

CITY OF PLYMOUTH



Interim Report on the Homelessness and Advice Service Review

Housing and Economic Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Panel – Select Committee

August 2004

‘Overview and Scrutiny is potentially the most exciting and powerful element of the entire Local Government Modernisation process. It places Members at the heart of policy-making and at the heart of the way in which Councils respond to the demands of modernization. In addition, Overview and Scrutiny is the mechanism by which Councils can achieve active community leadership, good governance and by which Councillors can become powerful and influential politicians’.

**Office of the Deputy Prime Minister :- ‘The development of Overview and Scrutiny in Local Government’.
September 2002.**

CITY OF PLYMOUTH

Portfolio and Cabinet Member: Housing Services
Councillor King

CMT Member: Head of Performance and Policy

Subject: Homelessness and Advice Service Review

Committee: Housing and Economic Regeneration OSP
Overview and Scrutiny Commission

Date: 8th September, 2004
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Part: I

Executive Summary:

The purpose of this report is to submit recommendations to the Housing and Economic Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Panel and the Overview and Scrutiny Commission following meetings of the Select Committee responsible for the purpose of reviewing the current Homelessness and Advice Service.

Corporate Plan 2004-2007

This report links to the social exclusion objectives of the Corporate Plan 2004-2007 of -

- (a) trying to prevent homelessness;
 - (b) improving services to vulnerable children and families;
 - (c) improving the quality of life and independence of vulnerable adults;
 - (d) improving the choices people have about their housing.
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Implications for Medium Term Financial Plan and Resource Implications: Including finance, human, IT and land

The primary implications concerning the recommendations outlined in this report are related to the allocation and distribution of resources. A specific budget of £683,000, excluding staffing, now exists for homelessness plus around £250,000 Government grant funding has been awarded for 2004/05. Much of the budget is now centred around prevention type work, with £208,000 specifically allocated for homelessness strategy initiatives.

Other Implications: e.g. Section 17 Community Safety, Health and Safety etc.

None.

Recommendations & Reasons for recommended action:

The Housing and Economic Regeneration Select Committee recommended that -

- (1) the problems within the Housing Department which had, understandably, resulted in slippage in the HSIP be acknowledged and the measures put in place to address this issue be noted;
- (2) the benefits of the Microsoft Project software package in tracking progress of the HSIP be recognised and that -
 - staff in the Housing Department be given access to appropriate training;
 - the Council's Cabinet consider the option of providing access and training for Elected Members;
- (3) the Housing and Economic Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Panel continue to keep a watching brief on progress of the HSIP;
- (4) the appointment of Councillor Carter as Homelessness 'Champion' be supported and his participation in the Homelessness Strategy Implementation Group be encouraged;
- (5) the proposals outlined in paragraph 5.6 of the report for the provision of an integrated service based in Midland House were seen as of significant importance in turning the service around and be welcomed;
- (6) the role of the voluntary sector in delivering the programme and the need to improve relationships through multi-agency working be recognised;
- (7) the approach of Beacon Councils (particularly Camden, Harrow and Colchester) in tackling homelessness be acknowledged as examples of best practice;
- (8) the Corporate Director for Housing provide a report to the Housing and Economic Regeneration OSP in January 2005 including -
 - staffing levels;
 - Discretionary Housing Payments including information on -
 - how the 2003/04 budget was spent;
 - the total allocation for 2004/05, together with a breakdown of how much has been spent to date and on what;

- a breakdown of homelessness expenditure for 2003/04, including how funding has been allocated and the measures in place for ensuring accountability, evaluation and effective monitoring of this expenditure;
 - a position statement on progress thus far with the customer and staff surveys;
- (9) the Rough Sleepers Strategy Group be requested to -
- provide an update to the Housing and Economic Regeneration OSP in January 2005 on progress with regard to the development of a 'wet hostel', including the associated anticipated capital and revenue budgets;
 - seek clarity on the true number of rough sleepers;
- (10) with regard to 'invest to save', the Select Committee stress the necessity for the targeting of resources towards prevention rather than management of homelessness;
- (11) the introduction of an integrated software package be welcomed;
- (12) the development of further BVPI's be welcomed, particularly where they assisted in the work being carried out by PATH and Shelter;
- (13) the efforts being made to improve relationships with both private and Registered Social Landlords(RSL's), which it was hoped would result in an increase in available accommodation, be encouraged;
- (14) the appointment of a Cabinet Member with responsibility for Customer Focus be welcomed;
- (15) the initiatives aimed at improving customer care throughout the Authority continue to be supported;
- (16) the training requirements of staff, particularly in relation to customer care be recognised.

