the supportive work and behaviour modification projects and apply these appropriately in much earlier interventions on a wider scale.

- h) **Domestic Abuse Services** in Halton represent an effective response and pro-active approach, but there will be a continuing need to ensure that people can remain safely in their homes and to support provision for those who have to escape.

5.86 The Homelessness Strategy should

R13. Develop an optimal model of homelessness prevention and relief including consideration of

- i. High profile accessibility and streamlined access to services.
- ii. The capacity for earlier intervention and risk reduction, to enable home retention; with an appropriate balance between prevention work and homelessness assessment.
- iii. The development of a planned move approach- particularly for younger people leaving the family home.

R14. Develop a legal and financial advice and representation strategy for Halton including:

- i. Development of debt and finance advice – covering money management, bank accounting, saving, debt avoidance and management.
- ii. Maximise take-up of the Court representation service aimed at reducing repossessions and evictions.
- iii. Stronger links with bodies such as the Legal Services Commission to develop appropriate provision.

R15. Support RSLs in the development of prevention strategies, and work with them to learn from and proliferate financial inclusion and worklessness reduction initiatives.

R16. Enable the development and expansion of mediation services for those at highest risk and formalise and develop the Prevention Service's capacity to deliver mediation via officers formally qualified in mediation.

R17. Support the further development of the Sanctuary services and maintain effective links with the Domestic Abuse Forum and key partners to ensure a pro-active approach to homelessness prevention and relief.

R18. Ensure mechanisms for cross departmental and organisational work with services to improve service delivery and development and the encouragement of joint planning to resolve barriers to rehousing for

- i. Children and young people.
- ii. Drug & alcohol support.
- iii. People with low mental health problems.
- iv. Victims of domestic abuse.

R19. Scope the feasibility of appropriate accommodation and day centre provision for those with chronic substance misuse and street homelessness.

- R20. Research the homelessness-related needs of those with mental health problems and dual diagnosis, and scope the development of appropriate provision.**
- R21. Ensure that monitoring and evaluation of specialist services such as services ASB cessation, private tenant enforcement and children's services become an integral part of homelessness prevention evaluation.**

6 Short Term Accommodation

Current strategic context

- 6.1. For those who become homeless, Halton has a range of short-term housing. Much of this is linked to on-site support.
- 6.2. Across the country, short-term provision has largely moved away from big, direct access hostels where anyone can self-refer and stay indefinitely, to the development of “places of change”³³ providing transitional, time-limited support linked to finding and sustaining settled rehousing.
- 6.3. This move to reduce institutionalisation and increase self-responsibility has been coupled with more sophisticated support planning with residents and higher levels of risk management to ensure the safety of residents and staff. Risk assessment has removed the onus on short-term housing providers to accept all-comers.
- 6.4. One effect of this development is that there are no hostels or temporary homes in Halton – apart from Bed & Breakfast (B&B) hotels – which homeless people can approach themselves for emergency access.
- 6.5. The Government has set targets to reduce temporary accommodation and bed & breakfast use by statutorily homeless households; requiring each local authority to halve its temporary accommodation use by 2010. It is clear that this accommodation is undesirable for long periods, and the goal is to secure settled housing as quickly as possible. However, it is also evident that the type of support, which can be provided to residents in short term housing is often an essential part of transition to independent living for many and is successful in reducing the risk of, repeat homelessness.

Sources of accommodation

- 6.6. **Grangeway Court** – is available only to homeless households assessed as statutory homeless, or likely to meet the provisions of the homelessness legislation, (mainly those who are pregnant or with dependent children). Households are placed there in self-contained flats, pending offers of settled housing.
- 6.7. **Bed & Breakfast** – a variety of hotels are used by the homelessness services

Figures

In 2007/8

■ **138** households were placed in B&B hotels including **61** families

■ **94** households were placed in Grangeway Court

³³ CLG <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/placeschange>

to place single people and couples without children. This is generally accepted as a place of last resort for those making the transition from homelessness to settled living; and often exacerbates instability. It is also relatively expensive, and is therefore subject to reduction targets by the Council in addition to central government. It should be noted that in 2007/8 B&B use increased during refurbishments taking place at two hostels which substantially limited hostel access.

