

Chairman's Foreword

This review has confirmed the complexity of housing and homelessness – but our focus has been how this affects the individuals and families involved. The initial scope of the review was on homelessness but this soon extended to include chooseyourhome. We were aware that during the review the credit crunch affected the housing market and more recently the recession affects the number of people who are at risk of homelessness. While we would have liked to do further work to look in-depth at how these issues were affecting Telford and Wrekin it was important that we concluded our report and made our recommendations based on the evidence to date.

I want to thank everyone who contributed to the review and look forward to the Cabinet response.

Cllr. Derek White

Chairman of the housing and Homelessness Scrutiny Review

Summary Report of Housing and Homelessness Review

Background

Members have undertaken a wide ranging review of the issues around housing and homelessness and the services that are available in Telford and Wrekin. During the review Members held a number of meetings and visits which provided evidence on the following:

- Legislative Context
- Telford and Wrekin Housing Strategy
- KIP Project
- YMCA
- STAY
- Marks Pit Stop
- Citizen's Advice Bureau
- Prevention
- Single Assessment and Support Centre
- Housing Supply
- Registered Social Landlords
- Private Landlords
- Homes and Communities Agency
- Maninplace

The scope of the review is outlined below:

1. To review the Choose Your Home choice based lettings scheme, and feed conclusions and recommendations into the officer review of the Council's housing allocations policy.
2. To assess the extent of housing needs and homelessness – including statutory homeless and those who do not fit within the priority needs group.
3. To investigate the barriers and opportunities in the supply of housing, and consider innovative design solutions.
4. To understand the eligibility criteria for accessing housing support for different groups within the community.
5. To make recommendations to Cabinet for improvement.

This raised many questions that Members wanted to answer and as a result some of the initial information is no longer up to date. In light of this Members have agreed to produce a summary report which identifies the current issues and relevant conclusions and recommendations.

Members of the Housing and Homeless Review Group

- Cllr. Derek White (Chair)
- Cllr. Angela McClements
- Cllr. Veronica Fletcher

- Cllr. Richard Overton
- Dag Saunders (co-optee)

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Members recognise the complexity of the problems around housing and homelessness and the range of organisations that are involved in meeting these needs. One of the roles of Scrutiny is to be the voice of local people and it is this perspective that Members have taken during the review – how well do these services meet the needs of the people of Telford and Wrekin.

A Scrutiny review is an opportunity to identify good practice as well as areas for improvement. Members were very impressed with the support provided by the Maninplace project and particularly commend the work of Alan Olver who has, over the years, made an outstanding contribution to improve the lives of homeless people. The Members agreed that the Council and the people of Telford and Wrekin owe him a debt of gratitude.

Members recognise that this Scrutiny Review will not solve all the issues that they identified during the review. However, Members have highlighted some key areas of concern and made recommendations that will help to address these. These key issues are:

- Support and services for non-statutory homeless
- Housing supply
- Choose Your Home
- Co-ordination of existing services
- Homelessness and young people

Support and Services for non-statutory homeless

A recurring theme from the evidence gathered has been the need to provide effective services for vulnerable people who are not statutorily homeless. While the legislation has changed recently extending the duty on the Council to assess the needs of all young people under 18 this wider group of non statutory homeless remains vulnerable. One group that were identified as being particularly vulnerable when seeking appropriate accommodation are people with mental health issues. Members recognise the financial pressure on all public services but are of the view that providing early intervention services for these vulnerable groups will in the long term generate savings. Members were also of the view that the services provided by the Voluntary Sector provide good value for money.

Housing Supply

Members are pleased that the Council has taken steps to strengthen its relationship with the Homes and Communities Agency. In order to increase the supply of affordable housing Members would like to see the Council exploring and supporting more non-traditional development builds and would like to see more of a strategic steer from the HCA. A related issue that

Members identified that Registered Social Landlords are not able to compete on an equal footing for land with private developers. This is an issue that Members would like the Homes and Communities Agency to address. One option that was raised during the review was the development of a Land Trust. Members also concluded that the Council can assist in increasing the supply of affordable housing through the development of a policy that prioritises affordable housing above all other Section 106 planning obligations over the medium term. Also if a Registered Social Landlord applies for a development containing 100% affordable housing then the Council should have an overarching policy that allows planning officers to make a decision to waive the need for a Section 106 agreement for further contributions.

