

**Appendix A**

Social Care, Health and Housing

# Homelessness Strategy

2010 - 2015



## Foreword

Councillor Rita Drinkwater, Portfolio holder for Housing

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# Foreword

## Councillor Rita Drinkwater



I am pleased to introduce you to this, the first Homelessness Strategy for Central Bedfordshire.

This is a difficult and challenging time for local people, and for homelessness and housing advice services. There is pressure on household incomes which in turn places pressure on family relationships – between adults, and between parents and their children. This generates increased demand for advice, information and social housing, at a time when local authority resources are under pressure.

For this reason, the Strategy focuses on responding to families in housing need, in a way which is holistic and links into the Think Family approach to support stable family life at this challenging time. In addition, the Strategy recognises a need to develop the response to homelessness experienced by young people and people who are vulnerable, more so than has traditionally been the case.

The Council is preparing for a strategic housing review, to report in September 2010. This strategy and the review process are an opportunity for Central Bedfordshire Council to look closely at value for money and to shape the future direction of strategic housing services, as a new unitary council.

Councillor Mrs Rita Drinkwater

## **Executive Summary**

### **Introduction**

This is Central Bedfordshire Council's first Homelessness Strategy following local government review. This strategy will continue to build upon the significant achievements made by the legacy councils and their partners to tackle homelessness, and will seek to enhance existing services, develop new initiatives and strengthen partnership working. This strategy has been developed in consultation with partner agencies and service users.

This strategy has been developed in response to the findings of the Homelessness Review 2009, which provided a detailed analysis of homelessness in Central Bedfordshire.

The Homelessness Act requires every local authority to carry out a review of homelessness in their area every five years; to develop and publish a Homelessness Strategy based on this review; and to consult with other local statutory and voluntary organisations. The purpose of the review is to develop an evidence base to inform the strategy for tackling and preventing homelessness for the next five years. The homelessness review is required to cover:

1. An analysis of the past, current and future levels of homelessness;
2. An audit of the services aimed at preventing, accommodating and supporting people who are or may become homeless;
3. A review of the resources available to spend on homelessness within the area.

We have considered available resources in developing this strategy, and this is reflected in the strategic priorities going forward. More detailed intelligence on resource availability within housing need services will be produced as part of the Review of Strategic Housing Services taking place in summer 2010, during which all strategic housing services will be assessed for their Value for Money. This will inform the content of commissioning plans to be developed out of this strategy.

### **Key review findings**

Central Bedfordshire is an area of relatively high housing costs and housing need. The housing market has, in the years running up to the recession, been driven by in-migration from more expensive areas to the south – for example Greater London and Hertfordshire; and also by out-commuting of local residents to better paid employment than is available within Central Bedfordshire.

The recession has brought a decrease in house prices. However, house prices remain high relative to the local wage market, and alongside this, more local households are unemployed or depending on lower paid work than previously. Between January 2007 and August 2009, there was a 138%

increase in the number of Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) claimants in Central Bedfordshire, compared to a national increase over the same period of 68%. People aged 18-24 are disproportionately affected, accounting for 12.8% of the working age population and 27% of JSA claimants. (Nomis, 2009)

Although the area remains relatively affluent, there are pockets of multiple deprivation. Supporting People needs analysis shows unmet need for people who are socially excluded or at risk of social exclusion. We also know that there is unmet need for site-based accommodation amongst local Gypsies and Travellers, and we believe that there is a particular need of suitable accommodation for older disabled people in the Gypsy and Traveller community.

This situation means a high volume of customers approaching local housing options and homelessness services for advice and help. A steady decline in the number of homeless applications and acceptances of full duty homelessness over the past 4 years, shows that services are effective in meeting this challenge, by preventing homelessness and drawing on all available housing options to help households address their housing needs. A decrease in the use of Temporary Accommodation also reflects this. At March 2004, there were 414 households in temporary accommodation. This had reduced to 47 households at March 2009.

Pressure on money advice services, and an increase in the proportion of priority need homelessness which arises from mortgage repossession, show the effect of the recession on local people. Services are responding to this by increasing the availability of specialist money and homelessness advice to people facing financial crisis and possible repossession.

Recently, the private rented sector has grown and has become an important option for preventing homelessness and meeting housing need. Further service development – for example the launch of the Lets Rent service, will build on this in closer partnership with local landlords.

Lets Rent is a new service which the council and Aragon Housing Association will operate in partnership with private sector landlords. People in housing need will be offered tenancies in the private sector, along with a deposit guarantee from the council, floating tenancy support and close liaison with Housing Benefit to ensure that delays in benefit assessment are minimised.

The available evidence shows that most people accepted as being in priority need homelessness are families with children. Service development around the Think Family agenda is therefore key to improving outcomes for families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Available information about households in contact with the service, and information produced by consultation on this homelessness strategy, suggests that there are particular types of local homelessness about which we do not know enough, and to which we need to develop our response.

Key areas to address are homelessness in young people, including non-priority need homelessness; and homelessness in people with complex needs, for example ex-offenders, people with mental health problems, people with drug or alcohol dependency, and people affected by a combination of different challenges.

The review process has also indicated that there may be further room for service development around homelessness which is caused by violence and harassment.

We also know that further service development is needed around equalities practice and around Safeguarding of Children and Vulnerable Adults.

A report into Homelessness and Health in Central Bedfordshire, produced in 2009 by a partnership of local agencies, including housing options and homelessness services, examined the local picture around the health impacts of homelessness, and made a series of recommendations for service development and partnership working, which are reflected in the following strategic priorities.

### **Homelessness strategic priorities**

The review process has led to the identification of ten priorities for homelessness in Central Bedfordshire, six of which are strategic and four of which are cross-cutting. These priorities are also shaped by the Local Government Reorganisation agenda and by national policy.

Increasing affordable housing supply is a crucial activity for Central Bedfordshire Council, underpinning all activity to address homelessness and wider housing need. However, increasing supply is not articulated here as a strategic homelessness priority because it is driven by the developing Housing Strategy for Central Bedfordshire.

**There are 6 specific priorities, which are:**

#### **Harmonise housing options services across Central Bedfordshire, following Local Government Reorganisation.**

Action around this is crucial to achieving a consistent response to residents across Central Bedfordshire, building on existing work between the legacy providers – Aragon Housing Association in the north of the area, and Central Bedfordshire Council's housing service to the south.

#### **Respond effectively to the recession, focusing on financial inclusion.**

As outlined above, the service is responding to an increased demand from people facing financial crisis as a result of the recession. Service development around financial inclusion will maintain and strengthen the

response to this, and has a preventative role in helping families to avert or manage periods of financial crisis in a way that supports their role as parents.

**Work with young people aged 16-24 to meet their needs more effectively.**

Young people who are homeless or in housing need are disadvantaged in their access to the private rented sector, due to rules around benefit eligibility. This element of the strategy focuses on developing options and pathways for young people to find settled accommodation, and also aims to address unmet need for support in developing the life-skills necessary to sustain an independent home.

**Embed the Think Family approach within all homelessness prevention activity and broader interventions to sustain families in permanent settled accommodation.**

This element of the strategy is preventative, aiming to increase the services available to support families, tackling the root causes which can make a family vulnerable to social exclusion, or to a financial or housing crisis; and aiming to improve outcomes for children by supporting stable family life.

**Strengthen safeguarding practice for vulnerable adults and children across all aspects of housing options and homelessness prevention.**

There is an on-going statutory obligation, under section 11 of the Children's Act 2004, which requires local authorities to ensure good practice in safeguarding children and young people, working in partnership with other agencies such as Children's Services. The act also requires authorities to promote the wellbeing of children as a material consideration in service development and strategic decision making.

The safeguarding of vulnerable adults operates on similar principles and is driven by good practice guidance, requiring councils to both safeguard vulnerable adults and promote their welfare.

**Investigate the particular problems and pathway journeys that are experienced by people with complex needs, including mental health and substance abuse.**

This strategic priority centres on developing a better understanding of this type of homelessness, and developing our response to it accordingly. It involves close partnership working with other agencies – such as health, and with social care colleagues; and builds on several existing projects which are in the homelessness strategy action plan.

In addition, there are a further four cross-cutting priorities, applicable across all aspects of the housing options and homelessness service, which are as follows:-



**Strengthen equalities practice across all aspects of the service.**

**Make best use of private sector accommodation in meeting all other homelessness strategic priorities.**

**Sharing awareness and working in partnership with the community and between partner agencies.**

**Tenancy sustainment.**

### **Implementing the strategy**

Tackling homelessness cannot be done in isolation and is dependent on effective joint working between the Local Authority and all organisations who are working to prevent and respond to homelessness, or to meet housing need through the supply of good standard, affordable accommodation.

The strategy will cover the period 2010 to 2015. Progress against its action plan will be monitored and reviewed by the Central Bedfordshire Strategic Housing Delivery Partnership, as well as through the local authority's internal performance management systems.

This strategy has been developed in the context of a recession, and an unpredictable socio-economic future; and ahead of a detailed Value for Money review of strategic housing services, to be undertaken in summer 2010 which will inform the resources available for its implementation. In the light of this, we will review the strategy in summer 2012 to ensure that it remains fit for purpose going forward.

# 1 Introduction

Homelessness is a key issue for local authorities which can have an adverse impact at economic, social and personal levels.