- 6.8. **Hostels** – access can be direct or by referral. All hostels operate waiting lists and these tend to be oversubscribed.
- 6.9. With the addition of 3 Direct Access YMCA units in 2008, there are now 6 Direct Access bed spaces available in Halton. N.B. customers cannot self-refer direct to accommodation providers. Referrals are via an agency (usually the Council’s Housing Solutions Team or children’s services). These units are to be used for a limited period to enable sufficient turnover. A difficulty for providers in enabling direct access is the lack of security for rental income – particularly where the person referred has a history of chaotic living, eg: in the time needed to claim benefit to cover rent, the resident may have left the hostel, reducing the hostel’s income.
- 6.10. Most hostels provide accommodation and support for those between 16 and 25 years. Belvedere and the largest provider- the YMCA – offers support to those over 25. There is a move amongst most hostels towards self-contained units, with some shared facilities – kitchens or bathrooms, and very few shared bedrooms.
- 6.11. 92% of hostel accommodation is in Runcorn, which can create problems of access and retaining family and community contact for those who become homelessness from Widnes.
- 6.12. Young people reported difficulties with the rent levels in hostels- where there are often service charges for facilities, which are not covered by Housing Benefit.
- 6.13. **Halton Women’s Aid refuge** – is for those escaping domestic violence. Access is direct or by referral and depends on available space –which is often oversubscribed. Families with boys over the age of 13 cannot be accommodated with their son/s because of the vulnerable nature of residents.
- 6.14. **Nightstop:** The YMCA has developed a Nightstop scheme for young people aged over 16. This enables the young person to stay with a host family (volunteer providers) who accommodate them for an emergency period during which more suitable short-term housing can be found, and/or intensive mediation between the young person and their family can be undertaken to reunite them. The scheme is based on existing models of good practice and is proving to be a successful model of providing emergency accommodation.

Figures

Hostels

- 118 bed-spaces are available across the **four** hostels in Halton
- 10 of these are in Widnes

Women’s Refuge

- 16 bed-spaces

Grangeway Court

- 32 units

Support provision in short term accommodation

- 6.15. In all types of short term accommodation the support provided is considerable, from counselling, life assessment, personal goal setting and strategies for independent living - to practical assistance: developing skills; undergoing training; gaining access to qualifications; job searching; help understanding and managing money; household management skills; links to services that help with drug and alcohol abuse etc. Most of those receiving this support will do so as residents, with some additional after-care when they move into a settled home.
- 6.16. At Grangeway Court the average length of stay at the accommodation is usually around four months. For those in hostels the stay varies from 6 months to a year in most cases.
- 6.17. There are high rates of success for those leaving short term supported accommodation (following being re-housed) and living independently, with the vast majority sustaining their longer term accommodation for over 6 months to a year, and very few households experiencing repeat episodes of homelessness.
- 6.18. Most providers – including Grangeway court – report an increase in the number of residents with complex needs or who are very vulnerable and unable to live independently. Grangeway Court also reported a rise in the number of very young pregnant women and or single parents who need more intensive and longer-term support before they can move on. This can create tension between ensuring sufficient length of support to achieve resettlement and freeing accommodation for use by other homeless households.
- 6.19. A number of providers of both accommodation based and community outreach services have expressed concern for a small number of people who cannot cope with shared living arrangements, or who, because of their past behaviour – involving violence or arson – have been banned from or pose too high a risk to access available accommodation and as a result have literally nowhere to stay.
- 6.20. There are also concerns about move-on from hostels. Whilst some providers felt that this was manageable and that services were not “silting up”, others have cited delays in achieving rehousing in reasonable time frames.

Gypsy & Traveller accommodation

- 6.21. The Council has a transit site for Gypsies and Travellers (in addition to the permanent site available see Section 7) along with additional support provided via the Council’s Gypsy and Traveller Liaison Officers. The lack of available permanent pitches in Halton and on a national basis can create homelessness for this section of the community.

Conclusions & Recommendations

- 6.22. Short term housing in Halton is currently oversubscribed with very little accommodation available in Widnes. There is also a need for more immediate access that removes the requirement for B&B use. Provision is lacking for those

with very complex needs, who cannot cope with or who would be excluded from mainstream accommodation.

- 6.23. From the figures provided for 2007/8 (taking into account hostel waiting lists and reported rough sleeping levels), there is a shortfall of between 10 and 15 spaces for immediate access by people without dependent children.³⁴ Further investigation is needed to assess how far changes in practice and move-on development can address this. Consideration should also be given to non-traditional provision – eg supported lodgings for young people and accommodation that can cater for ongoing substance abuse.
- 6.24. To meet the reduction target for temporary accommodation use by statutorily, homeless households, there is potential to remodel short-term accommodation provision. By diversifying and re-designating specific sources and extending the scope of the Council's Housing Allocations scheme (see Section 7) it should be possible to route people to the most appropriate forms of temporary accommodation, secure settled homes, and reduce the need for homelessness applications. For example:
- ◆ It is possible to offer units of RSL accommodation for those who need little support to sustain future tenancies, and to place those who need support into appropriate short-term housing or hostels. Using RSL accommodation in this way could potentially enable a temporary allocation to be made permanent, ie as an offer of rehousing under the Council's homelessness duties – in effect providing a direct rehousing option. Such schemes would in some circumstances need to be accompanied by support with furnishings. A range of options may be available including use of Halton Haven's recycled furniture scheme or the purchase of a furniture package. If the Council leased units of accommodation from partner RSLs to provide temporary accommodation the Council would purchase furniture packages as part of a lease arrangement. Similarly those who need assistance could be placed in supported short term with an automatic high priority onto the Housing Register, which is not dependent on a homelessness application.
- 6.25. The Homelessness Strategy should deliver:

R22. A Temporary Accommodation Strategy to ensure

- i. The right balance of provision and support across all needs groups and geographical areas, with appropriate move-on capacity.
- ii. The scoping of diverse provision such as lodgings schemes and for those with multiple problems including chronic substance abuse.
- iii. The development of a common move-on process and protocols.