Choose Your Home

Members were given an overview of the chooseyourhome system and had the opportunity to raise any concerns they had. Firstly, it was recognised that this system itself does not increase the supply of accommodation, and therefore due to the high demand for all homes, unfortunately, some customers did have to wait a considerable amount of time to find a suitable home. Some members raised concerns regarding customers having to bid each week even if the accommodation available is not appropriate. It was clarified that the only customers expected to choose on a regular basis were those in the urgent band, and they would only be encouraged to choose homes that addressed their housing need. Members were also concerned that if someone's circumstance changes they go to the bottom of the new band they are allocated to. It was clarified that if a customer's housing need increases and they are placed in a higher band, their date is changed because their level of housing need has changed. However if they are placed into a lower band their date remains unchanged. A further issue that Members identified was that the people who do not have easy access to a computer to bid may be disadvantaged. It was reported that customers can also choose homes over the phone or in person, however the highest number of choices are made via the internet. Urgent band customers are monitored closely to ensure no customer is disadvantaged. Members also noted that the system does not help providers of accommodation to develop balanced communities which can in some cases lead to anti-social behaviour.

Co-ordination of Existing Services

As previously mentioned this review has taken place over a long period of time and many of the services have changed during this period. Some of the recommendations made by Members do not look at new areas of work but the co-ordination of existing services. Members recognised that staff in housing services were working under the pressure of high work load and that this is likely to increase. Members concluded that the service needs to ensure that it has the capacity to work with other services and partner organisations effectively e.g. to increase the existing bond schemes. Members are aware of the financial commitment that increasing the scheme would involve but since the bond is retained by the Council this is not a recurring cost. It was identified during the review that there was a lack of co-ordination between the existing

bond schemes and that this has caused some confusion for partner organisations.

Members were pleased that First Point has helped to act as referral point to signpost to relevant services and recommend that the role of First Point in helping to address housing and homelessness issues is monitored. However Members are of the view that it is not acceptable that housing assessments are carried out in the foyer at Darby House when interview rooms located on the ground floor are already in use. This needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. Members concluded that anyone needing housing services should be able to see a housing officer at First Point who can undertake an initial assessment and make a further appointment when necessary in an appropriate room at Darby House.

There also appears to be a lack of joined up working between Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), adult mental health services and the homelessness team in finding accommodation for those people suffering from mental health conditions. Members identified that there is an opportunity for the Primary Care Trust and Council to explore whether men's health initiatives could be delivered via Mark's Pitstop, YMCA and KIP.

Young People

Members welcome the development of the Young Persons Referral Pathway. Members recognise that while processes have to be followed the systems in place need to be able to respond sufficiently quickly to meet young people's needs. Staff need appropriate training on the issues facing young homeless people and providers should be engaged in the referral pathway process to support the development of balanced communities.

Members were also concerned that there appears to be a lack of joined up working between the Probation service, Youth Offending service, and the homelessness team in terms of finding accommodation for prisoners being released.

Members are concerned that continuity of accommodation for young people is put at risk if they start temporary employment. If their housing benefit stops but then they have to reapply when the employment ends, there is inevitable time lag in receipt of benefit. Members identified that joint work between Homelessness services and Youth services work with the benefits agency could help ensure as far as possible young people's accommodation is not put at risk if they start temporary employment. It has been suggested that the Council may be able to develop a bridging grant.

Members also identified that the need to reduce the number of young people in Bed and Breakfast accommodation can in some cases result in them being placed together in accommodation that does not have support from people who have experience of working with vulnerable young people.

The refreshed Housing Strategy will be consulted on during May 2010. The recommendations from the Scrutiny Review will be fed into this process.

Equality Implications

During the review Members received information on the issues for different groups that are affected by homelessness.

Young People: The issues identified are set out in the conclusions and recommendations

Older People and Mental Health: The Extra-care Project at Lightmore provides support for this client group.

Domestic Violence: the Council has established a sanctuary scheme for victims of domestic violence and Multi-agency risk assessment conferences, the Specialist domestic Violence Court and the Integrated Domestic Abuse Programme.

Learning Disabilities: the Beth Johnson Sanctuary has worked closely with the YMCA to provide accommodation for people with Learning Disabilities. This has been part of a Section 106 Agreement. The BJS does not provide the care element of this work.

Recommendations

The recommendations from the Review Group are set out in the table below. We have assigned a priority level to each of the recommendations, and given an indication of the cost.