This is Central Bedfordshire's first Homelessness Strategy as a Unitary Authority and covers the period April 2010 to 2015. The strategy is based on the findings of the Homelessness Review, which sets out to examine homelessness demand, housing supply in the area and existing homelessness services in order to map any gaps in service provision. It aims to ensure that the Council's future housing needs service for local people has a seamless and holistic approach according to needs, and prevents homelessness from occurring wherever possible.

The Homelessness Review also looked at the past achievements from the former Mid and South Bedfordshire Councils' Homelessness Strategies and brings together any remaining activities from these strategies that will support and enhance the key objectives for the prevention of homelessness within Central Bedfordshire.

The Homelessness Act requires local authorities to carry out a review of homelessness every five years, to develop and publish a homelessness strategy based on the review and on consultation with other organisations. The Homelessness Act 2002 requires homelessness strategies to include actions that:

1. Prevent homelessness;
2. Ensure there is sufficient accommodation available for people who are or may become homeless;
3. Ensure there is satisfactory support for people who are, or may become homeless, or need support to prevent them from becoming homeless again.

Partnership working is fundamental to this Homelessness Strategy. Many people will have multiple, sometimes complex needs that extend beyond the basic need for a home. It is essential that services to meet the needs of homeless people are developed in partnership to prevent homelessness and offer sustainable housing solutions.

This strategy has been developed in partnership and its implementation will be led by the Strategic Housing Delivery Partnership, which is accountable to the Healthier Communities and Older People's Board (HCOP), within the Local Strategic Partnership. It is based on findings following wide ranging consultation with customers; stakeholders; local community groups; health; fire and police services; council officers and members and other frontline staff who work with homeless people and those in housing need.

Key actions from the strategy will be monitored and reviewed by the Strategic Housing Delivery Partnership and through Central Bedfordshire Council's performance reporting framework.

## 1.1 The locality of Central Bedfordshire

Central Bedfordshire Council was formed on 01 April 2009, covering the areas of the former Mid and South Bedfordshire Councils, and taking on the functions within the new area of the former Bedfordshire County Council.

Central Bedfordshire covers approximately 716 square kilometres and is home to 255,000 people. It is predominantly rural with just over half of the population living in rural areas and the largest towns being Leighton Linlade, Dunstable, Houghton Regis, Biggleswade, Flitwick, Sandy and Ampthill. Around 6% of people living in Central Bedfordshire are from ethnic minority communities, the largest of which is "White Other" (2%).

There are approximately 105,400 dwellings in Central Bedfordshire of which 77% are privately owned, 14% socially rented and 7% privately rented, according to the 2001 census. Evidence presented in the Strategic Housing Market Assessment 2010 suggests that the private rented sector has grown in size in recent years.

By 2021, it is estimated that housing growth will increase the population to more than 282,000, the largest growth in population being among the over 65's with a projected increase of almost 53% by 2021.

Overall, the health of people in Central Bedfordshire is generally similar to or significantly better than the England average. Over the last ten years, death rates from all causes, (including early deaths from heart disease, stroke and cancer) have reduced for men and women and are generally better than the England average. However, all age, all cause mortality (AAACM) rates in women are now very similar to the England average.

Average life expectancy in Central Bedfordshire is close to the East of England average (males 79.1 years and females 82.4 years).

Although Central Bedfordshire is a relatively affluent, and rural area, there are pockets of deprivation centered around the urban areas of Houghton Regis, Dunstable and Sandy, parts of Leighton Buzzard and Flitwick. These tend to be areas of social housing, and of more marginal private ownership and renting in ex-local authority properties. They are characterised by low educational achievement and skills, and by higher exposure to crime and anti-social behaviour. (Sources are the Strategic Housing Market Assessment 2010, and the Place Survey 2009).

## 1.2 National and local key drivers

The Government published a document called **Sustainable Communities – Settled Homes; changing lives** in March 2005, which sets key objectives such as homelessness prevention, supporting vulnerable people, tackling its wider causes and symptoms, helping people to move away from rough sleeping and providing more settled homes. The Government has also focused on youth homelessness as a particular concern, and has provided funding and support for local authorities to improve the supply of suitable accommodation for 16 and 17 year olds; increased access to mediation including family mediation; and launched a national Supported Lodgings Development scheme for young people.

The former Housing Corporation (whose regulatory functions are now with the Tenant Services Authority) published their own strategy for Housing Associations called **Tackling Homelessness** in 2006, which aims to support and complement the prevention work of their local authority partners. The Strategy outlined the key role that Housing Associations have to play in tackling homelessness. The work with Housing Associations has since been complemented with the introduction of the Communities and Local Government (CLG) Homelessness Action Team, who work to build and sustain partnerships between local authorities and Housing Associations, whilst promoting good practice.

**“Independence and Opportunity” (2007)** outlines how the Supporting People programme helps to reduce homelessness by providing support to enable households to remain in their own homes, and offering invaluable support services to other vulnerable groups. The strategy emphasises the need for service users to remain central to the programme, whilst highlighting future changes and plans for delivery through the Local Area Agreements.

The Government’s **Putting People First : Transforming Social Care** programme has five milestones for Local Government, one of which is to produce a joint Health and Social Care Prevention strategy by 2010-11, aiming to shift social care provision from reactive to preventative and rehabilitative provision. Preventative Strategy will increasingly shape commissioning priorities for housing related support services in Central Bedfordshire.

**Support for all : the families and relationships Green Paper**, published for consultation in January 2010, articulates Government policy aims around the Think Family agenda, looking at the role of public services in supporting strong and stable family life, and intervening to support families who are in or at risk of a crisis.

The Government also commissioned independent research to examine the role of social housing and how best to meet future housing need. The Hills Report entitled **Ends and Means: The Future of Social Housing** was published in 2007, and cites the need to include employment advice alongside housing advice in order to increase choice and opportunities for those in housing need.

Whilst each local authority is responsible for tackling homelessness within its own area it is important to recognise the benefits of sub-regional working. Central Bedfordshire is working in partnership with Sub-regional groups including the Milton Keynes and South Midlands Groups.

At a local level, we recognise the need to provide an efficient and focused housing needs service that delivers positive outcomes for homeless people.

The main objectives of the Housing Needs Service are;

- To increase the supply of affordable accommodation
- Early intervention to prevent homelessness
- Shift the focus on how we are best able to meet housing need, to promote choice
- Avoid the use of temporary accommodation where possible
- Provide support for vulnerable people
- Tackle the wider causes such as debt and unemployment
- Address the health needs of homeless people
- Focus on youth homelessness
- Strengthen partnerships with others and make best use of resources

### 1.3 Alignment with other Central Bedfordshire Strategies

This Homelessness Strategy is closely aligned with emerging and newly adopted Central Bedfordshire strategies and plans. Successful implementation and delivery is reliant on the outcomes from other housing related strategies. This strategy will influence some of the priorities of other emerging strategies, and has in turn been influenced by existing and emerging strategies and plans, including-:

- Sustainable Communities Strategy (**under development – adopted June 2010**)
- Bedfordshire Supporting People Strategy (**evolving into a Central Bedfordshire Preventative Strategy**)
- Housing Strategy 2010-2015
- Asset Management Strategy
- Private Sector Renewal Policy – incorporating Empty Homes, Grants Programme, policy on Houses in Multiple Occupation and Fuel Poverty.
- Tenant Participation Strategy
- Child Poverty Strategy

- Review of safeguarding practice for vulnerable adults
- Children and Young People Plan
- Child Poverty Strategy
- Mental Health and Housing Strategy
- Community Safety Strategy
- Domestic Violence Strategy – owned by a multi-agency partnership including Central Bedfordshire Council
- Action plan for Safeguarding Children in Central Bedfordshire
- Raising achievement policy – targeting resources to raise the achievement of children and young people, especially those in vulnerable circumstances.

The Bedfordshire Supporting People 2008-13 strategy is the framework within which the council has made funding and commissioning decisions around the provision of housing related support services since 2003. These services are key to the response to homelessness, and will be discussed in detail further in this document.

Under the Supporting People programme, the council has developed its understanding of needs around housing related support, and there has been some service development to better align service provision with identified needs. For example, Bromford Support was commissioned to provide generic and specialist floating support to households in Central Bedfordshire.

The emerging Preventative Strategy for Central Bedfordshire will in the future drive decision making around this type of service provision, taking a holistic view of all services which have a role in promoting the independence and welfare of vulnerable people, and as a result preventing crisis situations from arising.

For more information about strategic housing issues, please see the Council's main Housing Strategy, 2010-2015.

## **2 The Housing Need and Economic Context**

### **2.1 Housing affordability and the housing market**

Central Bedfordshire is an area of relatively highly priced housing to buy and rent privately. Between 2000 and 2008, house prices in the former Mid Bedfordshire rose by 111%, and in the former South Bedfordshire by 94%.

The 2010 Bedfordshire and Luton Strategic Housing Market Assessment identifies a need for 6400 further social rented homes to be built in Central

Bedfordshire by 2021 in order to meet need from people unable to access owner occupation or intermediate tenures such as shared ownership.

Although house prices have fallen in response to the recession, they remain out of reach for many people on relatively low incomes, whilst mortgage finance has become more difficult to obtain for those without a significant deposit. Meanwhile, decline in local manufacturing industries and job losses means an increasing number of households unemployed or in low-paid employment, and so unable to afford home ownership.

Data collected by the council's Economic Growth and Regeneration service shows that between January 2007 and August 2009, there was a 138% increase in the number of Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) claimants in Central Bedfordshire. This compares to a national increase over the same period of 68%. Vauxhall remains a major provider of relatively well-paid manufacturing jobs in the sub-region, and job losses here have the potential to pitch large numbers of people into unemployment and housing need. (Nomis, December 2009).

