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**Report of the Head of Scrutiny Support and Member Development**

**Scrutiny Board (Neighbourhoods and Housing)**

**Date: 11<sup>th</sup> October 2006**

**Subject: Late item – Homelessness Strategy**

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**Electoral Wards Affected:**

**Specific Implications For:**

Equality and Diversity

Community Cohesion

Narrowing the Gap

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**1.0 Introduction**

1.1 The agenda for Scrutiny Board (Neighbourhoods and Housing) includes an item on the Homelessness Strategy which was identified as a late item.

1.2 Attached is the Homelessness Strategy report, which is a late item due to the report not being available at the time of agenda publication.

**2.0 Recommendation**

2.1 The Board is requested to accept this report as a late item.



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**Report of the Neighborhoods and Housing Department**

**Scrutiny Board (Neighbourhoods and Housing)**

**Date: 11 October 2006**

**Subject: Leeds Homelessness Strategy 2006-2010**

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**Electoral Wards Affected:**

**Specific Implications For:**

Ethnic minorities

Women

Disabled people

Narrowing the Gap

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**Executive Summary**

Under the 2002 Homelessness Act Leeds City Council has a legal duty to develop a Homelessness Strategy for the city. The Council first developed a city wide Homelessness Strategy in 2003 to cover the period up to 2006. The latest strategy will cover the period up to 2010.

Significant progress has been made in terms of responding to homelessness in the city since 2003. Homeless Acceptances have been reduced by over 3,000 per annum as the Council focuses on opportunities to prevent homelessness. Homeless prevention initiatives have been established such as the Youth Mediation Service and the Private Sector Lettings Scheme to address the main causes of homelessness in the city such as parental eviction and loss of private tenancies. The Council no longer uses bed and breakfast accommodation except in exceptional circumstances and then for no longer than a three weeks – the legal maximum length of placement is six weeks.

However, it is recognised that significant challenges still remain. The Department of Communities and Local Government have set all Councils a target to reduce the number of households placed in temporary accommodation by 50% by March 2010. There is no doubt that this will be an extremely demanding target especially in light of the continuing reduction in the number of lettings made through the Leeds ALMOs and other social landlords. The new Homelessness Strategy sets out the Council's plans to meet this target through an increased focus on opportunities to prevent homelessness and by increasing the range of housing options available to homeless households including through the private rented sector.

## **1.0 Purpose Of This Report**

- 1.1 To give Scrutiny Board members information relating to the key challenges facing the Council and partners in relation to tackling homelessness and housing need in the city and how the Homelessness Strategy proposes to address these challenges.

## **2.0 Background Information**

- 2.1 The 2002 Homelessness Act places a duty on all Councils to develop a Homelessness Strategy by the end of June 2003. The first Leeds Homelessness Strategy was published in June 2003 and covered the period up to 2006.
- 2.2 The obligation to develop a Homelessness Strategy reflects the government's drive for authorities to focus on their core strategic role rather than primarily being a provider of services.
- 2.3 The 2002 Homelessness Act also sets out the legal duties owed by authorities to homeless households.
- 2.4 All authorities have a duty to make appropriate enquiries into the circumstances of a household who approach them requesting assistance because they are homeless or threatened with homelessness. The purpose of these enquiries is to establish whether any housing duty is owed to the household.
- 2.5 If it is established that a household is eligible for assistance, unintentionally homeless and in priority need then the authority will have a duty to secure suitable temporary accommodation for the household for an indefinite period of time. This duty can only be discharged in certain circumstances – the most common of which is the offer of a permanent tenancy through a social landlord such as the Leeds ALMOs.
- 2.6 Where a household is found to be ineligible for assistance, intentionally homeless or not in priority need then the authority will still owe a duty to provide advice and assistance to help them secure appropriate accommodation. In certain circumstances this may include securing suitable temporary accommodation such as for a household with dependent children who have been found to be intentionally homeless.
- 2.7 Whilst the authority does not have to provide the temporary accommodation the duty to ensure that suitable accommodation is secured can not be outsourced to another organisation.
- 2.8 The Leeds Homelessness Strategy 2006-2010 is essentially a follow on from the first Leeds Homelessness Strategy.
- 2.9 One of the key challenges of the Leeds Homelessness Strategy 2003-2006 was to address the significant rise in the number of homeless acceptances made by the Council. In 1999/2000 the Council accepted a housing duty to 1932 households; by 2002/2003 this figure had risen to 4964 households.
- 2.10 The increase in homeless acceptances made resulted in an accompanying increase in the number of homeless households placed in temporary accommodation by the Council to fulfill its legal duties. At the end of June 2003 the Council was placing

548 households in temporary accommodation on a nightly basis; by the end of March 2004 this figure had risen to 748 households.

