Report to the Health Improvement Board

Homelessness Prevention Activity in Oxfordshire

Background

The Health Improvement Board has agreed the prevention of homelessness as a key priority for housing and health inequality issues.

Local housing authorities are required by statute to periodically carry out a review of the homelessness situation in their area and to develop their strategy for reducing the incidence of homelessness and ensuring that homeless persons have the accommodation and support that they need.

This paper outlines what the key issues are across the county and describes how the issues are being addressed.

Key Issues

- Implementation of No Second Night Out in respect of rough sleepers

- Commissioning supported accommodation for homeless single people and meeting a savings target of £270k

- Mitigating the impact of welfare reform

- Prevention of homelessness of young people particularly 16 and 17 year olds

- Reducing homelessness caused by domestic abuse

- Meeting the housing needs of people leaving the Armed Forces

Main causes of homelessness

The main causes of homelessness across the county are;
- Being asked to leave by parents, other relatives or friends;
- Termination of privately rented shorthold tenancy;
- Rent or mortgage arrears
- Relationship breakdown including fleeing domestic violence or abuse;

Current trends

There remains a shortage of social housing to meet demand and access to private rented accommodation for households on modest incomes is increasingly restricted because of high general demand sustaining rent levels above Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates set for housing benefit eligibility and a notable reluctance of landlords to offer tenancies to households who may be dependent on housing benefit.

There are a number of challenges to be met locally if a rise in the number of households being threatened with homelessness is to be successfully prevented. The impact of the current economic climate, a much reduced new build programme for affordable housing in some parts of the county, the impact of various Welfare Reform measures and continued reductions in funding for housing related support all have the potential to give rise to an increase in the incidence of homelessness.

Nationally, government figures published for quarter 3 of 2012, show that homelessness rose in England by 11% compared to quarter 3 of 2011 and that there has been an 8% annual rise in the number of households in temporary accommodation, including a 29% rise in the number in bed and breakfast.

The emerging picture locally is of an increasing number of people seeking assistance because of concerns about homelessness. (see appendix giving statistics).

Rough Sleeping

The incidence of rough sleeping is greatest in the City and data from the Oxford City Outreach service indicates that on average 2 to 3 people come onto the streets of Oxford each week. A service model of No Second Night Out was implemented in July 2012 in order to try and ensure that no rough sleeper would need to spend more than one night on the streets in Oxford. This initiative is in the process of being rolled out to the rest of the county.

No Second Night Out works on the following principles

- Providing a rapid response to new and returning rough sleepers

- Making a single service offer of suitable accommodation and support for new and returning rough sleepers, based on individual assessment

- A focus on linking people who migrate into Oxfordshire back to accommodation and services where they have a local connection

- A partnership approach of relevant agencies and services working together to achieve the aims of the model

The service model is based on verification that someone is actually sleeping rough in order to access services, a highly assertive outreach approach, the establishment of an assessment unit at O'Hanlon House in Oxford where rough sleepers can receive a rapid assessment of their needs and receive a Single Service offer with rough sleepers being prioritised for accommodation within the Oxford Homeless pathway.

Welfare Reform

A number of welfare reform measures have already been introduced. Local Housing Allowance now only covers the cost of the cheapest 30% of rental properties in the private sector rather than the average cost and single people up to the age of 34 who rent from a private landlord now have their housing benefit entitlement restricted to the cost of a room in a shared house.

From April 2013, a maximum cap will be imposed on the amount of benefits a household can claim of £500 per week for couples and lone parent families and £350 per week for single people. Also, housing benefit will be reduced for working age social housing tenants who occupy a larger property than the family needs, set at 14% of eligible rent for one extra bedroom and 25% for two or more extra bedrooms.

Further major changes are due to be made with the roll out of Universal Credit from October 2013 and the routine payment monthly in arrears of the housing element of Universal Credit direct to housing association tenants unless they are considered to be vulnerable in accordance with criteria yet to be published.

Work underway to address these issues

With regard to the prevention of homelessness of single people and particularly those who are rough sleeping, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire have been allocated a one off sum of £455k transitional homelessness funding to be spent on front line prevention measures. The action programme that has been agreed for the two counties has 3 strands of work which are now underway and overseen by the Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Single Homeless steering Group. These are:-

- Mitigation of the impact of Welfare reform by identification of those affected, raising awareness of individuals and other agencies, sharing best practice across authorities, ensuring effective housing options advice for those affected, development of incentives to private sector landlords to let properties within Local Housing Allowance rates, development of credit union services, delivering partnership work to tackle worklessness and improved access to employment and training

- Effective implementation of the No Second Night Out model across the two counties, including commissioning an outreach service for rough sleepers in the Districts, provision of additional emergency beds in homeless projects outside of the City and a personalisation of support project for rough sleepers

- Development of improved move on options from supported accommodation including assistance to access private rented accommodation

Supported accommodation for homeless single people

One of the biggest challenges facing the county is achievement of a countywide savings target of £270k to be met as part of the retendering of hostel and supported accommodation for homeless single people during 2013/14.

The majority of this provision comprises the three main hostels in Oxford City. One of the options to meet this target is to de-commission one of the hostels and invest remaining funding into move on accommodation and floating support in priority areas. Instead of pursuing this option, it has been decided to invite proposals from service providers in respect of a suite of new services that would satisfy some fundamental service parameters. This market testing exercise will get underway early in 2013 with a view to new services becoming operational in 2014.

Homelessness and Young People

A Joint Housing Team comprising representatives from the local housing authorities and the County Council's Children, Education and Families Directorate works in a collaborative way to prevent young people from becoming homeless, oversee the effectiveness of the Young People's pathway of supported accommodation and to ensure that each agency's responsibilities with regard to meeting the housing needs of potentially homeless 16 and 17 yr olds, children leaving care and other vulnerable young people are met.

In May 2009 Oxfordshire published, *"Housing and related Support for young people aged 16-24 years: Oxfordshire Joint Commissioning Strategy 2009-14."* This report set out a coherent strategy for jointly commissioning services to meet the needs of young people and young families in Oxfordshire, bringing together funding from Children's Social Care (CSC), Supporting People and the district councils.

A Young People's pathway of supported accommodation was commissioned and contracts have been in place for these services since 1 April 2010. With the exception of One Foot Forward in Oxford, all services within the Pathway need to be retendered and new contracts in place by 1st April 2015.

A review of the effectiveness of current services will inform the content of specifications for the new services going forwards.

The aim of the Young people's pathway was to change the focus of current services and set out a service model that had a clear support pathway from prevention, assessment and referral to access, progression and move-through and then into independence. It places primary importance upon preventing homelessness.

A recent review of the effectiveness of the pathway in meeting the strategic objectives was that the structure of the pathway is broadly operating well. A notable success of the Pathway has been its ability to house priority needs group, predominately 16 and 17 year olds. This has however had a number of consequences and has highlighted the need for greater countywide provision for those young people with the most complex needs and has led to a shortage of provision to meet the needs of 18 to 24 year olds needing housing related support.

In order to meet the savings target set for 2013/14, the supported lodgings provision in the pathway has had to be de-commissioned.

Homelessness as a result of domestic abuse

Homelessness of people leaving the Armed Forces

Oxfordshire has three main military bases, RAF Brize Norton, Bicester Garrison and with associated married quarters for service personnel. The county signed up to the Military Covenant in 2011. One of the commitments is to ensure that the housing needs of households leaving the forces are met satisfactorily.