Local unemployment disproportionately affects people aged 18-24. This group account for 12.8% of the working age population, and 27.1% of JSA claimants.

It is widely accepted that timely, expert money advice is important in helping people in difficulty to avoid a crisis situation which may place them at risk of homelessness.

Housing need services in Central Bedfordshire have responded to this changed economic climate by employing a dedicated Homelessness Prevention and Mortgage Rescue Officer. This officer targets specific households to prevent homelessness, for example attending court desks on the dates of mortgage repossession hearings, and asking that cases are adjourned if the correct pre-court action protocol has not been followed by the lender. This compliments the general work of the service on financial inclusion and generic money advice.

Much of the money advice available to residents of Central Bedfordshire is provided in partnership with the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), supported by grant funding from the council. In addition, Aragon Housing Association run an in-house service, for their own tenants, and for homeless people referred from Aragon's housing advice service. Aragon Housing Association report that there are normally around 35 people on their waiting list for this service. Citizens Advice Bureaux in Central Bedfordshire report receiving 514 new debt advice enquiries between April and August 2009. However this does not include new enquiries to Dunstable CAB, or clients who presented with a different type of enquiry but went on to receive debt advice.



## 2.2 Migration

Previous housing need studies have shown that Central Bedfordshire attracts migrants from areas to the south, such as Greater London and Hertfordshire, where house prices are more expensive. It is also a destination for people moving out of Luton. This has been an important driver of the local housing market, although it is unclear what the effect of the recession has been on this pattern of migration.

## 2.3 Housing waiting list demand

Local housing need translates into a total of 2781 households currently registered on the Choice Based Lettings housing waiting list for Central Bedfordshire. Of these, 1347 are waiting for one bedroom accommodation, 999 for two bedroom accommodation and 435 for accommodation of 3 or more bedrooms.

It is important to note that housing waiting lists do not reflect total and true need and demand for social housing. Although the higher volume of demand is for smaller accommodation, in practice it is a bigger challenge to meet needs for family sized accommodation. This is because smaller properties become available to re-let more often, and because homelessness legislation places a greater statutory obligation on councils to house families with children than other household types.

Customer feedback and frontline experience indicate that there is pent-up demand for three bedroom accommodation, particularly in the south, from households with two children in 2 bedroom, often flatted accommodation. These households are considered to be adequately housed within current Lettings Policy for Central Bedfordshire, which must balance felt need for rehousing against stock availability to ensure that the most acute needs are met first.

The following table shows the main council and Housing Association stock in Central Bedfordshire from which these needs can be met, and the frequency with which properties of different sizes have become available for letting between April 2006 and March 2009. (NB these figures include sheltered housing stock and stock designated as particularly suitable for older people).

	<b>Number of properties</b>	<b>Average yearly lettings</b>
Bedsit and 1 bed	3330	129
2 bed	3110	211
3 bed	4611	166
4 bed +	212	8



## 2.4 Choice based lettings

A sub-regional Choice Based Lettings scheme for the allocation of social housing has been operational in Central Bedfordshire since June 2009. This is delivered in partnership with other providers in the sub-region. An accessible and effective Choice Based Lettings system is a crucial part of the response to households who are homeless or threatened with homelessness.

Choice Based Lettings describes a scheme where all available council and housing association properties are advertised to housing applicants who can then place a bid for any property they are interested in. Priority is given to households in the greatest housing need.

The CBL scheme, Bedfordshire Home Finder, is supported by a Sub Regional Allocations Policy and at present this Policy is undergoing a review in order to provide a fair and flexible system of allocation, through choice.

Choice Based Lettings encourages families to take up a tenancy in the area they want, and the type of property that best suits them. By doing so, it has been evidenced that tenancies tend to be longer as a result, and families are more inclined to become involved in a positive way with their neighbours and wider community. Choice Based Lettings also means that families and individuals have choice about their local schools or health centres, and can plan to move close to family and friend networks which is especially important for vulnerable people.

It is important to note that the ability of Choice Based Lettings schemes to meet applicants' aspirations for where and in what type of property they live depends on the location and type of the social housing stock which comes up for letting. An aim of the Choice Based Lettings approach is to give applicants information about the likely availability of property in different locations, helping them to make realistic decisions about their options.

The following table shows the number of people who have successfully obtained a property under the Choice Based Lettings system between June and December 2009. Allocations in bands 1 and 2 are to applicants with an emergency or urgent need for accommodation – including people who are homeless. Allocations in band 3 are to people who are in housing need. Allocations in band 4 are to people who are classified within the system as being 'adequately housed' - people who may have a perceived need, but are not considered to have a need to move within local allocations policy.

<b>Bedsizes</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Band 1</b>	<b>Band 2</b>	<b>Band 3</b>	<b>Band 4</b>
Bedsit	5	0	0	3	2
One bed	158	0	21	95	41
Two bed	138	2	18	100	18
Three bed	60	3	16	39	2
Four bed	6	0	0	5	1

The fact that a high proportion of allocations have been to people in band 3, and that there have been allocations into band 4, suggests that the system is working well in meeting a range of housing needs.

However, it is important to interpret these figures in the light of customer feedback, and the geography of the area. We know that in the south of the area, the greatest pressure from pent-up demand is on 3 bedroom accommodation, whilst in the north of the area, there is a greater supply of 3 bedroom accommodation but pent-up demand for 2 bedroom accommodation.

The potential to ease these demand pressures by moves between the north and south of the area is reduced by applicants' reluctance to move to an unfamiliar area, probably compounded by the relatively long distances involved and lack of frequent public transport connections.

Other information emerging from the Choice Based Lettings IT systems indicates a high level of unsuccessful bidding, which represents a lot of wasted time and disappointment for applicants, and there are also concerns that some applicants in housing need seem not to be bidding, and a need to understand why this is.

Choice Based Lettings outcomes will be reviewed after one year of operation, leading to the adoption of a Central Bedfordshire Lettings Policy, an element of which will be a Local Lettings Plan. This will introduce local lettings variations for particular schemes or types of housing, giving preference to specific groups of applicants.

The Lettings Policy will retain the principle that housing allocations should be driven firstly by need. However, it will attempt to balance this against wider social and community needs, in order to contribute to wellbeing and sustainable communities.

Full consultation will be carried out prior to the implementation of a local lettings variation and specific measures of success will be identified and monitored to ensure that it meets one or more of the Policy objectives.

## **2.5 Equalities monitoring of new allocations**

Monitoring of new allocations by ethnicity shows that the proportion of new council tenants between April 2006 and March 2009 who were from a Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) background was broadly similar to the proportion of BME residents of Central Bedfordshire in the 2001 census.

Information on new allocations to disabled people is currently unavailable, although CBL reporting systems are being developed to deliver this. Monitoring by age is not carried out systematically and this is an area for development. There is no monitoring by sexuality, and this also needs to be addressed.

Central Bedfordshire will continue to monitor any changes in Policy that may impact negatively on marginalised and vulnerable households and will work with partners Sub-Regionally to ensure a fair and flexible system of allocation.

## **2.6 New affordable development**

An important part of the council's response to housing need is working with Housing Association partners to bring about the development of new affordable housing. The council uses the findings of housing need studies to develop planning policies around the amount and type of new development which should be affordable, and negotiates with developers as to how these plans will be reflected in new housing developments.

Between April 2005 and March 2009, 365 new social rented homes were built across Central Bedfordshire, as well as 333 new homes of intermediate tenure, such as shared ownership.

New affordable development should be considered in the light of Right To Buy losses. Between 2001 and 2007, there was no net gain in the number of new social rented homes despite 1800 new affordable completions. However, Right To Buy has since slowed, with just 25 sales across Central Bedfordshire between 2007 and 2009.

The Council is currently performing within its 2009-2010 target (National Indicator 155) to build 150-200 units of new affordable accommodation, despite the current economic downturn and its impact on the housing market. This is due to effective internal working within departments and a close relationship with our partner Housing Associations. A further 200 units of affordable accommodation is anticipated in 2010-2011. It is not possible at this stage to predict development beyond 2011 as it is dependent on yet unannounced funding from Central Government.

## **2.7 Meeting housing needs within the private rented sector**

In recent years, the private rented sector has grown locally as described in the Strategic Housing Market Assessment 2010. This seems to be linked to the growth of buy-to-let mortgages which took place in the years before the credit crunch, and has continued through the credit crunch as home owners wanting to move have chosen to rent out their properties as an alternative to selling.

It has traditionally been difficult for people on low incomes to access good quality private rented housing due to a reluctance on the part of landlords to accept benefit applicants. However, as the sector has grown, more landlords have begun to accept tenants on Local Housing Allowance. At the same time, homelessness prevention services have worked with private landlords to keep people in Assured Shorthold Tenancies for longer, and promote Local Housing Allowance to landlords as a secure source of rental income.

This means that the private sector is catering to more housing need than in the past, and playing a greater role in homelessness prevention, allied to tenancy deposit schemes which help people in financial difficulties to overcome the difficulty of meeting the requirement for a large deposit at the start of a tenancy.

Increasing use of the private rented sector has some knock-on implications around affordability. There is a need for ongoing work with landlords, and with Job Centre Plus, to tackle the 'poverty trap' effect of rents which are higher than those in the social rented sector.