- 2.11 The reasons for the increase in acceptances were multifold: the broadening of the statutory safety-net in the 2002 Homelessness Act so that more homeless households were treated as having a priority need, the rise in house prices in the city which meant that less households were able to buy their own homes, the contraction in the social housing stock which led to a reduction in social housing lets and demographic changes such as the increase in one adult households.
- 2.12 However, the first Homelessness Strategy recognised that the increase in homeless acceptances was also partly a result of a lack of focus on homeless prevention opportunities.
- 2.13 A priority action in the first strategy was to establish the main causes of homelessness in the city. These were identified as domestic violence or other hate crime, parental eviction and loss of private rented accommodation. Homeless prevention initiatives were established to reduce the incidence of homelessness against these reasons.
- 2.14 A mediation service was established in partnership with a local youth agency, Archway, which aims to help young people reconcile disputes with their parents so that hopefully they can return to live in the parental home. A Private Sector Lettings Scheme was established to help homeless households secure accommodation with accredited landlords where a bond was not required.
- 2.15 The increased focus on homeless prevention options had a significant impact on the incidence of homelessness in the city. In 2005/2006 the Council accepted a housing duty to 1868 households, a reduction of over 3000 applications from the figure for 2003/2004. By the end of March 2006 the number of households placed in temporary accommodation had been reduced to 502 households. The Council had also by this point ended the use of bed and breakfast placements for families, except in emergency situations and then for no longer than three weeks. The statutory requirement is to not make such placements except in emergency situations and then for no longer than six weeks.
- 2.16 On the basis of the achievements made in tackling homelessness the Council was awarded Regional Champions status by the DCLG for 2005/2006.

### **3.0 Main Issues**

- 3.1 The Leeds Homelessness Strategy 2006-2010 aims to build on the achievements made since 2003 but recognises the current key challenges facing the authority and its partners in terms of tackling homelessness in the city.
- 3.2 These challenges are the government agenda in relation to homelessness and housing market trends in the city.
- 3.3 The DCLG have set a target for all authorities to reduce the number of households placed in temporary accommodation by 50% by the end of March 2010. The baseline position for this target was the number of households placed in temporary accommodation at the end of December 2004. At that point 521 households were placed in temporary accommodation and therefore Leeds needs to reduce this figure to 261 in order to achieve the target.

- 3.4 The new Homelessness Strategy recognises that this will be an extremely demanding target especially within the context of housing market trends in the city. The contraction in the supply of social housing and improvements in tenancy sustainment levels have meant that there are less social housing units available to let. In 2001 9927 lettings were made by Leeds City Council; by 2005 this figure had been reduced to 5580. It is forecast that the impact of a range of large scale regeneration projects will mean that approximately 3500 lettings will be made in 2010.
- 3.5 The new Homelessness Strategy recognises that the reduction in available homes to let through the Leeds ALMOs will make it more difficult for the Council to fulfill its legal duties to homeless household. There is a significant risk that this could lead to households needing to stay in temporary accommodation for longer periods and therefore make it difficult for the Council to reduce the number of households in temporary accommodation.
- 3.6 The offer of permanent accommodation through one of the Leeds ALMOs has traditionally been the main way that the Council has discharged its housing duty to homeless households. However, the new Homelessness Strategy recognises that alternative routes out of homelessness will need to be identified to compensate for the reduction in ALMO lettings.
- 3.7 The new Homelessness Strategy also recognises that ALMO managed accommodation should be potentially available to all applicants who are in housing need or require rehousing. A homeless application should not be the only route to secure social housing. It is also recognised that having a concentration of vulnerable households in social housing will be counter-productive in relation to fostering sustainable mixed communities. Currently, approximately 40% of ALMO lettings are made to homeless households. This is considered to be a reasonable balance in terms of the potentially competing pressures of fulfilling legal duties to homeless households and making social housing accessible to a wide range of households.
- 3.8 The new Homelessness Strategy proposes to supplement the number of ALMO lettings made to homeless households by increasing the number of private sector lettings made to homeless households. These will be done as either a homeless prevention option (household decides to take up the offer of a tenancy as an alternative to going into temporary accommodation) or to discharge the housing duty owed. In both instances, the household will have made a personal choice that the swift offer of a private tenancy is preferable to waiting for a social housing let.
- 3.9 The Homelessness Strategy will dovetail with the Affordable Housing Strategy, which is seeking to increase the supply of housing within the city.
- 3.10 The Council currently assists approximately 20 households per month to secure a private tenancy. The new Homelessness Strategy aims to increase this figure to approximately 40 per month – this will in part compensate for the reduction in ALMO lettings. The Council is not in a position to offer private landlords a bond payment or guarantee. However, accredited landlords are offered direct payment of housing benefit for the first twelve months of any tenancy. Housing benefit is also paid at a flat rate and this ensures that claims are processed more swiftly. Landlords have been attracted to take homeless households on as tenants through the offer of these incentives.