³⁴ This figure takes account of the reintroduction of units closed for refurbishment in 2007/8.

7 Settled Housing

Access to Social Housing

The Housing Register

- 7.1. Access to social rented housing in Halton is divided between nominations through the Council's Housing Register and direct applications to a provider's waiting list. However tenancy turnover for participating RSLs is low, creating relatively few new vacancies.

Allocations of housing under the Homelessness Act 2002

- 7.2. The Housing Register offers the principal rehousing route for households accepted under homelessness law in Halton. Homelessness confers the maximum points needed to secure an offer of accommodation. However these households are restricted to one offer (applicants can choose either Runcorn or Widnes), which they must accept unless they can show that it is unsuitable – eg because of health or other risk. This restriction of choice increases rehousing speed and temporary accommodation turnover, reducing related expense. It can increase the risk of less suitable offers, although this should also be balanced against the very low levels of repeat statutory homelessness.

Figures

- In 2007/8 there were **1720** households on the register.
- Just over **380** were offered accommodation
- **55%** of these offers were made to homelessness households
- **26%** of all vacancies available for new tenants within Halton's 7 major RSLs were allocated to homeless people

- 7.3. The restriction also reduces perverse incentives to apply as homeless in order to acquire maximum points on the register. It is notable that the implementation of the one-offer policy (amongst other developments) correlated with a subsequent reduction in homelessness applications.

Non-statutory allocations

- 7.4. Those who apply to the register outside the statutory nominations process are entitled to three offers of housing.
- 7.5. If applicants restrict their choices of accommodation or areas they are less likely to be rehoused quickly. Young people in particular expressed concern that they were more likely to be offered property in a poor state of repair or in "hard to let" areas.

Future plans for access to social housing

- 7.6. Halton Borough Council and RSL partners plan to introduce Choice Based Lettings³⁵ in 2010 in line with Government targets. Choice based schemes have been shown to offer greater transparency about vacancy information, resulting in more realistic expectations amongst home-seekers about availability; increased consumer choice, with greater prospects that households and properties will be well matched helping to improve the prospects of tenancy sustainment. All of these elements can reduce the risk of future homelessness and enable more stable transition from one home to the next. It can also reduce the confusion between pathways to rehousing, and possibly the incentive to use homelessness as a route to rehousing.
- 7.7. However most CBL schemes – particularly in high demand areas – are based on banding of bidders according to need, and in some cases on restrictive bidding processes according to bands, which can impact negatively on homeless households if not modelled and managed effectively.
- 7.8. Longer term there is evidently a need for sufficient vacant properties to enable the scheme to support homelessness prevention effectively. The Regional Spatial Strategy sets a minimum target for the provision of 500 new homes per annum in Halton. Halton’s status as a Growth point, in partnership with St Helens and Warrington councils, will see the development of an additional 100 homes per annum. The Council will be working closely with the Homes and Communities Agency to maximise affordable housing in the Borough. This will reduce some of the pressure on the Housing Register and any future scheme.

The Private Rented Sector

- 7.9. The 2006 Housing Needs Survey evidenced the unpopularity of this relatively small sector amongst those seeking to move home. Private tenancies offer limited security for residents in contrast to social rented housing or home ownership, although the usual 6 month fixed terms offered often roll on to a longer term tenancy.
- 7.10. Traditionally across the country, this sector has been characterised by extremes of higher quality but high cost housing at one end of the market, and lower cost but very poor standard accommodation at the other. Government enforcement of improvements to the standards expected of private landlords for some types of housing, and legislation to protect tenants’ deposits, along with an expanded buy-to let market, have contributed to the increasing use of privately rented housing. In Halton, the affordability problem for many first time buyers and the limited turnover in the supply of vacant social housing is now increasing the take up of private tenancies. This take up has been boosted considerably by the development of a Deposit and now Bond Guarantee Scheme – see below.
- 7.11. A Landlord’s Accreditation scheme has also encouraged the development of the sector. It supports landlords to deliver good practice, offering regular liaison with

³⁵ A single scheme replacing housing registers, where vacancies are advertised and where prospective tenants can “bid” for (ie express an interest in) the vacancies

the Council, the Housing Benefit Section, and access to specialist discounted services and suppliers.