### **Lets Rent**

The Lets Rent initiative being launched in Central Bedfordshire on 17 March 2010 is intended to create further opportunities to meet housing need in the sector. Tenants going into the private rented sector under Lets Rent will receive a deposit guarantee from the council, and floating tenancy support to prevent tenancy failure.

The Housing Options Team, who run the service, work closely with colleagues at Aragon Housing Association and in Housing Benefits to ensure that all paperwork and documents are in place where applicable to avoid delays in payment before the tenancy commences. The team is also on hand throughout the tenancy to provide help and advice to either party and to resolve any difficulties that may arise.

The quality of accommodation under Lets Rent will be assured through an Accreditation undertaken by the Council's Private Sector Housing team. Officers will work with landlords to ensure that properties meet standards to become accredited as good quality accommodation.

## **Empty homes**

We will be developing a private sector empty homes strategy during summer 2010, with the aim of increasing the use of this potential supply of accommodation to meet housing needs.

This will link into Lets Rent. We also have in place an agreement with Pathmeads, a specialist housing association who will manage tenancies in empty private sector homes on our behalf.

## **Private sector landlord forum**

Crucial to success on Lets Rent and empty homes is a stronger Private Sector Landlord Forum, in order to bring about stronger, mutually beneficial partnership working with private sector landlords.

The Council will be hosting a Landlords' Forum in May 2010, the focus of which will be Lets Rent.

## **2.8 Young people**

People who are aged 24 and under, without children, and on low incomes, have restricted access to the private rented sector due to rules about Local Housing Allowance eligibility. This group have not benefited from increased access to the private rented sector and there is a lack of alternative housing options for young people in housing need – for example, Central Bedfordshire has no crash-pad, supported lodgings or foyer accommodation for young people, and only limited supported hostel accommodation, discussed in more detail below.

Young people aged 16/17 are also a group that are affected by homelessness and although they are defined as a “priority need” group, recent case law changes mean this group are actually defined as being the responsibility of Children’s Services and many now fall under the criteria of the Children’s Act 1989. A protocol with Children’s Services for jointly assessing the housing and support needs of this group is in development.

## **2.9 Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Need**

A study of Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Needs across Bedfordshire and Luton was carried out in 2006. It found that there was unmet housing need within the local Gypsy and Traveller community, and that there was a general preference amongst Gypsies and Travellers to live on sites if possible rather than in ‘bricks and mortar’ accommodation.

The study concluded that in order to meet the needs of local people, 74 new pitches should be provided on sites across Bedfordshire and Luton between 2006 and 2011. The study recommended that 20 of these pitches should be in the former Mid Bedfordshire, and 34-40 should be in the former South Bedfordshire.

The Council believes that there is also unmet need for accommodation in older disabled members of the Gypsy and Traveller community. We will investigate this need in greater depth, with a view to using one of the three council-owned Gypsy and Traveller sites in Central Bedfordshire solely for this purpose.

## **2.10 Need for housing related support services**

Meeting housing need and responding to homeless demand means understanding and meeting needs for housing related support services. Existing services are currently funded from Supporting People grant – an amount paid to Central Bedfordshire by the Government, based on needs in the area. The council uses this money to deliver support services – either directly as a provider, or by funding other providers to deliver a service.

A study is currently underway researching where there is unmet need for these types of services. However, we know from previous research that there is significant unmet need for services which support people who are socially excluded or at risk of social exclusion. These are the type of services which are particularly important in meeting need from people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

At present, floating support in Central Bedfordshire is provided by Bromford Support, a relatively new service which has been commissioned as a result of Supporting People service development. They are able to provide support to up to 133 households at a time, across different types and levels of need.

There are three Supporting People funded services providing supported hostel accommodation to homeless single people. These are Signpost which provides accommodation and support to homeless young people; Mayday Trust and Bedford Housing Link, which provide accommodation and support to single homeless people across age groups.

Data on the numbers of people trying to access these services show the pressure they are under in meeting the level of local need. The three services have 86 units of accommodation and support. In 2008-09, they received 404 referrals of people seeking accommodation. At September 2009, the services had 36 people on their waiting lists to take up accommodation. At the same time, they were accommodating 14 people who were ready to move out but unable to because they were waiting for suitable move-on accommodation.

All the services referred to in the above paragraph take referrals from housing advisors. There is no direct-access hostel in Central Bedfordshire, to which single homeless people can refer themselves in an emergency.

Responding to this type of homelessness is perceived as a challenge by frontline workers. Housing options advisors must have reason to believe that a homeless person is likely to be in priority need (within the meaning of homelessness legislation) before they can arrange temporary accommodation and take a homeless application from the person. Alternative options and pathways need to be available in order to be able to offer meaningful help to a person who is not in priority need.

This difficulty is more acute where the person in housing need is aged under 25, due to the lack of access to private rent described above.

Young people aged 16-17, or who are vulnerable due to leaving care, are catered to by homeless legislation – they fall into priority need, and are the subject of protocols with Children’s Services as described above.

However, new services and pathways are needed for those young people who do not fall into priority need homelessness, do not otherwise have high priority for a quick allocation of social housing, and are not able to access a private rented tenancy due to their age.

There is unmet need for supported housing provision for people with mental health problems. Steppingstones Hostel, which was previously used as supported housing for people recovering after a period in hospital, has been closed, and there has been no re-provision to replace this resource.

We are aware that some of the young people supported by Signposts hostel have experienced CAMH (Child and Adolescent Mental Health) problems. The early intervention team work with young people who are experiencing psychosis. They perceive a big gap in the provision of supported housing for young people who are well enough to leave residential care, but require a more supported environment than would be possible in general needs housing.

A Mental Health Housing Strategy is being developed by the South Essex Partnership Trust (providing services for mental health across Bedfordshire, Luton and South Essex) (SEPT).

An effective hospital discharge protocol for mental health patients is in place, under which people being rehoused from hospital are supported by the assertive outreach team in their mental health needs, complemented by housing support provided by Bromford.

## **2.11 Disability and housing need**

Disabled people present their need mostly as requests for grant-funded aids and adaptations. There is high spending on this across Central Bedfordshire,



for council and Housing Association tenants, and home owners, and unmet need from Gypsies and Travellers living on sites. However, waiting times for help can be long, in part because the available Disabled Facilities Grant funding is wholly inadequate for local needs. A comprehensive review of these services is currently underway, with the explicit aim of increasing the number and timeliness of adaptations as far as possible within available resources.

However, the response to this challenge must involve incorporating higher mobility standards into newly built housing wherever possible.

The Sub Regional Partnership for Choice Based Lettings will introduce an Accessible Housing Register in 2010. Matching the specific housing needs of customers who require aids and adaptations to properties that already have such adaptations contained within them is crucial to meeting customer needs and making best use of stock.

## **3 The Council's Approach to housing options and homelessness**

### **3.1 Housing options and homelessness services**

Central Bedfordshire homelessness and housing need services are provided directly by the council in the south of the area, and by Aragon Housing Association in the north of the area, reflecting the arrangements in place under the legacy district councils.

The two services have been working closely together since April 2009 through a series of harmonisation meetings, examining and synchronising their work practices in order to draw together a seamless service across the whole Central Bedfordshire area. A review panel of senior officers co-ordinates this activity.

Housing options and homelessness prevention are a key element of the way services are provided. Traditionally, homelessness services have responded to cases of apparent priority need homelessness by taking a homeless application; placing the household in temporary accommodation; and allocating a council or Housing Association tenancy to the household once a full homeless duty was confirmed.

Where a full homeless duty is confirmed, this means the council has investigated the household's circumstances, and concluded that they are homeless, that they are in priority need, that their homelessness is not intentional, and that they are not ineligible for help under homelessness legislation due to immigration status or any other reason.



What places someone in 'priority need' is legally defined, and may not match up to the need which the homeless person considers themselves to be in. (Definitions of priority need can be found at Appendix 3).

Since 2008 the focus has been on homelessness prevention, early intervention to avoid crises and expanding housing choice for customers. Under a homelessness prevention and housing options approach, a housing options officer will work with a homeless family to find a way of preventing the homelessness by helping the household to remain in their present home; or to find alternative accommodation, taking into account all the alternative housing options which might be available, which they can move to in a planned way.

Often there are other issues not housing related that may affect a household and by tackling the root cause of these issues, it can mean a household being provided with a sustainable housing option that will have benefits and positive outcomes in terms of health, educational attainment and tackling worklessness.

Taking this approach achieves other benefits. By taking into account the full range of housing options available to the household, it makes better use of the limited social housing stock available for letting. Secondly, by either preventing homelessness altogether, or helping the household to move in a planned way – which for many households will still be into a social tenancy, it helps households to avoid the trauma and uncertainty of actually being homeless and spending time in temporary accommodation.

The same approach of exploring all housing options and providing information and help in accessing them is applied to people who are not homeless, or not in priority need.

The council and its partners aspire to develop an 'Enhanced Housing Options' service in the future, aiming to work with the household on the root causes of their housing need, by for example by looking at support issues, or training and skills. The Hills Review identified this as an important area for service development, if social housing is to play its proper role in improving the life-chances of its residents.

### **3.2 Referral to and from other agencies**

Central Bedfordshire Council already has a number of protocols in place with external agencies to capture and protect vulnerable people who may become homeless for reasons other than housing itself. Protocols and referral mechanisms are already in place for Care Leavers, Mental Health and Hospital Discharges, and draft documents are currently under consultation for 16/17 year olds and Drug/Alcohol. The council is currently writing a draft protocol for ex offenders which will go out to consultation in due course.