Alternative options considered and reasons for recommended action

None.

Background papers:

- (1) Final Review Plan for scrutiny of Homelessness and Advice Service (RHEE 16 03/04).
- (2) Project Plans for Key Strategic Objectives (RHEE 17 03/04).
- (3) Homelessness Strategy Implementation Action Plan – Summary of Yearly Target Actions and Progress (RHEE 22 03/04).
- (4) Monthly Performance Information Reports – March 2004 (RHEE 23 03/04).

- (5) Draft Survey Questionnaire for Staff giving Housing Advice and Guidance (RHEE 24 03/04).
- (6) Draft Survey Questionnaire for Customers Draft Survey Questionnaire for Customers Draft Survey Questionnaire for Customers (RHEE 25 03/04).
- (7) Information from Beacon Councils.

REPORT OF THE HOUSING AND ECONOMIC REGENERATION OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY SELECT COMMITTEE

HOMELESSNESS AND ADVICE SERVICE REVIEW

1.0 Introduction

At its meeting on 12th February, 2004, the Overview and Scrutiny Commission approved a work programme for the previously constituted Regeneration, Housing, Economic and Environmental Overview and Scrutiny Panel. It was agreed that one of the topics to be considered would be a review of the Homelessness and Advice Service. A Select Committee was convened to scrutinise the current service provision.

2.0 Select Committee Structure

Councillors:

Councillor Mrs. Blackburn, in the Chair.
Councillors Mrs. Aspinall (substitute for Councillor Carter) and Councillor James.

Co-opted Representatives:

Ms. E. Bentley - Project Manager, Plymouth Access to Housing (PATH) Resettlement Service
Ms. J. Filby - Manager, Shelter
Mr. R. Kramer - Director, Youth Enquiry Service (YES) (23rd April and 5th May only)

Also in Attendance:

Housing Department

Andy Edwards - Resources Manager (23rd April and 5th May only)
Clive Turner - Corporate Director (11th August only)
Alan Grant - Housing Support and Resource Manager (11th August only)

Chief Executive's Department

Carole Hoyle - Democratic Support Officer

3.0 Terms of Reference and Key Objectives

3.1 The Homelessness and Advice Service Select Committee agreed that the purpose of the review was to -

- (i) examine the current homelessness process and delivery of advice, including initial advice, from the perspective of people who approached the Council as being homeless;

- (ii) as necessary, to make recommendations that would improve the Council's front-line advice service;
- (iii) make recommendations that would assist the Council in achieving the social exclusion objectives of the Corporate Plan 2004-2007 including -
 - trying to prevent homelessness;
 - improving services to vulnerable children and families;
 - improving the quality of life and independence of vulnerable adults;
 - improving the choices people have about their housing.

3.2 The Key Objectives were identified as -

- (a) to explore the experiences of a number of people who presented themselves to the Council during November 2003 as homeless;
- (b) to identify the level of advice, including that given to people when they initially approached the Council;
- (c) to investigate the endogenous factors influencing the level of advice/service provision;
- (d) to investigate the level of homelessness enquiries, complaints and appeals/reviews, including Councillors' casework;
- (e) to investigate homelessness prevention methods currently employed by the Council;
- (f) to identify and examine examples of homelessness best practice of other local authorities;
- (g) to identify measures/activities that would improve the current homelessness service.

4.0 Hearings

- 4.1 A series of meetings was scheduled to hear from Lead Officers and witnesses, consider background papers and public consultation feedback, conduct site visits, and to formulate a report of recommendations to the Overview and Scrutiny Commission. However, following the first two of these meetings, held on 23rd April and 5th May, 2004, it became evident that changes in both the make-up of Scrutiny Panels and in the Housing Department were making further scrutiny increasingly difficult.