Halton's Deposit Guarantee Scheme

- 7.12. The 2003-2008 Homelessness Strategy enabled the development of a Deposit Guarantee Scheme (DGS), which provided deposits on behalf of tenants to secure a private tenancy. As the deposits were actual sums of money paid to landlords from a finite funding pot, the overall pot therefore dwindled over the financial year, creating an uneven spread of support throughout the year. For this reason the scheme evolved into a Bond Guarantee Scheme (BGS) whereby Halton Borough Council guarantees to pay the landlord up to £500 to cover any financial loss in lieu of a deposit should problems arise during the first year of tenancy. This is advantageous as more households can be assisted, as the actual rate of problems and payments made is very low as a proportion of bonds guaranteed.
- 7.13. The DGS and its successor the BGS have provided an important route to rehousing for many of those unable to secure other forms of accommodation. Service users can source tenancies themselves or receive support in finding accommodation. Access to the scheme has been via the Council's Prevention Service and latterly the Housing Solutions Team, which works with the dedicated BGS Officer. This approach checks the suitability of the customer to the tenancies available, avoiding problems of affordability and ensuring that those assisted by the scheme understand their rights and responsibilities and are able to seek help if there are any problems with their new tenancy. As a result most of the tenancies have been sustainable, continuing beyond the fixed term.
- 7.14. The BGS also provides positive experiences for landlords, who are increasingly inclined to seek tenants through the scheme, helping those who may not have been able to secure a tenancy through their own endeavours. It encourages greater willingness by landlords to take on a wider range of tenants than they may have previously considered. Overall the scheme has been hugely successful however it should be noted that it is not possible to assist every household to access the private rented sector. Those accepted for bonds are sometimes required to undergo a credit check to satisfy the landlords/agents of their capacity to manage a tenancy. In some cases clients are also asked to provide a guarantor for the rent, which for those without family or friends to turn to, can prove impossible.

Figures

- In 2007/8 **114** tenancies were created using the Deposit Guarantee Scheme.
- **314** households were referred to the Deposit Guarantee Scheme.
- **65%** households referred to the Deposit Guarantee Scheme by the Prevention service were families with dependent children.
- **77%** continued on after their initial fixed term.
- **96%** of tenancies that reached the end of their fixed term resulted in the landlord returning the deposit to the scheme.

Low Cost Home Ownership

- 7.15. Low cost home ownership (LCHO) covers: shared ownership schemes that enable people on modest incomes to purchase part of their home and rent the rest; and help through an equity loan³⁶ for certain types of purchasers - eg first time buyers. There has been an increase in RSLs developing these schemes, partly in response to the desirability of mixed tenure communities and in the context of profits generated which can subsidise rental housing.
- 7.16. A potential 140 new low cost homes has been projected to be built in the coming 3-5 years, and offered for sale through the new build HomeBuy scheme. Such schemes can reduce pressure on the Housing Register and in multi generational households, create opportunities for movements through tenures and enable rented development.

Gypsy & Traveller sites

- 7.17. A permanent Council owned and managed site is available in Halton, enabling secure pitches for rent by Gypsy and Traveller households. Support is available from the Council's Gypsy and Traveller Liaison Officers and to provide liaison between the site users, other agencies and the local community.
- 7.18. This is part of a Cheshire-wide initiative to deliver local authority obligations to Gypsies and Travellers³⁷. These communities run a higher risk of statutory homelessness due to the lack of legal sites on which to place their homes. At the same time, those who become homeless have no absolute right to be rehoused in a mobile home, and no right to have a legal site created for them to occupy. It is clearly critical to the communities concerned that they have access to provision that enables them to continue their lifestyle and culture.

General access considerations

- 7.19. Agencies and service users have expressed concern about the timing of moves from short term to settled housing, where rent is payable from the start of the tenancy, but benefit is only paid from the date the tenant moves in. When tenants have to remain in short term accommodation until they can secure furniture and equipment for their move, they have to pay two rents and potentially start their new tenancy in arrears.
- 7.20. Agencies and services users consulted have also noted a mismatch between the offers of accommodation made and user's needs, which can result in rejection of offers or abandonment of accommodation further on. There are wider concerns about the information available about access, which if improved could help to make expectations and choices more realistic.

³⁶ These are loans which provide part of the funding for the property in return for a % stake in any future sale and therefore enables a smaller mortgage.

³⁷ Housing Act 2004 – Local Authorities must assess the needs of Gypsy and Traveller communities and detail how these needs will be catered for.

- 7.21. Young people in particular are concerned about the difficulties securing lettings for those under 18, who are often deemed unsuitable to hold tenancies in their own right, but may not have anyone to act as a guarantor.
- 7.22. The Mental Health Accommodation Strategy highlights the need for additional investigation in to the housing needs of homeless people with mental health problems.

Help with furnishing

- 7.23. Many homeless households are without the means to furnish a new home. The lack of furniture and essential equipment such as cookers and fridges can make people reluctant to move from temporary homes, and can contribute to abandonment of new tenancies.
- 7.24. Assistance is available via the benefits system's Social Fund, which offers discretionary help through Community Care Grants or Budgeting Loans. The availability of the grant or loan will be judged on a case-by-case basis and is also subject to the District Social Fund Budget, which reduces over the course of the year. Timing and support to make a claim are therefore critical to receipt of these benefits. The Strategy Review consultation revealed a mixed experience amongst agencies with some achieving greater rates of successful claims for their clients than others.
- 7.25. Many local authority areas benefit from furniture projects where recycled furnishings and white goods can be purchased very cheaply or provided free of charge to those in crisis – including homeless households. A local charity Halton Haven offers recycled furniture at reasonable prices for sale and will also depending on availability help households with free furniture that has been donated, but did not sell in the charity's shops. Some of the RSLs in the Borough are working in partnership with Halton Haven regarding removal and donation of furniture left in empty properties by the previous tenant. The Council is currently undertaking a feasibility study to see if this scheme can be developed further with funding from the Council.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Access to housing