## **4 The Homelessness Review**

### **4.1 Purpose of the review**

Under the Homelessness Act 2002, local authorities are required to carry out a review of homelessness in the area in order to publish a new homelessness strategy. The review should seek the views of both service users and stakeholders so that the council can identify and map any gaps in the existing service, and to listen to suggestions as to how the service could improve its customer focus and support to the community.

### **4.2 Reviewing existing homelessness strategies**

The homelessness review, carried out in 2009, was particularly important as it needed to combine information and intelligence about homelessness across the former Mid Bedfordshire and South Bedfordshire districts. There were two existing homelessness strategies for these former council areas, so it was necessary to examine and bring together all the past achievements and ensure that any remaining actions were examined and if appropriate carried over to the new Central Bedfordshire strategy.

### **4.3 Findings of the homelessness review**

A detailed homelessness review narrative, and background data, are published at appendix 1. The main points to come out of the review are outlined below.

### **4.4 Homeless acceptances and applications**

Data on approaches to the service from customers in housing need shows a high volume of work coming into the service. In 2009, 1550 households presented to the council's service in housing need and 814 presented to the service run by Aragon Housing Association.

However, data on the number of homeless applications taken, and the number of households accepted as being in priority need homelessness, show the success the service has had in responding to this challenge, with a 70% reduction in acceptances between 2005 and 2009.

The available evidence shows that homelessness in Central Bedfordshire is a challenge, as described in the council's self-assessment, rather than a 'problem', as it was described in our Comprehensive Area Assessment.

The following table shows in more detail how housing need services across Central Bedfordshire responded to households presenting in housing need in

2009. This data suggests that the scale of homelessness is larger in the south of the district, echoing the broader housing need picture presented in the Strategic Housing Market Assessment 2010. At the same time, the data suggests a similar approach being taken by the council and Aragon Housing Association in responding to households in housing need.

Housing need approaches Jan-Dec 09	Total	All priority need acceptances	All homeless applications	All preventions	All advice cases
'North' Central Bedfordshire	814	44	86	66	618
'South' Central Bedfordshire	1550	67	109	112	1262

Of the total approaches, the table shows the number of households who received housing advice; the number of households who were the subject of a successful homelessness prevention; the number of households from whom a full homeless application was taken, and of these the number which were accepted as being in priority need with a full duty owed under homelessness legislation.

## 4.5 Homelessness prevention

The decrease in priority need homelessness acceptances co-incides with the introduction of the housing options and homelessness prevention approach in 2007. During 2008 and 2009, there were 330 homelessness preventions, including some early successes on mortgage rescue. More detail on the number and type of preventions achieved across the two housing options services is published in Appendix 1. The data shows strong performance on this across both housing options service providers in Central Bedfordshire.

This approach has allowed a marked reduction in the use of temporary accommodation across Central Bedfordshire. There were 414 households in temporary accommodation at March 2004 across Central Bedfordshire. This had reduced to 47 households in March 2009.

During 2009-10, there has been a trend for preventions to decrease relative to the number of priority need homeless acceptances. This is indicative of increasing pressure on the system as the recession has progressed, to the point where the ability to prevent homelessness has plateaued.

## **4.6 Profile of homeless households by reason for homelessness**

We have examined data on all priority need homeless acceptances between 2005 and 2009, by the recorded reason for the homelessness. Analysis shows the volume of homelessness decreasing across all recorded reasons over the period.

During the period, the most common reasons for homelessness were the loss of accommodation with family and friends (including non-violent relationship breakdowns), followed by the end of an assured-shorthold tenancy, violence and harassment (including violent relationship breakdown), and mortgage arrears.

The only reason for homelessness which has increased proportionately during this period is mortgage arrears, which is to be expected in the context of the recession.

The 10 cases of homelessness due to mortgage arrears in 2009 are only one part of the effect of the recession on homelessness. For instance, we know that there were 43 evictions for rent arrears from council and Aragon Housing Association tenancies during 2008-09.

There has been a slight increase in the proportion of people becoming homeless due to harassment or violence, which is a concern given service development around harassment and violence in recent years. More in-depth research would help to understand the nature of this problem locally, and identify the correct response.

Service developments include the Sanctuary scheme, which is designed to prevent homelessness where appropriate by installing security measures which allow a victim of domestic violence to remain in their own home safely. In addition two new domestic violence hostels for Central Bedfordshire are due to complete in 2010.

Funding of these schemes is mainly from Supporting People grant, which is increasingly under pressure. We will need to examine with partners how these services will be funded in the longer term.

## **4.7 Profile of homeless households by type of priority need**

Data is also available on the reasons for priority need in these homeless households. It shows that the great majority of priority need homeless households are single parent households, followed by couples with children.

This reflects that children or a pregnant woman in the household automatically places the household in priority need.

The number of homeless households with children, whilst far lower than in previous years, nonetheless highlights the importance of the Think Family Agenda in the way that the service responds to homeless families.

Analysis of priority need shows that after families with children, the next largest group (10% of all acceptances in 2009), are people who have mental ill health or a mental disability, followed by people with a physical disability, people with 'other special need', and people who are vulnerable because they are fleeing violence.

Gaps in the availability of supported housing for young people with mental health problems have been referred to in section 2.10. Further, mental health professionals have raised as issues a general lack of knowledge about mental health amongst housing and other practitioners; a failure on the part of agencies to recognise the impact on mental health of being homeless; and a lack of direct access to emergency housing for people in crisis situations.

The number of people having a priority need because they are care-leavers is low – just 8 people in 5 years. This could be because alternative housing pathways are effectively preventing homelessness in this group. However, better intelligence is needed to clarify housing outcomes for this group.

## **4.8 Ex-offenders and people with drug or alcohol dependency**

Numbers accepted as having a priority need because of alcohol or drug dependency, or because of having been in custody, are particularly low and have been throughout the period 2005-09 – just seven people from these categories in 5 years.

The low number of people in priority need because of alcohol or drug dependency relates to case-law directing that life-style choice is not a relevant factor in establishing priority need.

At the same time, Supporting People needs analysis suggests that there is unmet need for housing and support in both of these groups. We need to collect more reportable data about people in contact with housing options and homelessness services in these circumstances, in order to better understand outcomes for the individuals concerned, and implications for families and the wider community.

## 4.9 Equalities review of homelessness data

### **Ethnicity**

Data collected on the ethnicity of priority need homeless households suggests that the proportion of households found to be in priority need who are recorded as belonging to a Black or Minority Ethnic group (BME) is proportionate to the percentage of BME households in the population according to the 2001 census.

However, this does not mean that there is not ongoing work to be done in ensuring that the service meets needs across ethnic groups. For example, we have no data about the number of Gypsy and Traveller households applying as homeless because the statutory returns do not ask for them to be recorded as an ethnic group, although we know that there is unmet accommodation need amongst local Gypsies and Travellers.

We also believe there to be unmet need for adapted accommodation on sites for older disabled Gypsies and Travellers, which we hope to address by designating an existing council-owned site for this use.

### **Disability**

We do not have reportable data about the volume of homeless demand which comes from people needing housing adapted for a disability, and this needs to be addressed in monitoring systems. However, the available intelligence suggests that the biggest area of unmet need around physical disability is for adapted property in people who are not homeless.

Responding to people with learning difficulties and mental health carries the same equalities obligations around disability. Issues around the ability to respond to homelessness and housing need in these circumstances have been raised in sections 2.10; 4.7 and in the section to come on homelessness and health at 4.14.

### **Sexuality**

We do not collect information about the sexuality of customers approaching the service in housing need and therefore cannot evidence our response to people who are homeless in situations where sexuality is a factor in their situation.

## 4.10 Non-priority need homelessness and repeat homelessness

Conducting the homelessness review has revealed a general difficulty in obtaining reportable information about non-priority need homelessness, and about repeat homelessness.

We need to address this lack of information in order to understand these issues better, in respect of outcomes for individual households and the wider community.

### **4.11 Rough sleeping**

Rough sleeping is perceived not to be a significant problem locally and Central Bedfordshire is not defined as a rough sleeping zone by the CLG. However, intelligence gathering with partners in 2009 showed evidence of an issue with rough sleepers, with a total of 9 rough sleepers identified and a further 4-5 known to have slept rough in Sandy in the previous 12 months. Central Bedfordshire is working in partnership to provide a dedicated winter hostel for 2011.

### **4.12 Young people**

Homelessness in young people (those aged 24 and under) is an area where frontline services perceive unmet need. This links back to earlier discussion, under 'Housing needs', about the difficulties for this group in accessing the private rented sector, and the lack of alternative pathways and options – including support – for this group.

Statutory returns show that in 2009, there were 37 cases of priority need homelessness where the household was headed by someone aged 24 or under. However, analysis of people approaching the council service for housing advice in this age group shows that a further 459 young people came to the council for housing advice in 2009, amongst which will be people who were homeless but not in priority need.

Crucial to our response to vulnerable young people is agreeing a robust protocol with Children's Services for responding to homeless 16 and 17 year olds, which establishes the roles and responsibilities of housing and social care services, embeds good practice on safeguarding, and establishes funding for crash-pad accommodation and supported lodgings.

### **4.13 Safeguarding vulnerable adults and children**

Central Bedfordshire Council has a statutory responsibility, under the Children Act 2004, to safeguarding children from harm, and to make the promotion of their welfare a material consideration in strategic decision making and service development.