4.2 It was therefore agreed that -

- (i) the scrutiny process be suspended until January 2005 to allow Officers' sufficient time to effect the changes taking place in the Housing Department;
- (ii) the Housing and Economic Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Panel be recommended to make appropriate arrangements for this item to be reconsidered at that time;
- (iii) the Select Committee meet on 11th August, 2004, to prepare an interim report based mainly on progress on the recommendations of the Health and Social Well-being Scrutiny Committee in September 2003 following its scrutiny of Plymouth's Homelessness Strategy 2003-2006.

5.0 The Select Committee's Findings

Homelessness Strategy Implementation Plan (HSIP)

- 5.1 Since mid-May 2004, a temporary management team under the direction of the Supporting People Project Manager had been managing Homelessness, Allocations and Advice services in respect of both day-to-day operational and strategic issues.
- 5.2 The team was participating in the overarching Homelessness Strategy Implementation Group (HSIG) which comprised representatives from -
 - the Primary Care Trust;
 - Domestic Violence Unit;
 - Social Services Department;
 - Shelter;
 - PATH;
 - YES;
 - local businesses.
- 5.3 The HSIG was independently chaired by Shelter and was developing a work programme focused on monitoring the implementation of the Homelessness Strategy. One of the key responsibilities of the group was to have an overview of all funding bids and to make recommendations in that respect.
- 5.4 Whilst Councillor Carter had been designated Lead Member for Homelessness, it was unclear whether he would participate in the HSIG.
- 5.5 There had been some slippage with progress of the Implementation Plan, which mainly resulted from disruptions within the Housing Department, but Officers were working hard to get it back on track and to address any shortfalls as soon as possible. The newly formed management team was carrying out a review of the Plan and it would be republished shortly.

- 5.6 The decision to create an integrated service based in Midland House had been a great morale booster for staff and the opportunity to use additional revenue to appoint more staff with a direct focus on prevention, in order to impact on the actual numbers presenting as homelessness, was crucial. Appointments to these posts would be made shortly.

Recommendations:

That the Select Committee acknowledge the problems within the Housing Department which had, understandably, resulted in slippage in the HSIP and note the measures put in place to address this issue.

That the Select Committee recognise the benefits of the Microsoft Project software package in tracking progress of the HSIP and that -

- ***staff in the Housing Department be given access to appropriate training;***
- ***the Council's Cabinet consider the option of providing access and training for Elected Members.***

That the Housing and Economic Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Panel continue to keep a watching brief on progress of the HSIP.

That the appointment of Councillor Carter as Homelessness 'Champion' be supported and his participation in the Homelessness Strategy Implementation Group be encouraged.

That the proposals outlined in 5.6 above for the provision of an integrated service based in Midland House were seen as of significant importance in turning the service around and be welcomed.

That the role of the voluntary sector in delivering the programme and the need to improve relationships through multi-agency working be recognised.

That the approach of Beacon Councils (particularly Camden, Harrow and Colchester) in tackling homelessness be acknowledged as examples of best practice.

That the Corporate Director for Housing provide an update on staffing levels to the Housing and Economic Regeneration OSP in January 2005.

Rough Sleeper Initiatives

- 5.7 A working group had been set up to look at the issues of the most vulnerable chaotic clients who were not able to be accommodated elsewhere for a variety of reasons and to try and come up with a scheme that would help.
- 5.8 The group comprised the Police, Outreach Workers, Shekinah Mission, Salvation Army, Ship Hostel, Community Psychiatric Nurse for the Homeless, Assisted Social Worker for the Homeless and Vulnerable Adult Co-ordinator.
- 5.9 Some case studies had been undertaken to look at both need and the cost of these clients to the City.
- 5.10 With regard to the development of a 'wet hostel', a flat was currently being converted in the 'Gates'.
- 5.11 There was a significant discrepancy in the number of rough sleepers officially recorded and that recorded by the SHIP Hostel.