- 3.11 The new Homelessness Strategy also recognises that it will be important to maximise the number of lettings made to homeless households by local RSLs. The Council has benefited from increasingly comprehensive and robust information relating to ALMO lettings. This has been used to inform the development of the new strategy, to hold the ALMOs to account in relation to the Council's duties to homeless households and to make projections on the likely level of lettings that will be available to homeless households in the forthcoming years. However, this level of detail is not currently available in relation to homeless lettings by specific local RSLs. Therefore the new strategy has been unable to establish the degree to which local RSLs are contributing towards tackling homelessness in the city. Securing more detailed information by RSL is therefore a key priority of the new strategy.
- 3.12 The main route that the Council can use to rehouse homeless households through local RSLs is nomination agreements. Work is currently underway (led by the Strategic Landlord Section) to improve the existing nomination arrangements with local RSLs with an emphasis on stressing the need for higher nomination outcomes to meet the Council's strategic housing objectives (including tackling homelessness) but also to promote the use of the choice based lettings system and the common housing register. Feedback from local RSLs has been broadly positive so it seems likely that partnership arrangements between the Council and local RSLs in terms of tackling homelessness can be improved.
- 3.13 The new Homelessness Strategy is in many ways a follow on from the objectives and actions set out in the first strategy. It is recognised that a significant gap in provision has been the development of homeless prevention initiatives for households who are encountering domestic violence or other hate crime. Households who approached the Council requesting assistance because of these reasons were generally placed in temporary accommodation where they would wait until an offer of permanent accommodation was made.
- 3.14 There is no doubt that such assistance was right for many customers (and will continue to be so for many households in the future) but it did not cater for households who wished to remain in their own home. The transfer of a household to temporary accommodation in another part of the city meant that families had difficulty accessing existing health care and school placements and became estranged from existing support networks. The lack of assistance to help households maintain their existing accommodation also impacted on social landlords such as the Leeds ALMOs that would lose rental income whilst the property was void and incur costs associated with securing and re-letting the property.
- 3.15 Funding of £200,000 has been obtained from the DCLG to establish a Sanctuary scheme in the city. This will involve the installation of a range of security measures and an emergency alarm to enable the household encountering violence or hate crime to stay in their own home if that is their choice. Households will not be compelled to take up this offer, if they do not feel safe they will be offered alternative temporary accommodation. A partnership between the Council and West Yorkshire Police is integral to the scheme: the police Domestic Violence Coordinators will, in conjunction with the household, determine what security measures are required, and the police will also be responsible for responding to emergency alarm calls. Households will also be able to access housing support services commissioned through the Supporting People programme.
- 3.16 It is envisaged that approximately 240 households will have their homelessness prevented per year through the installation of Sanctuary security measures. The

DCLG funding is for one year but it is envisaged that the scheme can be funded in the long-term through savings in the temporary accommodation budget resulting from the projected fall in temporary accommodation numbers.