The response to homeless 16 and 17 year olds, and to families with children who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, has an important role to play in meeting these obligations. Developing and improving practice around these areas of work is therefore an ongoing strategic priority for homelessness and housing options services.

There is a parallel obligation to safeguard and promote the welfare of vulnerable adults, and to develop and improve practice in respect of vulnerable adults. The obligations to vulnerable adults are not legislative but set-out in good practice guidance published by the Department of Health, (the No Secrets Guidance).

#### **4.14 Homelessness and health**

A study of the health impacts of local homelessness was carried out in 2009 by a partnership of local agencies, including the council and Aragon's housing options and homelessness services. The study was informed by work with focus groups of single homeless people and homeless families.

A multi-agency conference was held in January 2010, hosted by NHS Bedfordshire, to further explore the issues raised in the study.

The focus groups with homeless families raised issues around the impact of homelessness on the health and wellbeing of parents and children, which echo the findings of various academic studies into health outcomes for homeless parents and children.

The study also drew attention to the nature and scale of rough-sleeping locally, its health impacts, and the lack of local hostel provision for rough sleepers.

The role of health professionals in assessing priority need and vulnerability was identified as crucial in ensuring that priority need in homeless people was correctly identified, and in ensuring that considerations of intentionality took mental ill health and learning disability properly into account.

#### **4.15 Benchmarking against other authorities**

A benchmarking exercise has been done to find out how Central Bedfordshire compares to 'near neighbour' authorities in its volume of homeless acceptances per thousand households; its use of temporary accommodation; and the percentage of homelessness applications which result in a full duty acceptance of priority need homelessness.

Central Bedfordshire has a rate of homeless acceptances slightly below average for the near neighbour group, and performs strongly compared to other authorities in its use of temporary accommodation. It seems reasonable to take this as indicative of robust work by the council and Aragon Housing Association's housing need service to meet the local housing need and homelessness challenge, given the housing need and unemployment context outlined in section 2.1. Further analysis of unemployment levels and housing



supply in the near neighbour authorities would help to clarify our position in relation to them.

## **5 Partnership Working**

### **5.1 Relevance and importance of other agencies**

Central Bedfordshire Council cannot resolve the challenges of homelessness alone and must work in partnership to deliver services for homeless people. Partnership working within the council is well developed and we are increasingly aligning our strategies with those of partner organisations to address the needs of homeless people.

In particular, there is a need to maintain and build on the strong partnership that exists with Aragon Housing Association, developed over many years close working with Mid Bedfordshire District Council.

Through our Healthier Communities and Older People Partnership Board, the Strategic Housing Delivery Partnership comprises a broad range of public sector agencies, Housing Associations, private sector housing landlords and other voluntary and community groups who jointly develop strategies and policies for preventing homelessness as well as commissioning Supporting People services, to safeguard vulnerable people and ensure that their needs are met.

### **5.2 Total Place pilot scheme**

Central Bedfordshire Council is a Total Place Pilot and we are working with local partners on Integrated Offender Management and Access to Benefits, both of which have a significant impact on the management of homelessness demand and sustainment of tenancy, and meet policy aims articulated in the Hills Review.

### **5.3 Working with Housing Associations**

Housing Associations are key partners in delivering new affordable housing and other strategic housing aims, and are represented on the Strategic Housing Delivery Partnership with common aims and objectives with the Council. We are working together to review our approach to homelessness to meet the Government's targets on prevention, overcrowding and worklessness.

## 6 Stakeholder and Service User Consultation

### 6.1 Consultation on Homelessness Services

In order to create an effective new Homelessness Strategy, Central Bedfordshire Council has spent the last year consulting with stakeholders and service users about current homelessness demand and how best to meet it. The Council held a series of three initial consultation events; a Stakeholder day, an Overview and Scrutiny meeting for Members, and used a specialist independent agency, Understanding Us, to work with service users – people who had experienced homelessness and had been assisted by the Council.

The following are some of the common suggestions for improvement, from both stakeholders and services alike.

- More effective inter-agency working.
- Education and awareness raising, to include:-
  - Greater education and awareness about homelessness for service users and providers.
  - Training on mental health.
  - Staff training on equalities.
- Consultation with and responsiveness to service users, to include:-
  - Introduction of a housing forum.
  - Developing a range of quality standards.
  - Consulting with diverse client groups.
  - Tailoring the service to the individual's need.
- Service development, to include:-
  - Provision of floating support services and drop-in outreach services.
  - Increasing methods of access to homelessness services.
  - Provision of crash-pads for emergency homeless use.
  - Providing advice in a variety of formats and languages.

The stakeholder's Question and Answer session raised some interesting enquiries about how the new strategy would support vulnerable client groups like those leaving the armed forces, young people and provision of care for rough sleepers. There were also questions about the type and flexibility of support that could be offered to those in housing need. Issues about tenancy sustainment in the private sector were aired by a landlord, and the new Lets Rent scheme was examined in closer detail including the processes that had been drawn up to reduce tenancy failure through behaviour issues or rent arrears.

# 7 Housing Outcomes and Homelessness Strategy priorities

## 7.1 Housing Service objectives

Central Bedfordshire Council has identified a set of ambitious but achievable high level housing outcomes for the next five years. These outcomes aim to maximise housing supply and reduce homelessness demand, and they also feed into the delivery of the wider corporate objectives of the council.

### Corporate objectives

Supporting and caring for an ageing population	Educating, protecting and providing opportunities for children and young people	Managing growth effectively	Creating safer communities	Promoting healthier lifestyles
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### High level housing service outcomes

Needs are met from the supply of decent affordable housing	Housing assets are protected and improved for the benefit of future generations	Accommodation is safe and healthy; accessible and affordably warm
Home and Estates are well managed, instilling neighborhood pride and a thriving community spirit	Homelessness is prevented and crisis situations are avoided and uncommon	Vulnerable people are living independently in suitable accommodation

## **Housing options and homelessness service objectives**

The housing options and homelessness service has as set of objectives which contribute to these high level housing outcomes, and are articulated in the housing service plan for 2010-11. Joint working with Aragon Housing Association ensures that these outcomes and objectives are reflected in a shared approach to housing options and homelessness services across Central Bedfordshire.

In order to give context to the homelessness strategic priorities, some headline housing options and homelessness service objectives are listed below. Several of the actions in the Homelessness Strategy Action Plan are existing work strands for the housing options and homelessness service, and so are reflected in the list below.

- Fully contribute to the inspection process for strategic housing services, building on the inspection outcomes to achieve coherent services across Central Bedfordshire.
- Assess and interpret housing need to develop a strategic perspective which supports the council's enabling approach to deliver new affordable homes.
- Develop a Service Improvement Strategy through a combination of peer review and external inspection.
- Improve the level of customer care and customer satisfaction ratings within the housing needs service.
- Implement the Homelessness Strategy 2010-2015.
- Financial inclusion and money management to increase resilience to financial stress; and prevent people from losing their homes, whether through eviction or repossession, where a crisis has developed.
- Work with partners to increase the number of units of supported housing and move-on accommodation, in particular for young people.
- Deliver two domestic violence refuges in Central Bedfordshire.
- Expand and enhance the current range of housing options to support a comprehensive Lets Rent scheme for private landlords, in partnership through a stronger Landlord Forum.
- Develop our approach around Think Family, maximizing potential for the service to support strong and stable family life.
- Establish through a review process whether services are meeting best practice in safeguarding vulnerable adults and promoting their welfare.
- Establish through a review process whether services are meeting statutory obligations and best practice in safeguarding children and promoting their welfare.
- Promote equality through making available a range of services that reflect and respect the diversity of individuals and their communities.
- Support the development of the Council's Preventative Strategy.
- Develop stronger working relationships with the Mental Health Trust.

## 7.2 Strategic priorities for homelessness

Consideration of homelessness demand, the wider housing need and economic context, and of outcomes from the Homelessness Strategy consultation have led to the development of 6 specific strategic priorities for homelessness, and 4 cross-cutting priorities. 'Health' does not feature as a priority in its own right, but recommendations from the homelessness and health study referred to in the Homelessness Review at section 5.14 are reflected across the various priorities outlined below.

### **1. Harmonise housing options services across Central Bedfordshire, following Local Government Re-organisation.**

The creation of Central Bedfordshire Council on 1 April 2009 was a single milestone in the process of change management that began in the spring of 2008, and will take possibly two more years to complete. The harmonization of former District council responsibilities for housing is progressing well, in terms of a coherent and consistent customer experience.

However, the needs service, encompassing homelessness; options and advice; lettings and temporary accommodation, is managed differently in each of the former District areas. The service is, in structural terms, split, one service being directly managed by the council, the other being managed through contractual arrangements by our partner, Aragon Housing Association.

The council is undertaking a wide ranging strategic housing review, between April and June 2010, to determine its arrangements for its strategic housing approach.

The specific aims of this review are to assess service quality in respect of outcomes for customers, inform service improvement strategy, assess Value for Money, and determine the future direction of service delivery.

In this context, the priority in terms of the Homelessness Strategy is to develop a model of service for Housing Needs that is fit for purpose for the future, in terms of the overall strategic housing approach.

Specific actions for this strategy in respect of service harmonisation include:-

- Agreeing a Service Level Agreement between Central Bedfordshire Council and Aragon Housing Association.
- Develop a robust understanding of accountability between the two organisations in respect of implementing the homelessness strategy.