- 7.26. There remains a tension between meeting the needs of those who are at high risk of homelessness because of the unsuitability of their housing, and those who have actually become homeless. In the context of Halton's main source of homelessness – family breakdown- and the particularly high proportion of statutory homeless households who remain "homeless at home" for some time awaiting offer of social housing, it could be argued that the Allocations Policy still offers an incentive for homelessness applications to be made in order to speed up rehousing.
- 7.27. This is not to suggest that levels of need are not high amongst this group, or that living arrangements are reasonable and present no homelessness risk, but that more effective interventions are required for those living in unsatisfactory family housing.

- 7.28. Until CBL is introduced, there is a need to review the allocation of housing under the register, to create a more preventative focus and reduce perverse incentives to apply as homeless; and also to assist families with the process of planning moves, with support to enable continued residence in the family home- eg through mediation.
- 7.29. The economic downturn is likely to have an impact on both the social and rented markets and a reduced impact from LCHO on both levels of homelessness and the ability to subsidise rented developments.
- 7.30. The Homelessness Strategy will also need to address barriers to access:
- The lack of furniture that some households require to aid ‘move on’ especially from supported housing schemes.
 - Mechanisms to ensure that timing of offers and moves do not create financial hardship.
 - Enhanced communication to match households to appropriate settled housing.
- 7.31. The Homelessness Strategy will need to support the Housing Strategy in development schemes that can improve access to the relevant markets, and increase affordable housing. It will also need to support access for particular groups such as Gypsies and Travellers and those with mental health problems.

Implementing Choice Based Lettings

- 7.32. CBL will need to ensure:
- The allocation of sufficient priority to homelessness in any banding process.
 - The allocation of sufficient priority to those who are in high need and unsuitable housing, to reduce incentives for households to become homeless in order to gain priority.
 - The need to ensure genuine choice for homeless bidders – to reduce the prospect of repeat homelessness.
 - The provision of sufficient support to those who are most vulnerable, to enable equal access to the bidding process.

The Bond Guarantee Scheme

- 7.33. The Scheme’s provision for families with children is significant and marks a positive alternative to the Housing Register/social housing route. Further incentives for landlords and support to tenants to ensure sustainability should be considered. For example the Council could undertake a feasibility study regarding working with or acting as a credit referencing agency, using cheaper credit checks, which will facilitate better access to those in greatest need.
- 7.34. The Homelessness Strategy should:

R23. Evidence the need to review and revise the Council’s Allocation Policy (pre-CBL) to increase prevention allocating greater priority to those at risk.

R24. Develop processes to ensure efficient transition to settled housing:

- i. A planned moves approach – especially to avoid family evictions.

- ii. Information and guidance packages to reinforce rights and responsibilities and promote clear expectations.
- iii. Consider negotiating to extend the existing furniture-recycling scheme in partnership with Halton Haven and RSL partners.
- iv. A move-on protocol to deliver consistency, maximise appropriate offers and take up of accommodation, leading into CBL access protocols.
- v. Support to enable 16 and 17 yrs olds to take up appropriate settled housing.

R25. Ensure Choice Based Lettings takes account of those who are most at risk.

R26. Provide support to the Housing Strategy by evidencing risk and need:

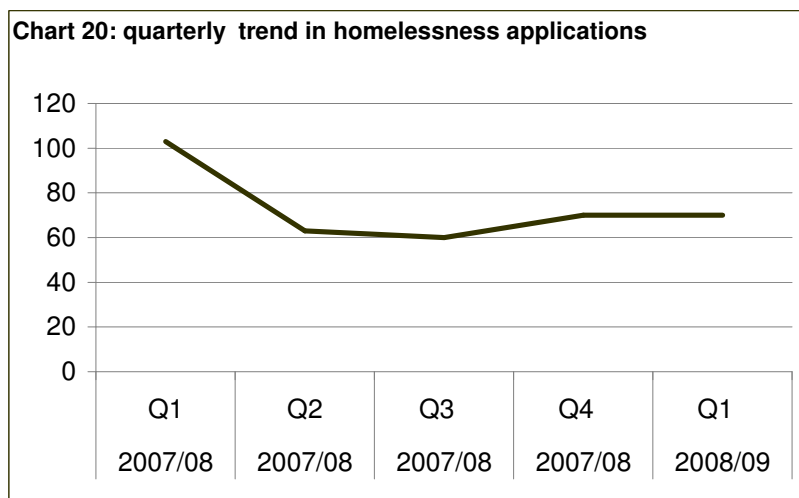
- i. For the development of affordable housing and appropriate schemes.
- ii. In the development and maintenance of sites and facilities for Gypsy & Traveller communities.
- iii. For appropriate accommodation for those with mental health problems.