Recommendation:

That the Rough Sleepers Strategy Group be requested to -

- ***provide an update to the Housing and Economic Regeneration OSP in January 2005 on progress with regard to the development of a 'wet hostel', including the associated anticipated capital and revenue budgets;***
- ***seek clarity on the true number of rough sleepers.***

ODPM Homeless Directorate's Report - "Ending Use of Bed and Breakfast for Families with Children"

- 5.12 The Select Committee heard that the following progress had been made with regard to the nine recommendations of the above report:-
- (a) A new Directorate had been created, with a Director of Housing appointed and a new Assistant Director joining in the Autumn. Restructuring proposals for the current Homelessness, Allocations, Housing Advice and Supporting People programme have been accepted by the new Housing Directorate Management Team and were currently being implemented.

- (b) Staffing of Housing Advice Services had been doubled with an additional Senior Housing Advice Officer, Housing Advice Officer, 3 Tenancy/Rent Intervention Officers and a Welfare Benefits Advisor. In addition the role and responsibilities of other agencies in support of such services had been recognised, e.g. rent and deposit guarantee scheme operated by PATH. Care Direct, the Plymouth City Council Call Centre facility, which already operated in respect of Social Services, was in negotiation with the Housing Department and would add its own considerable expertise and support to the general public.
- (c) Insofar as 'invest to save' issues were concerned -
- the Bed and Breakfast budget had been significantly reduced from previous levels of expenditure;
 - Plymouth City Council had consistently met the new ODPM targets in terms of the duration that families were housed in such accommodation but, without a significant input of suitable accommodation from the private sector or the RSL's, the options in terms of responding to families at points of crisis remained rather limited.

Recommendation:

That, with regard to 'invest to save', the Select Committee stress the necessity for the targeting of resources towards prevention rather than management of homelessness.

- (d) With regard to home visits, as a result of the measures outlined in (b) above, the whole approach to receiving referrals and homelessness applications was being revamped, including a greater emphasis on prevention and early identification of potential problems in both the private sector as well as RSL/PCC stock.
- (e) IT Systems/Credit Referencing - presentations by software developers have continued in respect of Housing related support and a decision would be taken once the options have been evaluated.

Recommendation:

That the introduction of an integrated software package be welcomed.

- (f) Allocations and Nominations – a report on Choice Based Lettings was being submitted to the City Council’s Cabinet on 24th August, 2004, followed by full Member consultation in September. If approved, consultation would commence with key stakeholders on the potential changes to the allocations scheme.
- (g) Waiting Lists and Registers – this would be addressed as part of (f) above.
- (h) Allocation into Council Vacancies - this would be addressed as part of (f) above.
- (i) Void Control - in line with the management of Homelessness, Allocations and Housing Advice, a new team had been created in terms of void control. The lead officer from that team was now a member of the Housing Directorate Management Team and significant progress had already been achieved, which would be reported separately to Scrutiny and Cabinet.
- (j) RSL’s and nominations - all RSL’s had been invited to a meeting with the Director and members of the management team, from which an agenda and action plan had emerged. There was clearly a great deal more work to be done in terms of accessing the potential of this valuable stock.
- (k) Housing Benefit - a significant increase in Housing Benefit staff had occurred (4 full time), with the most important appointment being that of a dedicated ‘Housing’ Housing Benefit officer who would be an integral member of the new ‘Midland House’ team. Landlords would therefore find their claims being processed more quickly, and also have a single point of reference for developmental issues. In addition the Housing Benefit team would be part of a Housing team focusing on encouraging existing Landlords to offer more accommodation and supporting the Plymouth City Council strategy.

Recommendation:

That the Corporate Director for Housing provide an update on Discretionary Housing Payments to the Housing and Economic Regeneration OSP in January 2005 including -

- ***how the 2003/04 budget was spent;***
- ***the total allocation for 2004/05, together with a breakdown of how much has been spent to date and on what.***

- (l) Procurement - in reality some 79% of current housing stock was still within the private sector, either as privately rented or owner-occupier accommodation. The private sector leasing scheme under the direction of Tamar Housing now had some 42 properties rather than 30 reported in the original paper. Major initiatives within the new Housing Directorate needed to occur in order to satisfy the submission of a Housing Strategy by Autumn 2004. This included enhancement of relationships with Private Sector Landlords, RSL's and the University of Plymouth.
- (m) Direct Lettings Scheme - this would be addressed as part of the direction of (f) above. The concept of perfectly adequate student accommodation being empty for nearly 25% of the year, whilst homeless individuals and families were accommodated in unsatisfactory Bed and Breakfast or short-term accommodation was also of concern.