- Aligning work across the two services to achieve consistent operational service delivery, including service culture, consistency of good quality advice, a consistent range of options available across the district, consistency in levels of staff training and expertise across different circumstances and areas of legislation, and consistency in the content and tone of communications such as letters to applicants.

## **2. Respond effectively to the recession, focusing on financial inclusion.**

The focus of our work around this strategic priority is maintaining our existing focus on the increased provision of expert money advice and homelessness prevention case-working to households at risk of financial crisis.

The council is working in partnership to alleviate the impact of recession on homelessness, financial poverty and its indirect effects of increased cases of domestic violence and crime. Clearly the impact of recession has many negative outcomes for individuals and communities, but by early intervention and targeted homelessness prevention, quality housing advice coupled with good debt and money advice can limit the effects of recession and promote financial inclusion.

Central Bedfordshire Council has successfully accessed funds from the government for Mortgage Rescue and Recession Impact Funding. £16 000 of extra resource was provided by the Government and this money was shared with the Citizens Advice Bureaux, Salvation Army and Luton Rights to support them with the increase in demand for money and debt advice. Part of the funding is being used to raise public awareness of the services available to households and promote better financial inclusion.

A dedicated Homelessness Prevention and Mortgage Rescue Officer is working across Central Bedfordshire with partner agencies, court desks and financial institutions to identify households at high risk of repossession and to target households to prevent mortgage arrears escalating. To date, two households have completed a full mortgage rescue.

There is a dedicated protocol and Service Level Agreement with the Citizens Advice Bureau in Central Bedfordshire to provide dedicated and comprehensive debt and money advice services. Much work has been carried out to strengthen the relationship with the Citizens Advice Bureau and the Salvation Army.

The housing options service continues to provide advice to households to ensure that they are aware of their rights in mortgage or rent arrears cases and to signpost to specialist services. The service also carries out affordability assessments for all clients in financial difficulties with rent or mortgage arrears.

The Housing and Health Study 2009 published by NHS Bedfordshire recommended engaging the Benefits Agency in local homelessness forums, and we will take this recommendation forward in the strategy action plan.

### **3. Work with young people aged 16-24 to meet their needs more effectively.**

Available information suggests that the main causes of homelessness amongst young people are parental eviction and teenage pregnancy. There are also associated issues around domestic violence, substance misuse, intergenerational worklessness, crime and disorder.

There are clearly negative outcomes around health and educational attainment for young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, and more work to be done to create housing pathways which meet needs in this group.

Needs in this group are for accommodation but also for support – tenancy sustainment is perceived as a problem for young people, as they may lack the life-skills to sustain independent living in their own tenancy, particularly if they have left home without receiving financial or practical support from their family to establish their own home.

Present homelessness legislation requires that any 16 or 17 year old made homeless has an automatic priority need for housing assistance. However, recent case law (R (on the application of G)(FC)(Appellant) v London Borough of Southwark (Respondents 2009) has contradicted this by stating that the majority of 16 and 17 year olds made homeless should be considered as 'children' under s20 of the Children Act 1989, and that responsibility for them in a situation where they do not have a home with their family now lies with Children's Services, with input from Housing Services. As a consequence, a protocol is in development with Children's Services in Central Bedfordshire to provide a comprehensive service to maximize the best outcomes for young people in this situation.

A dedicated action plan is being developed for implementation of the protocol. Development of Crash Pads and Supported Lodgings are needed, and we will need to work closely with Children's Services in order to meet these aspirations.

Other homeless young people are not subject to the same legal and funding arrangements. There is a lack of supported hostel accommodation for young people in Central Bedfordshire. Signposts and Mayday Trust provide some supported accommodation in the south but are not able to meet all local needs. In the north, Bedford Housing Link provides a limited amount of accommodation for people with low to medium support needs. However, most young people requiring hostel accommodation who present to Aragon's housing need service in the north are referred to hostels in Bedford Borough.



A significant element of youth homelessness involves young people who are 'sofa-surfers' – people staying with various friends and relatives but lacking a stable home.

Existing floating support services in Central Bedfordshire – support services which are separate from the customer's housing arrangements and delivered to wherever they happen to live – are provided by Bromford Support. They do not have sufficient capacity at present to meet the needs of this group.

There is a specialist Priority and Prolific Offender floating support service based at Luton Probation Service, for Central Bedfordshire clients. However, this is currently funded from a one-off Vigilance Programme grant, and it is felt to be of strategic importance that alternative funding is established in order to maintain this service.

Providing more accommodation and support for this group in the future requires a comprehensive commissioning plan to include all young-people client groups, including those with specific requirements and vulnerabilities, and those who are homeless but not in priority need. Good practice for single people should include supported accommodation in a pathway model with access to suitable move-on accommodation with an element of support.

Immediate actions for improving our response to homelessness within this group include improving the way we use data to understand homelessness in this group, and using the Lets Rent scheme to provide extra capacity for young people, by procuring bed-sit or shared housing in the private rented sector, for which the young people will be eligible for Local Housing Allowance, and providing support.

The council is also looking at making more of its own housing stock available to young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, allied to floating support to sustain the tenancies and promote community safety and neighbourhood sustainability. This will be examined through the asset management review of sheltered housing.

We would also like to carry out focus-group work with young people to gain better, real-world intelligence about needs.

There is an aspiration to develop a foyer scheme for Central Bedfordshire in the future, but Crash Pads and Supported Lodgings are seen as the more immediate investment priorities.

#### **4. Embed the Think Family approach within all homelessness prevention activity and broader interventions to sustain families in permanent settled accommodation.**

Central Bedfordshire Council has adopted the Think Family approach, and the housing options and homelessness service will use this approach to support



the whole family, intervening early where necessary to avoid escalation of problems and improve outcomes for children, young adults and the family as a whole. As a unitary council with a whole systems approach, we will work with other services to improve outcomes by adopting a holistic approach with the following principles:

- No wrong door – contact with any services offers an open door into a system of joined-up support.
- Look at the whole family, taking into account family circumstances.
- Provide tailored and family centered packages of support to families at risk.
- Promote the use of family mediation and extend the scope of the Family Intervention Project.

Housing Renewal Challenge Funding has been secured to fund two Family Intervention Project officers who will be based in the housing service in Central Bedfordshire Council. They will work across tenures with families who present a housing management challenge and/or are at risk of homelessness due to problems with anti-social behaviour.

There is a separate Family Intervention project, hosted by Children's Services, which will work with families on anti-poverty issues. Joint working via the council's Family Intervention Group should ensure that the different Family Intervention Projects complement and support each other.

##### **5. Strengthen Safeguarding Practice for vulnerable adults and children across all aspects of housing options and homelessness prevention.**

Safeguarding requires strategic leadership from the Council and its partners and is a main responsibility of the Council. Put simply, safeguarding is everyone's business and the approach being taken is across the whole Council, to strengthen policy, practice and to achieve better outcomes for people who are at risk of harm or abuse.

In terms of our Homelessness Strategy, the initial imperative is to establish through a review process whether safeguarding concerns are being properly identified, whether appropriate action is being taken to properly investigate all concerns, and to develop further protocols and procedures to support correct practice.

Risk areas include temporary accommodation, for families, for vulnerable adults and also for vulnerable young people. Initial work has been undertaken to risk assess our temporary accommodation from a safeguarding perspective, but meeting this responsibility means ongoing review of activity to ensure that existing procedures are being followed, and are updated to follow good practice developments.

We will co-operate with the development of the notification system between health and housing for families moving in and out of Temporary Accommodation as part of this strand of work.

Joint work with Children's Services around the protocol for homeless 16 and 17 year olds is also crucial to safeguarding these vulnerable young people.

The Housing Needs Service touches on the lives of people who are vulnerable or in crisis and for this reason needs to treat safeguarding practice and systems as an ongoing strategic concern.

Statutory responsibilities to children go further than safeguarding, and require council services to make the promotion of children's welfare a material consideration and service development and strategic decision making. We will review housing options and homelessness services across Central Bedfordshire in order to identify potential to better serve this requirement to promote welfare, in partnership with Children's Services.

This means responding to families who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, in a way which is sensitive to the health and emotional impact on the parents, and works with partner agencies to help parents feel supported.

It also means making sure that housing options and homelessness service practice is supportive of the health and educational needs of children in these families, and links in with relevant partner agencies to achieve this.

In taking this forward, we will implement the Housing and Health study 2009 recommendations to develop multi-agency protocols and working practices for families placed in temporary accommodation, between housing and health, housing and education, and housing and social care services.

## **6. Investigate the particular problems and pathway journeys that are experienced by people with complex needs, including mental health and substance abuse.**

The effects of homelessness, when combined with substance misuse, or mental health problems, or both (dual diagnosis), can impact acutely not just on the individuals and families concerned but also on the wider community.

Evidence from research into health and homelessness shows that the experience of homelessness - in particular rough-sleeping - is likely to exacerbate pre-existing mental health or substance misuse issues, and that these problems also cause poorer physical health.

Feedback from local mental health professionals has highlighted issues around lack of awareness about mental health issues in housing and other practitioners; lack of direct access to emergency housing for people in crisis situations; and a lack of supported housing for young people who are well

enough to leave residential care but require a more supported environment than would be possible within general needs housing.

Work on this area involves better intelligence on the nature and scale of this problem in Central Bedfordshire. This means better information on those presenting to housing options and homelessness services in these types of circumstances. However, it should also be informed by data held by other agencies about housing need in people with mental ill health and drug / alcohol problems. Those with chaotic lifestyles will not necessarily be presenting to housing advice services.