8 Forecasting Future Homelessness

- 8.1. To achieve an appropriate strategic direction, it is important to anticipate homelessness risk factors and the impact that services and policy developments may have in reducing homelessness.
- 8.2. It is common to forecast by extrapolating from historical data, weighting this according to known or likely influences such as demographic or economic factors. The considerable services changes in 2007/8 (and ongoing) mean that it is too early to map future trends with any sophistication. Similarly the extent and duration of the economic downturn and the impact of responses to it, are not fully clear at this stage. However, it is possible to identify some broad risk areas over the coming five years.

Pattern of Homelessness in Halton

- 8.3. Whilst the substantial reduction in statutory homelessness applications (62%) over the past five years might suggest a downward trajectory for the years to come, the pattern of this reduction is more complicated.
- 8.4. As outlined in Section 4, the figures for 2003/4 were probably increased by the broadening of the legislation in 2002. A 75% increase from 2002/3 was then followed by a smaller downward trend - perhaps a natural re-adjustment as the law was understood more clearly in practice. The subsequent downward trend did not take a straight path. There was a slight increase in applications in 2006/7 from the year before. The reduction in 2007/8 correlates with the take up of the Options & Advice and Prevention services, suggesting a shift rather than reduction in demand.
- 8.5. Added to this, the level of statutory homelessness seen in the first quarter of 2008/9 is on a par with the rates in 2007/8. The pattern over the last 5 quarters may indicate that without addition prevention resources, the statutory homelessness take-up rate is reaching a plateau rather than reducing. Further assessment in 2008/9 and into 2010 will be needed to establish further shifts across the three services.



- 8.6. Taking services as a whole, it will also be critical to differentiate between levels of homelessness risk and match this against outcomes.
- 8.7. It is likely however that overall levels of demand from those who are homeless or at high risk of homelessness will remain at current levels of around 800 households a year, or actually increase.

Current risk levels & the impact of strategies & new services

- 8.8. Considerable progress is being made to reduce levels of deprivation in Halton and the associated problems and to increase and improve the supply of affordable housing. For the medium term, the current climate is still one of relative poverty across Halton, with low levels of employment and low health prospects for a number of communities, coupled with a limited supply of affordable housing, and a growing affordability problem. It is a context in which homelessness remains a very real risk.
- 8.9. It is encouraging to note that the development of the Prevention and Bond Guarantee Scheme services have made a positive impact on the outcomes for many homeless households and those at risk, in terms of successful home retention or rehousing. However, a comprehensive approach to recording outcomes across all homelessness services would enable a more accurate measure of how well services are reducing or mitigating the effects of homelessness.

Emerging Risks

- 8.10. At the time of writing the country is facing economic recession, bringing the potential for increased individual and structural risks.

Debt

- 8.11. Recession will increase unemployment and debt, leading to arrears of rent or mortgage payments, and repossessions.
- 8.12. Acceleration in possession proceedings – both for mortgage and rent arrears – has been dramatic at the County Courts covering Halton. This will not always result in homelessness, as some claims will be dismissed or settled and others will be subject to a binding agreement for the debtor to reduce arrears; but it indicates the increased level of ‘homelessness risk’ facing those in financial difficulty. Nationally there has been a 13% increase in landlords

Figures

Action brought for **mortgage repossessions** in the first 2 quarters of 2008 compared with the same period in 2007

- In St Helens county Court a **rise of 24%**
- In Warrington County Court a **rise of 41%**

Action brought for **landlord repossessions** in the first 2 quarters of 2008 compared with the same period in 2007

- In St Helens county Court a **rise of 25%**
- In Warrington County Court a **rise of 9%**

gaining possession orders and a 48% increase in the number of mortgage possession orders, which resulted in repossession.

- 8.13. Debts, which are not secured on homes, can nonetheless jeopardise homes in two ways – by making homes unaffordable; and through Court Orders which enable the lender to force the sale of the home. Current evidence suggests that the rate at which these orders result in repossession is increasing and seeking such an Order is being made easier as a result of legislation³⁸.
- 8.14. There is an additional risk with the introduction of Local Housing Allowance, which pays benefit straight to the tenant in the expectation that it will be used to cover rent. As spending priorities are squeezed there is a risk that some tenants may have difficulty managing payments.
- 8.15. Taking into account the current debt levels reported across all services, this factor – if unchecked at current risk levels - could increase overall homelessness by at least 5% in Halton.
- 8.16. It should be noted however that the Government has introduced a number of measures to assist Councils and their partners in reducing homelessness due to repossessions and evictions. The Mortgage Rescue Scheme is one such initiative that has been adopted in Halton. Funding has also been made available to introduce a small loans scheme. A Repossessions Action Plan has been drawn up which will complement the objectives in the Borough's Homelessness Strategy for 2009-2013.