Local Performance Indicators

- 5.13 The RSI Co-ordinator could provide monthly hot spot counts, which would give an indication as to the progress of their work. Currently the BVPI was based on those hot spot counts. A full count was not required until we believe we have over 10 rough sleepers on any one night. Bed and Breakfast PI's were regularly reported, and other PI's were being developed.

Recommendation:

That the development of further BVPI's be welcomed, particularly where they assisted in the work being carried out by PATH and Shelter.

Public Awareness

- 5.14 The newly formed Homelessness Strategy Implementation Group had taken responsibility for public relations and communication and there had been positive articles recently in the local press. In addition, there was a sub-group of the HSIIG made up of experienced practitioners from a variety of agencies, and this medium would also be used to raise awareness with vulnerable people. The relocation to Midland House would require a complete reappraisal of public relations and communications, including public information material.

5.15 2003/04 Homelessness Expenditure

Recommendation:

That the Corporate Director for Housing provide a report to the Housing and Economic Regeneration OSP in January 2005 including -

- ***a breakdown of homelessness expenditure for 2003/04, including how funding has been allocated;***
- ***the measures in place for accountability, evaluation and monitoring of this expenditure.***

Discretionary Housing Payments

- 5.16 A series of meetings had taken place with the Housing Benefit management and staff. The focus had been on enhanced working relationships between the two departments, one outcome of which had been the appointment of a dedicated member of staff (see 5.12(k) above). In addition the Homelessness Manager was now a member of the Housing Benefit panel, which made decisions on the Discretionary Housing Payments, and could influence such outcomes. It was already clear that in 2004/05 the budget would be fully committed.

Relationships with Private and RSL Sector Landlords

- 5.17 The corporate working referred to in 5.16 above had also been focused on improving the working relationships with Private and RSL Sector Landlords. Much improved processing times had been achieved, and with a dedicated Housing Benefit Officer in the Housing Department there would be a focal point for areas of concern. Following a meeting with the ODPM it was suggested that targeting of Landlords who had indicated a willingness to take tenants on DSS might be fruitful in terms of making more accommodation available, and this was currently being pursued. A Private Sector Landlords Forum was taking place in the Guildhall in September and this would also be actively supported by a variety of staff from the City Council including Supporting People.

Recommendation

That the efforts being made to improve relationships with both private and RSL Sector Landlords, which it was hoped would result in an increase in available accommodation, be encouraged.

Customer Care Focus

- 5.18 Proposals for a significantly enhanced Customer Care focus made by the interim management team had been accepted and would be developed over the Summer. This included specific links to the City Council Corporate Call Centre provision, which would enhance the quality and response times in terms of telephone callers, and provide a monitoring focus for service users. Short-term accommodation provided at Raglan and through the Private Sector Leasing Scheme would also have their own dedicated worker in terms of assessment of need at point of allocation, and ongoing support.

Recommendations:

That the appointment of a Cabinet Member with responsibility for Customer Focus be welcomed.

That the initiatives aimed at improving customer care throughout the Authority continue to be supported.

That the Corporate Director for Housing provide a position statement to the Housing and Economic Regeneration OSP in January 2005 on progress thus far with the customer and staff surveys.

That the training requirements of staff, particularly in relation to customer care be recognised.

Presentation to the Council

- 5.19 The presentation of the report on Choice Based Lettings at the end of August 2004 would provide a focus for raising awareness amongst Members of the current Homelessness Strategy. As part of an ongoing programme of Member training, sessions relating to Homelessness and Allocations had recently been delivered, and were very well received.

6.0 Chair's Summary

- 6.1 The Chair thanked Members of the Select Committee, Co-opted Members, and Officers who have supported the Committee, for their contribution, enthusiasm and dedication to this Scrutiny Select Committee.