

ROTHERHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL – REPORT TO MEMBERS

1. Meeting:	Improving Places Select Commission
2. Date:	Wednesday 1st July 2015
3. Title:	Progress of the Scrutiny Review – Homelessness Strategy
4. Directorate	Housing, Asset Management and Neighbourhood Services

5. Summary

5.1 The Scrutiny Review of the Homelessness Strategy was undertaken by Improving Places Select Commission. The review took place between August 2013 and January 2014 and recommendations were considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board, at its meeting on 25th April 2014, and were then reported to Cabinet on 21st May 2014.

5.2 The report was welcomed and provided an opportunity to raise awareness and also explain homelessness procedures. As the review coincided with the renewal of the Homelessness Strategy 2014 to 2018 recommendations from the review were incorporated into the Homelessness Strategy Action Plan 2014 - 2018.

5.3 This report provides an update of progress on the ten recommendations made by the Improving Places Select Commission.

6. Recommendations:

6.1 That the Select Commission receives and accepts this progress report

7. Background and Proposals:

7.1 The focus of the Improving Places Select Commission Scrutiny Review on the Homelessness Strategy was focussed on improving information for customers who are faced with homelessness and the availability of temporary accommodation. The recommendations from the Improving Places Select Commission Scrutiny Review are outlined below:-

- That the Homelessness Section should undertake work to raise public awareness of the '28 day rule'. Specific awareness raising/training should be undertaken with elected members to increase understanding of the implications of this criteria.
- Information and trends regarding rent arrears in relation to Welfare Reform "bedroom tax" should be monitored and reported to members at the Improving Places Select Commission meeting on a half yearly basis by the Homelessness Manager.
- The Private Sector Housing Officer to explore the option of issuing a newsletter to private sector landlords to promote the benefits of the private rented sector and how they can contribute to reducing homelessness. **Cabinet amended this recommendation to offer an alternative method of communication with private sector landlords**
- Improve communications between the Homelessness Team and private sector landlords via the Private Sector Housing Officer, holding regular meetings and being proactive in reducing the number of empty properties.
- The Homelessness Section continue to explore potential partnership options to address the lack of bed space provision, particularly for women and young people who need additional support.
- Explore the above and other potential opportunities for joint service provision sub regionally via the South Yorkshire Leader's meeting.
- Develop a coherent, cross service approach to tackling empty properties within the Rotherham Borough utilising existing resources.
- Consider ways to provide tenancy support to private sector tenants within Rotherham.
- The Homelessness Manager to arrange implementing the suggested improvements to the crash pad provision.
- The Strategic Housing Investment Team to look at building provision to both prevent and tackle homelessness in future regeneration schemes at the planning stages and consider ways that this could incorporate an extension to the HOPE project or other similar projects.
- For the Council to explore how it invests in property and assets with the aim of reducing homelessness and out of authority placements.

7.2. Progress has been made in accordance with the recommendations agreed by the Scrutiny Review Group and detailed as detailed in appendix 1. Of the eleven

recommendations eight have been completed, one is no longer viable and the remaining two will be completed by March 2016.

8. Finance

8.1 The Scrutiny review acknowledged the need for recommendations to be contained within existing resources and in the main there were no financial implications arising from this report.

8.2 The emergency temporary accommodation “crash pads” service is self-financing, and as such there is no budget allocation from the General Fund. It relies wholly on the crash pad nightly charge for income. The income generated from the charge covers all staffing, furniture and operational costs. The scheme has been a financial success with no losses ever been made, this is mainly due to how the scheme was originally created and the tight financial monitoring that has taken place within the service.

8.3. Focusing on homelessness prevention will facilitate a cost saving to the Council as it is likely to create a reduction in the temporary units of accommodation currently needed for homelessness families. In Rotherham we utilise our own temporary accommodation (crash pads) which is our preferred option, and can be managed more effectively. It is more economical than other options used by other authorities, e.g. bed and breakfast, and was highlighted as a beacon of good practice in the recent Gold Standard inspection, and will be shared with other local authorities.

8.3 The majority of the training will be carried out in house by the Homelessness Manager. Additional training and support is provided by National Housing Advice Shelter, Homeless Link and Department Communities and Local Government Practitioner Support Service.

8.4 Prevention activity is mainly financed through the homelessness grant which is set at £91589.63 for 2015/16.

9. Risks & uncertainties

9.1 We are already seeing an increase in the numbers of people contacting the service, who are homeless or threatened with homelessness, and we have to prioritise the work of the team accordingly. This is mainly due to the following:

- Complex lifestyles and the increasing need for support prior to and after rehousing
- Changes to Welfare Reform
- Mortgage and Rent Arrears

9.2 The impact of the changes in Welfare Reform are also increasing the demand on the housing options service and advice is being sought by people feeling that they may be under threat of homelessness due to these changes.

9.3 The prospect of the introduction of Universal Credit also poses a risk, as some people have never had to manage the type of income they will receive in the future, and do not have the necessary budgeting skills, which could result in household charges being neglected and an increased risk of eviction and the threat of homelessness.

9.4 Further changes to welfare benefit, housing benefit regulations and age eligibility, recently suggested by government and announced in the Queens speech.

10. Policy and Performance Agenda Implications

10.1 The Homelessness Strategy has considered the impending changes to the Council's Housing Allocations Policy and also contributes to three of the ten commitments within the Housing Strategy:

- Commitment 1 – we will deliver Council Housing that meets people's needs
- Commitment 6 – We will help people to access the support they need
- Commitment 9 – We will help to improve Rotherham's private rented sector

10.2 **Gold Standard Challenge** - In March 2015 a review of the housing options service was conducted as recommended by the National Practitioners Support Service, funded by the Department of Communities and Local Government. The review was a local authority sector led peer review scheme, designed to help local authorities deliver more efficient and cost effective homelessness prevention services. The challenge follows a 10 step continuous improvement approach that starts with a pledge for local authorities aspiring to 'strive for continuous improvement in front line housing services' and culminates in an application for the Gold Standard Challenge.

10.3 The review was successful and we are now able to apply for the 10 challenges to achieve Gold Standard in front line housing services. A Continuous Improvement Plan has been developed following the review and will complement the recommendations of the Scrutiny Review Group.

11. Background papers

- Homelessness Act 2002
- RMBC's Housing Strategy
- Homelessness Strategy 2014 -2018
- RMBC's Housing Allocations Policy 2008, revised October 2014
- Localism Act 2011

12. Contact details

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