House sales and housing availability

- 8.17. Whilst recession may continue to depress house prices, there is no indication that this will translate into increased affordability and sales. Homeowners facing negative equity will be reluctant to move until prices improve and may indeed find their level of debt exacerbated as their home devalues. At the same time, credit availability is now being substantially restricted – reducing the opportunities for many potential buyers.
- 8.18. The recession also reduces capacity for property development. The lack of credit and the impact of recession on developers could lead to stagnation in many RSL building programmes. This, along with an increasing inability or reluctance of potential buyers to take up low cost home ownership options, may further reduce the opportunity to use commercial properties to subsidise affordable rented housing.
- 8.19. The downturn may lead to some restriction in the availability of private rented housing or affordable private rents. Continued contraction of the buy-to-let market, and the increasing risk of landlords returning to live in their properties or selling up, will reduce the stock, whilst increased rent levels will price some people out of this option.

³⁸ Tribunals, Courts and Enforcement Act 2007

- 8.20. These trends would at best leave homelessness levels static, but at worse may further reduce the prevention options available, making an increase in homelessness more likely.

Individual risk factors

- 8.21. It is important to recognise that the economic downturn may have a wider impact on existing risks. There is the potential to exacerbate problems involving individual or household tension, stress or existing abusive behaviour– leading to increased incidences or worsening of mental health problems, alcohol or drug abuse, domestic violence and family breakdown.
- 8.22. There is also the risk that practical difficulties such as job seeking and affordability are made worse, with the potential to affect younger people – eg: the possibility that families evicting children when Child Benefit ends could increase; or a heightened risk to young people leaving school with low skill levels.

Strategic Resources

- 8.23. Funding sources are subject to change, with the allocation of SP funds shifting to Area Based Grant from 2009 and the remodelling of funding needs assessment.
- 8.24. The recession may also affect levels of new funding available and it will be important to find ways of reconfiguring resources and to ensure that potential new funding streams are utilised wherever possible.

Conclusions

- 8.25. There is considerable uncertainty and difficulty in accurately predicting future homelessness. The economic risk may be tempered by Government initiatives to mitigate recession and stabilise markets; by initiatives already underway from some RSLs, councils and property developers; and by the inception of the Homes and Communities Agency³⁹ which will have greater freedom to enable new methods of investment to develop social housing.
- 8.26. The recent proliferation of prevention and support services, and further development - particularly in relation to debt reduction, assistance to increase employability and support to families and young people - could reduce the impact of the risks identified above.
- 8.27. It will be important to develop methods of accurately assessing the cost of prevention. As a consolidated budget is available for the Housing Solutions Team it is possible to arrive at baseline costs for direct service provision. In conjunction with coherent monitoring of service take-up across a range services, unit cost assessments can be made, enabling cost/benefit and spend to save analyses. (It is more difficult to place a cost on the overall preventative initiatives taking place across the Borough.)

³⁹ The organisation formed in December 2008 from the merger of the Housing Corporation and English partnerships

- 8.28. It will also be vital to set measurable outcomes along with monitoring and evaluation processes to generate authoritative information for forecasting. The current combination of Statutory Homelessness and Prevention services located in one Housing Solutions Team provides an excellent opportunity to develop a coherent set of data, and enable a fuller picture of homelessness and its risk.

The strategy should

R27. Prioritise service development activity in the following areas –

- i. Debt and financial management.
- ii. Family support and support for young people to enable planned moves to independent living.
- iii. Combining homelessness services with those, which increase skills and employability, i.e. an 'enhanced Housing Options Service.'

R28. Enable capacity for pro-active assessment - anticipating trends and need by

- i. **Developing coherent baseline data** to enable mapping of service and policy impacts.
- ii. **Developing a model of forecasting** which informs the data capture and service monitoring processes.

R29. Develop financial management capacity and intelligence about current and potential costs and funding.

Appendix 1 - Review & Strategy Development Methods.

The Homelessness Review and Strategy development process involved a combination of desktop research and consultation, using the following processes:

Questionnaires

A questionnaire was sent to all members of the Homelessness Forum and other relevant agencies in 2007. This yielded a very low response rate.

A follow up questionnaire was sent to 30 Forum members and 10 additional agencies. This brought a 38% response rate.

Interviews

In depth interviews were then conducted with 12 agencies representing specific areas of provision. Interviews were based on the second questionnaire, expanding on specific issues for their user group.

Data analysis

Research data was taken from the following sources:

- Statutory homelessness returns – P1E data 2003-2008.
- Monitoring information form.
- The Prevention Service.
- The Options & Advice Service.
- Multi Agency Monitoring.
- B&B usage.
- Temporary Accommodation usage.
- Supporting People performance returns.
- RSL Nominations.
- CLG Statutory homelessness data.

Secondary sources are cited within the text.

User Consultation events

Two consultation events with homelessness service users and with young homelessness people were held in 2007 and 2008 respectively. The Focus Group in 2008 was facilitated by the Specialist Homelessness Adviser from the Government Department leading on homelessness issues and was attended by 15 service users. Information from those events was used to inform the Homelessness Review and Homelessness Strategy.