It is not possible to provide detailed costings for the recommendations within this report without a considerable amount of additional work being undertaken by both scrutiny and finance officers. However, the recommendations have been placed into one of three categories below and an indication if it is a one off or an ongoing cost:-

- Low cost indicates that the recommendation could be funded from within existing resources, although not necessarily in the current year.
- Medium cost indicates that the recommendation is anticipated to cost up to £10,000 which is not currently budgeted.
- High cost indicates that the recommendation is expected to cost more than £10,000 which is not currently budgeted.

| No. | Recommendation | Indication of Cost |
|------------|---|---------------------------|
| | Support and Services for Non-Statutory Homelessness | |
| 1. | Homelessness Strategy should provide more detailed information on the full range of | Low / Ongoing |

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| | homelessness in the Borough including data on non- statutory homelessness figures (this is available from the KIP project) and the services available. Service outcomes for this for non- statutory homelessness should be monitored. | |
| 2. | Members support the continued funding of the KIP project and recommend that this should be developed into an ongoing Service Level Agreement. | High / Ongoing |
| | Supply of Housing | |
| 3. | The fundamental problem of RSLs not being able to compete on an equal footing for land with private developers needs to be addressed by the HCA. | Low / One off |
| 4. | The Council should develop a policy that prioritises affordable housing above all other Section 106 planning obligations over the medium term. | Low / Ongoing |
| 5. | If an RSL applies for a development containing 100% affordable housing then the Council should have an overarching policy that allows planning officers to make a decision to waive the need for a Section 106 agreement for further contributions where possible. | To be determined |
| 6. | Members would like to see the Council exploring and supporting more non-traditional development builds on land that is not suitable for traditional builds. Members would like to see more of a strategic steer from the HCA. | To be determined |
| | Choose Your Home | |
| 7. | The partner organisations look at the urgent banding to allow partners some flexibility to enable those people who have the greatest needs being dealt with accordingly. This should link with the work of the Safer Communities Partnership and the Think Family Programme to support the development of balanced communities. | Low / Ongoing |
| 8. | The bidding system should be reviewed so that if someone logs on to the system this should be recognised as actively seeking accommodation to help avoid inappropriate bids. | Low / Ongoing |

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| 9. | The Wrekin Housing Trust continues to monitor the number of bids for accommodation via electronic, postal and telephone and the success of these applicants for accommodation. This information should then be used to ensure that Choose Your Home is accessible to all customers. | Low / Ongoing |
| Information and Co-ordination of Existing Services | | |
| 10. | The existing bond schemes are co-ordinated and this is communicated to partner organisations. The Council should review its financial commitment to the scheme to increase the number of bonds available. | High/ Ongoing |
| 11. | Members have been pleased that First Point has helped to act as referral point to signpost to relevant services. Members recommend that role of First Point in helping to address housing and homelessness issues is monitored. It is not acceptable, that housing assessments are carried out in the foyer at Darby House when interview rooms located on the ground floor are already in use. This needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency – interviews must be held in a secure and confidential space. | Low / Ongoing |
| 12. | There also appears to be a lack of joined up working between CAMHS and adult mental health services and the homelessness team in finding accommodation for those people suffering from mental health problems. The PCT and Council should explore whether men's health initiatives could be delivered via Mark's Pitstop, YMCA and KIP. | Medium / Ongoing |
| 13. | The staffing of Housing Services is already under pressure and this should be looked at sympathetically in the service review and restructure. | To be determined |
| Young People | | |
| 14. | The referral pathway for homeless young people is monitored to ensure the needs of young homeless people are met. This should include the views of young people who have used the service. | Low / Ongoing |

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| | Provider organisations should be engaged in the in the referral pathway for homeless young people. | |
| 15. | Members support the work of the Council with the Regional Offenders Accommodation Pathway and support further work through the development of an integrated offender management process to assist offenders to find suitable accommodation. The work of this group should be monitored to ensure the housing needs of offenders, including young offenders, are met. | Low / Ongoing |
| 16. | Homelessness services and Youth services work with the benefits agency to ensure as far as possible young people's accommodation is not put at risk if they start temporary employment. | Medium/ Ongoing |
| 17. | All accommodation for homeless young people regardless of size should be licensed to ensure it is appropriate and provides appropriate support. | High / Ongoing |