

## **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMENTS ON DRAFT HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY**

The Social Care, Health and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee received a presentation on the 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2010, which set out the key themes and priorities of the Draft Homelessness Strategy. The Committee were advised that Central Bedfordshire Council is required to review homelessness in its area and publish a Homelessness Strategy, based on the review, every five years.

The draft strategy addressed the current situation in Central Bedfordshire, setting out six strategic priorities, and four cross cutting priorities. The Committee supported the strategic direction and the priorities that are proposed, in what was described as a “comprehensive document”. However, the committee requested that the points raised during discussion, be incorporated within the strategy. These comments and discussion points are reflected under the headings below.

### **Harmonisation of the Needs Service across Central Bedfordshire**

The Committee questioned the extent of progress to harmonise the Housing Needs service across Central Bedfordshire and were assured that staff from the Council and Aragon Housing Association were building strong relationships; are sharing and developing best practice; and, despite uncertainty over future provision in Central Bedfordshire, staff are committed to creating a coherent, seamless service across Central Bedfordshire. This will be determined through the Review of Strategic Housing services, which includes advice and assistance from the Audit commission.

### **How do we perform compared with other areas?**

Following the Committee meeting, further work was undertaken to evaluate performance compared with the council’s Audit Commission comparator group. Specifically the Committee asked for a comparison of Homelessness acceptances; number of Homeless cases prevented and also numbers of households living in temporary accommodation, and for the comparison to be undertaken on the basis of “per 1000 of population, so that the comparison was realistic. The results of this work are set out in the Homelessness Review at Appendix 1 of the Strategy.

### **Choice Based Lettings (CBL)**

A number of questions were posed that related to Choice Based lettings and the availability of accommodation, to meet housing need. Specifically, there was a challenge as regards households being accommodated in accommodation that comprised, for example, 2 bedrooms, where the household is considered to be adequately housed, in terms of their essential needs being met. This commonly results in families being placed in band 4, and effectively unable to compete for properties that are more spacious.

This issue was discussed in terms of the housing supply in Central Bedfordshire which is predominantly 2 bedroom in the areas of Dunstable, Houghton Regis and Leighton Linlade, but predominantly 3 bedroom in the North area of Central Bedfordshire, dominated by Aragon Housing Association's stock.

This issue will dominate local housing supply in the medium term and will not be addressed through the homelessness Strategy. However, the issue is key to the Council's new Housing strategy and must be addresses in term sof the delivery of new affordable housing.

A second question posed related to the difficulty and complexity of participating in the CBL Scheme, known as Bedfordshire Homefinder. Specifically Members asked whether vulnerable people are supported, and were assured that vulnerable people are identified at an early stage and are supported through the process.

However, the CBL Scheme will be evaluated after 1 year of operation, specifically to examine outcomes; participation in the Scheme; and whether housing need is met. This evaluation will be reported to the Committee, which will have an opportunity to review the Lettings Policy for Central Bedfordshire and to review operation of the Scheme..

### **Accessible Housing Register**

A question was asked as when the Accessible Housing register would be operational. It was confirmed that it will be implemented and operational by December 2010. Concern was also raised that new homes being developed are not being built to Lifetime Homes standard. It was confirmed that the concern will be raised with the Sustainable Communities Directorate.

### **Young People**

A comment was made in the context of the Think Family approach, that young people should be encouraged to attend Life Skills classes and that this general point should be developed more fully within the Think Family approach. This point will be communicated to the appropriate lead for developing the Think family approach, in the Childrens' Directorate.

### **Tenant Conference**

There was a specific question about feedback from a recent Tenant Conference, held in Central Bedfordshire. The feedback from the conference will be reported to the Committee.

### **Credit Union**

Members sought clarification as to progress and success of the Credit Union. This will be reported to a future meeting.

### **Citizens Advice and Money Advice Generally**

Members asked specifically how much of the Homelessness grant had been paid to the CAB's in Central Bedfordshire. Members are advised that this is £16,000, distributed on an even basis between CABs in Central Bedfordshire. Members also raised concern that the strategy relies on a strengthened partnership with CAB; but Members are concerned that CAB's are not financially robust and, especially at a time of recession, are facing increasing demands which they are not able to meet.

There is general concern that the Homelessness Strategy relies heavily upon the work of the CAB's without there being a commitment of resources to support CAB activity, in particular in terms of specialist money advice services. The point is noted and will be kept under review, in terms of how the Homelessness grant is used. Offices recognise that the issue should be raised in terms of the Service Level Agreement. The action is now specified in the Homelessness Strategy Action Plan, which the AD Housing will take responsibility for.

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19<sup>th</sup> March 2010.