Appendix 2

Strategic priorities & planned activity in the 2003-2008 Strategy

Coordination of the strategy & services		
1. Maintain and further develop multi agency liaison in order to deliver the Homelessness Strategy		
a) Establish Homelessness Forum		Bi monthly meetings established and membership increased.
b) Develop & undertake joint training programmes		Training has taken place across agencies (provided by Shelter)
c) Review existing protocols and development new protocols – particularly in relation to referrals of clients between services.		Some progress re: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Rehousing vulnerable young people in 2005. ✓ Internal work on the development of good performance on referrals. ✓ The development of referral mechanisms to homelessness and prevention services by Halton Direct Link centres.
2. Develop common data recording systems		A Multi Agency Monitoring scheme has been established and monitoring reports are now produced.
3. Develop common homelessness assessment process		This has been done in respect of Supporting People funded services
4. Ensure Halton's Homelessness Strategy continues to be linked to other relevant strategies and initiatives.		Ongoing work
5. Ensure continuous improvement of the Homelessness Service.		See note above on the contracting out of this service and its reversal. Mechanisms were put in place to develop improvement: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Housing Agency Agreement contracted service providers HHT ✓ Mock inspections have been carried out ✓ Bi-annual Homelessness reviews monitor progress against the strategy.
		Halton established a Homelessness Prevention Team
a) Enable user feedback		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ A user consultation exercise was carried out in November 2007 as part of a wider ranging review of the homelessness service
6. All provider agencies to comply with CRE standards		This has been achieved with respect to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ HHT homelessness provision compliance with monitoring standards and those for tackling racial harassment. ✓ All RSL compliant with relevant Housing Corporation standards.
Prevention		
7. Carry out a fundamental review of advice services to ensure they are meeting need		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▫ Some progress made on this via the review of HHT services. ▫ Work overtaken by loss of funding to voluntary organisations to provide direct advice services in

		the borough.
8. Produce service guide for providers and users		This work was completed but now needs to be updated and provided electronically.
9. Produce an accommodation directory of all temporary /permanent accommodation across the borough		Current directory of SP funded services across the borough
10. Promotion promote existing and new advice services		Contingent on the continued provision of advice services.
11. Recruit 2 additional tenancy support workers to be based @ Grangeway Court		Posts filled by 2006
12. Promote access and monitor tenancy support services available from different providers		Supporting People services compliant with all monitoring requirements and SP representation at Homelessness Forum encourages sharing of relevant performance information.
13. Establish private landlord scheme		Scheme established in 2006.
14. Establish Rent Deposit Scheme		Scheme established in 2007.
15. Develop education programme for young people on the reality of homelessness		A YMCA based project ran from 2006 to 2008 – producing a DVD for use in schools, youth centres etc.
16. Establish the feasibility of establishing a family mediation service		A YMCA scheme established for young people
17. Review social landlords arrears procedures and referral protocols		Reviews were started however this has been overtaken by the development of practice by the RSLs themselves. This also forms part of the current review.
18. Develop a scheme to assist homeless households who fall into arrears whilst in TA		A fund is currently in place and managed by the Prevention Team
19. Assist in the establishment of the Cheshire prison advisory service.		The service has now moved on with resettlement teams in the relevant prisons.
20. Promote existing health services available to homeless applicants		Health visitor surgery for Grangeway court residents, plus walk-in dentist surgery in Halton Lea and Information for teenage parents.
21. Conduct Rough Sleepers Count		Counts have been conducted in ✓ 2004 – result = 0 ✓ 2008 – result = 1
22. Evaluate effectiveness of tenant support services to ensure they meet strategic priorities and identified needs		Supporting People monitoring and review of services 2007.
23. Continue to provide support to Merseyside Asylum Seekers Consortium		Ongoing work – but limited need within the borough
Accommodation		
		Establishment of the Housing Partnerships following LVST has created a positive environment to deliver improvement in access and practice across the borough
24. Review existing nomination scheme with RSLs and develop a common		Common Nominations Agreement now in place. Meetings take place to monitor effectiveness

nomination scheme		
25. Develop performance management info on RSL net lettings & nomination levels		Established
26. Provide improved access to RSL accommodation		
a) Revise Allocation Policy		This was revised, however as a result of delays in access to accommodation, the policy was amended to allow one offer only to homeless households
b) Establish Choice Based Lettings		The scheme to be adopted by Halton is still under discussion. Government target for implementation is 2010.
27. Evaluate feasibility of additional accommodation		
a) Temp/short term accom for general use in Widnes – initial target: 10 units		Orchard House - 6 bed unit Halton Goals - 4 bed unit
b) 4 units for teenage parents		✓ There is some provision for this group at Grangeway Court
c) 10 units of supported accom for special/multiple needs		This has been recorded as achieved in 27.a)
d) 6 units furnished accom		
e) 4 units of emergency direct access		CIC - 3 units YMCA – units 3
28. Reduce use of B&B		Use of B&B increased over the life of the strategy.
a) End use for families entirely		Although length of stay was reduced.
b) Reduce stay for all others to max 2 weeks		