The housing needs service therefore needs to connect more effectively with these services and improve signposting for customers and other agencies.

Needs analysis of housing needs and homelessness from people with drug and alcohol problems will be made available through the developing Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and Supporting People needs analysis. The Homelessness and Health 2009 Study recommended joint commissioning of additional drug and alcohol treatment services in Central Bedfordshire, possibly including residential treatment, pending the outcome of these needs assessments and depending on available funding.

This will inform the development of actions around this strategic priority.

In the meantime, the following positive practice features in the strategy action plan-:

- A mental health and housing forum has been set up. Early activity initiated by the forum has been cross- service training, attended by housing needs and housing estates staff. It is a priority for SEPT that this forum is strengthened and its members are able to influence working practices.
- The mental health and housing forum will start meeting monthly, to look at improving joint working practices, integrating best practice and managing complex and chaotic clients. This will include taking forward the recommendation to use co-ordinated health support to minimise eviction from hostels.
- A Bedfordshire-wide hospital discharge form is in place for all mental health section patients.
- A Bedfordshire-wide hospital discharge form has been developed, to include a housing needs assessment prior to all discharges from hospital.
- The housing and health study 2009, discussed in section 5.14 of the homelessness review, recommended focus groups with rough sleepers and multi-agency working to better understand and respond to this problem. We will explore taking this recommendation further.

Further work will be driven by developing Health Equality Strategy for Central Bedfordshire.

## **7. Strengthen equalities practice across all aspects of the service.**

Actions under this strategic priority include better capture of data on equalities. This data will be used to inform service developments which ensure that vulnerable or hard-to-reach groups can engage with the service, that all client groups are adequately represented and included in the shaping of policies, and that the service provided meets all language, cultural, disability, and other specific needs of the customer.

The strategy aims to tackle the barriers faced by marginalised groups in accessing services, for example Black and Minority Ethnic Groups (including Gypsies and Travellers); lesbian, gay and transgender people; young people; older vulnerable people; people with disabilities; groups marginalized due to substance misuse and those affected by physical or mental health issues. The strategy also aims to capture the housing needs of people living in rural communities who may face issues of overcrowding, rough sleeping, lack of accessibility to support and advice services, and isolation.

Inter-generational poverty, which places those affected as an inherent disadvantage in the housing market, is also recognised as an equalities issue. Good quality housing options services are one of the tools which local authorities should use to address this type of inequality.

Some actions around equalities are in place within the service. All housing needs staff have had specific, specialised training around around safeguarding vulnerable children and adults and responding to domestic violence, with links made to BME survivors groups.

There has been specific mental health training and awareness, and there is a dedicated training plan to roll out continuous training that meets the needs of communities and enables officers to create an environment where marginalized groups will feel at ease in accessing services.

Specific actions to be implemented under this strategic priority are-:

- Ongoing focus on training. For example, all officers will undergo specific training to ensure compliance with the law and regular equality training to recognize the different needs of communities and apply the law in a fair and consistent manner so as not to promote discrimination.
- The formation of a People's Panel to shape policy, which will include policy around housing and services which meet the needs of disabled people and carers.
- A disability audit of all reception points to ensure adequate access to the building and staff.

- The development of an Accessible Housing Register which will better match adapted properties with people requiring the adaptations.
- Assessment of need for adapted accommodation for disabled Gypsies and Travellers.
- Work to ensure that men presenting with domestic violence, and men with dependent children, are treated equitably with women, who are more likely to present in these circumstances.
- Work to ensure that services are fully responsive to lesbian, gay and transgender people, taking into account the particular housing issues related to sexual orientation or gender reassignment that people might experience – for example hate crime or relationship breakdown, and the particular difficulties that people may experience in accessing help and advice in these situations. Targeted analysis and further consultation is required in order to develop these plans further.
- On race and religion, it is vital that data collection is improved and that further training needs are identified, to allow staff to recognise and respond to lesser-known cultural needs.
- Work to develop our ability to give housing options and homelessness advice to Gypsies and Travellers, which takes cultural factors into account.
- Consideration of closer joint working between health professionals and housing in consideration of priority for housing, priority need and intentionality, where physical and mental ill health and disability are relevant factors.

**8. Within all the above priorities, it is imperative that the council makes best use of private sector accommodation.**

We have developed the Lets Rent initiative in partnership with local private sector landlords. We will continue working closely with them to make the launch in March 2010 a success, and to further develop the role of the Landlord Forum as an arena for feedback and consultation, and a forum at which the council and landlords can develop strategy around the private sector in partnership.

Separate monthly meetings will be held with all landlords who are Lets Rent partners.

**9. Sharing awareness and working in partnership with the community and between partner agencies.**

The Council recognises that much more needs to be done to engage local groups and to promote the importance of homelessness prevention within the community, and to work in partnership with them to tackle homelessness and housing need. This aim cuts across all the strategic priorities. The

Homelessness Strategy Action Plan contains a number of actions to progress, as follows-:

- Service development, to include-
  - Dedicated officer to promote mortgage rescue scheme.
  - Developing work with the landlord forum, particularly around Local Housing Allowance administration and the new Lets Rent scheme.
- Consultation with service users, to include-
  - Setting up a panel of service users for consultation on policy and procedure.
  - Creation of a specialist people's panel dealing with housing and homelessness issues.
  - Creation of a local homelessness stakeholder forum.
- Training and awareness raising, to include-
  - Promotion and publicity of the Lets Rent scheme.
  - Monthly advice training for all tenant liaison officers.
  - Monthly Choice Based Lettings awareness training for frontline agencies and voluntary groups.

## **10. Tenancy sustainment**

The need to prevent homelessness by sustaining tenancies cuts across all strategic priorities. Particular actions around tenancy sustainment to be included in the Homelessness Strategy Action Plan are:

- Further improvements to the Choice Based Lettings scheme.
- Training on money advice for tenant liaison officers.
- Continue funding partner agencies such as CAB to give specialist housing and money advice.

# **8 Implementing the Strategy**

## **8.1 Strategy action plan**

The Homelessness Strategy Action Plan incorporates any remaining actions from the existing Homelessness Strategies, and identifies new actions for the next five years. The full Plan can be found at Appendix Two.

Central Bedfordshire Council produces a monthly **Performance Information and Business Intelligence** report, currently under review for further improvements to the style and format. The Council also collates a housing baseline profiling report that provides detailed data on homelessness activity and prevention and housing supply status.

The Council will use its performance monitoring framework to examine how closely homelessness and housing need is being met and to ensure that resources are used efficiently and productively, and in the right areas. More details of this can be found in the Strategy's accompanying Action Plan.

## 8.2 Dedicated resources

The Housing Options team has been refocused by the introduction of specialist officer roles for specific areas of prevention such as youth homelessness, mortgage rescue and the Lets Rent scheme.

A review of strategic housing services in Central Bedfordshire will begin shortly after publication of this strategy, assessing Value for Money and service delivery against the Audit Commission Key Lines of Enquiry.

This review will produce an in-depth understanding of the resources available to implement the strategy, against which the action plan will be reviewed.

We already know that we cannot address all the issues identified in the homelessness review within the likely available resources in the life of this strategy. In particular we have identified three areas which will not be a priority for investment in the foreseeable future.

We know that there is unmet need from people who are homeless but not in priority need, evidenced by the high level of approaches to housing need services. We aim to achieve a deeper understanding of this issue, in order to develop our ability to give good quality, low-cost information and advice to people in this situation, both within the service and by joint working with the corporate customer service team. However, we do not expect to be able to invest in new accommodation and support services specifically catering to this group.

We recognise a need for more move-on and supported accommodation across need groups, but do not anticipate having additional resources to invest in this area. However, we will look to refocus and reprioritize existing services and the resources that pay for them where possible. For instance, we intend to make more use of existing council housing stock to meet housing needs in young people, tied in to our asset management review of sheltered housing.



Finally, investment in services to tackle worklessness, training and employment is not a priority for this strategy. However, this area may emerge as a priority for investment over the coming three to five years along Total Place principles. In the meantime, we aim to develop closer joint working with Job Centre Plus, within existing resources, to ensure that customer interactions with housing services and Job Centre Plus complement each other as far as possible.

### **8.3 Customer feedback and satisfaction**

The Housing Needs service has already begun to record and monitor customer satisfaction levels through their mini satisfaction survey at the main reception desk. The Council's set of service standards have also been included in all the service's new literature and advice leaflets.

Within the next five years, the Housing Needs service will continue to expand its customer satisfaction monitoring by;

- implementing an annual postal survey to all homeless and housing register applicants
- delivering a set of specific customer service training sessions to all staff
- setting up a panel of service users to consult and review policy and procedural changes
- conducting an annual review of Members Enquiries and complaints
- ensuring that customer care is a standard item for discussion at all team and staff one to one meetings

### **8.4 Reviewing the strategy**

This strategy has been developed in the context of a recession, and an unpredictable socio-economic future, and ahead of a detailed Value for Money review of strategic housing services which will inform the resources available for its implementation.

Further, the Council is currently undertaking an organisational review project known as DECATS (Delivering Efficient Corporate and Transactional Services), which aims to promote standardization and remove fragmented or duplicated processes, in order to achieve efficiencies. This project may also have implications for housing options service delivery and the resources available for it.

In the light of this, we will review the strategy in summer 2012 to ensure that it remains fit for purpose going forward.