- 3.17 The new Homelessness Strategy includes the temporary accommodation move on targets which have been established by the Leeds Supporting People team. The Supporting People programme has been subject to significant reductions in budget over the last three years. It is therefore essential that the finite number of supported housing units that have been commissioned are used as effectively as possible. There is no doubt that the targets set in the new Homelessness Strategy are demanding but supported housing providers need to be striving to achieve them. Supported housing providers have a clear responsibility to be assisting their clients to make a housing application; to ensure they have been assessed correctly in relation to priority to be rehoused; to give realistic housing advice relating to rehousing options; to be assisting clients to register bids for properties; but also to be considering other housing options such as those provided by RSLs and the private rented sector. It is also essential that supported housing providers are assisting clients to challenge negative decisions that have been made relating to their housing applications.
- 3.18 The Homelessness Strategy has been developed to complement the Supporting People strategy by focusing on the need to prevent homelessness wherever possible. Progress on both strategies will be reported to the Leeds Housing Partnership via the Fair Access Strategic Working Group.
- 3.19 The DCLG measure the effectiveness of homeless prevention services partly by monitoring the number of homeless acceptances made by each authority. However, the new strategy recognises that such an approach could be problematic in that households could be denied access to services as a means of avoiding taking a homeless application.
- 3.20 A clear priority of the new Homelessness Strategy is to ensure that an increased focus on homeless prevention options coincides with enhanced standards of service in the provision of housing advice.
- 3.21 Homeless households are legally entitled to request a review of any decision relating to their housing application that is 'against their interest': they have been found to be intentionally homeless, ineligible for assistance or not in priority need. The review of homelessness (which was a precursor to the development of the strategy) identified that only 293 applicants who received a negative homeless decision in 2005 (2294 in total) exercised their right to request a review. This is clearly a low figure and does suggest that many households are unaware of their rights or are unable to independently challenge a decision. The Council is committed to ensuring that the decisions it makes relating to homeless applications are legally robust. It is therefore a clear priority of the new strategy to significantly increase the proportion of households who are exercising their right to review. This will be done by ensuring that households are given clear information on why decisions have been made but also working in partnership with legal and housing advocates who can assist households to request a review.
- 3.22 Housing applicants also have the right to request a review of a decision to exclude them from the housing register on the basis of their 'unacceptable behaviour'. In Leeds this is known as a suitability assessment and the actual assessment is carried out by the Leeds ALMOs on behalf of the Council. The review of

homelessness has identified that 825 households are excluded from the Leeds Housing Register on the basis of their unacceptable behaviour.

3.23 Other agency feedback on the draft strategy has identified this as a significant issue. Excluding someone from the Leeds Housing Register might well work for the housing office/local community where that customer was residing but ultimately that household will need to be housed somewhere and in all likelihood the Council will continue to have some form of housing duty towards them. The new Homelessness Strategy has set a target to reduce the number of households who are excluded from the Register by 50%. It is felt that the suitability assessment is not always carried out in a legally robust way and consequently decisions are often overturned when the customer seeks a review. However, when the test has been applied appropriately stakeholders such as supported housing providers have a key role in providing support that addresses the behaviour that has resulted in the household being excluded. Suitability assessments also impact on the supported housing sector as it invariably results in the organisation having difficulty in helping the customer to access longer term accommodation. The Homelessness Strategy identifies a clear need to work in partnership with colleagues within the Community Safety division to address anti-social behaviour. Approximately 50% of households excluded from the Housing Register have dependent children and therefore this issue is a key priority within the Every Child Matters agenda.

3.24 The Homelessness Strategy has identified that there are specific issues relating to homelessness within Black and Minority Ethnic communities. BME households are disproportionately likely to make a homeless application but also to have a negative homeless decision. This raises a number of issues including whether wider socio-economic trends relating to poverty and social exclusion mean that BME households are more likely to experience homelessness. An undoubted priority is the need to examine the reasons why BME households are more likely to receive a negative decision and certainly to link this in to actions relating to assisting vulnerable households to request a review of a negative decision. The Leeds Housing Partnership have identified homelessness amongst BME communities as being a key priority for action and intend to commission further research into this issue.

## **4.0 Conclusions**

4.1 The Council and its partners will face significant challenges over the next four years in relation to meeting the targets that have been set out in the new strategy. The key target that has been included in the strategy is that to reduce the use of temporary accommodation. The continuing reduction in lettings from the Leeds ALMOs does mean that this and other targets set out in the strategy will be extremely demanding. However the increased focus on homeless prevention opportunities and broadening the range of housing options available to households are the key actions that need to be taken in order to meet the strategic objectives. However at the same time the strategy recognises the need to promote the rights of households who have become or are threatened with homelessness.

## **5.0 Recommendations**

5.1 To note the contents of the report.



