

Title of Report:	Update on Homelessness Recommendations
Report to be considered by:	Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission
Date of Meeting:	29 October 2013
Forward Plan Ref:	

Purpose of Report: To provide an update on the homelessness recommendations made by OSMC on 11 December 2012

Recommended Action: OSMC to note the progress made on the homelessness recommendations

Portfolio Member Details	
Name & Telephone No.:	Councillor Roger Croft - Tel (01635) 868638
E-mail Address:	rcroft@westberks.gov.uk
Date Portfolio Member agreed report:	15 July 2013

Contact Officer Details	
Name:	Mel Brain
Job Title:	Service Manager, Housing Strategy & Operations
Tel. No.:	01635 519403
E-mail Address:	mbrain@westberks.gov.uk

Executive Report

1. Introduction

- 1.1 On 26th November 2012, OSMC held a special meeting to scrutinise the Council's response to homelessness. A number of witnesses were invited to the meeting to give evidence and at the OSMC meeting on 11 December 2012, OSMC made 12 recommendations.
- 1.2 Some of the recommendations were for the Housing Service to consider. Four of the recommendations were published alongside the draft Homelessness Review & Strategy for consultation.
- 1.3 On 9th May 2013 the Executive approved the adoption of the Homelessness Review & Strategy 2013-2018. This decision was called in on 17th May 2013 and the call-in was considered by OSMC on 02nd July 2013. At this meeting, OSMC agreed the adoption of the Homelessness review & Strategy as presented to Executive but requested that the Housing Service provide a further update on the recommendations and addressed the questions raised in Part B of the call-in. This report responds to that request and is an update to the report prepared for and published in the OSMC papers of 16th April 2013.

2. Update on the Recommendations

- 2.1 Each of the recommendations is presented in turn, along with the update on progress.

Recommendation 1: The Executive Member for Housing should work with other local agencies to agree an accepted methodology for the counting of rough sleepers. A report outlining the production process and count should be presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission within 6 months of agreement.

Update: The Housing Service follows Government guidance and methodology for the counting of rough sleepers. A methodology is already in place and the Housing Service is satisfied that this provides an accurate estimate. The Housing Service collates information from a wide range of statutory and voluntary agencies that may come into contact with rough sleepers and then verifies the information prior to submitting the estimate.

Since the OSMC recommendations, the Housing Service has met with Homelessness Link, who are funded by CLG to work with local authorities to tackle homelessness, to discuss rough sleeper estimate methodology. Homelessness Link have not raised any concerns about the way in which West Berkshire apply the CLG methodology.

The Homelessness Strategy is focused on prevention. This recommendation is not preventative and is about data collection. In addition, the Housing Service is following Government methodology. For this reason, this recommendation has not been included in the action plan but the data will feed into future homelessness reviews.

Recommendation 2: The Executive Member for Housing should advise the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions of the genuine concerns held locally that the impending

changes to the benefits regime will have an adverse effect on homelessness in West Berkshire.

Update: Since the recommendations were made, the new Social Sector Size Criteria has been introduced, as has the phase-in of Personal Independence Payments (PIP) to replace Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and the Benefit Cap. The transition to Universal Credit is expected to be introduced later in 2013.

Whilst there are concerns about the impacts of welfare reforms locally, there are also provisions in place to mitigate against the worst of those effects, for example, Discretionary Housing Payments. Nationally there has been lobbying by a wide range of stakeholder groups and some amendments have been made to the proposals with more regulations likely. It is recommended that this action should be deferred until there is hard evidence that can be used to support concerns.

The Homelessness Strategy has not included this specific action, as it is unclear yet whether such action will be appropriate. However, one of the key priorities for the Homelessness Strategy is 'Mitigating the negative impacts of the welfare and housing reforms' and the action plan contains practical actions to directly support clients affected by the reforms.

Recommendation 3: The Executive Member for Housing should establish how the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) plans to deliver Universal Benefits (which include Housing Benefit) locally and report by 31 March 2013 on plans for transferring Housing Benefit payment to DWP.

Update: There is a national roll out of Universal Credit and details of how this benefit will be delivered are currently in the process of being published. The issue of transferring Housing Benefit to the DWP is a matter for the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Economic Development, Health & Safety, Pensions, Human Resources.

This action was not included within the Homelessness as it concerns information available in the public realm, is an administrative matter for Revenues & Benefits rather than for Housing Services and will not directly contribute to the prevention of homelessness.

Recommendation 4: The Executive Member for Housing should consider the production, either as part of the Homelessness Strategy or separately, of a 'reconnection' policy, to ensure that homeless people who have no local connection to West Berkshire are able to sustainably relocate to those places outside of the district with which they do have a link.

Update: The Housing Service already seek to reconnect applicants with no local connection to the district back to a locality where they do have a local connection as part of their standard housing options approach. This can include establishing contact with family and friends, securing that accommodation and/or support will be available on their return and funding transport costs to enable applicants to return.

Members are referred to Appendix One of the Homelessness Strategy, (the Homelessness flow-chart) which highlights that local connection and referrals back to authority areas where applicants do have a local connection is standard practice.

<p>Recommendation 5: The Executive Member for Strategic Support should ensure that time is made available at a District Parish Conference for Housing officers to explain to Councillors the content of, and rationale for, the Homelessness Strategy when agreed.</p> <p>Update: The Council does not dictate what items are on the District Parish Conference agenda and it is for Parish Councils to determine what items they consider appropriate. The Housing Service will attend, if invited, or will provide a copy of the Homelessness Review and Strategy to interested Parishes upon request.</p>
<p>Recommendation 6: At the next revision of the Council's Service Level Agreement with the Citizens Advice Bureau, the Executive Member for Strategic Support should consider the offer by SHELTER to assist with housing advice, so as to ensure that the document contains the requirement for the Bureau to provide a dedicated housing advisor.</p> <p>Update: This recommendation has been discussed with the CAB. All of their volunteer generalist advisors offer housing/homelessness advice, backed up by an in-bureau specialist and further backed up by the Citizens Advice specialist support unit. The CEO of CAB Newbury has specifically said, in a letter to the Head of Strategic Support Services, that CAB do not wish to appoint dedicated Housing Advisors. This recommendation cannot be supported as it would be likely to have a detrimental effect on the wider service provided by Citizens Advice and could cause a bottleneck and create a capacity problem that does not currently exist.</p>
<p>Recommendation 7: Performance monitoring reports received from the Citizens Advice Bureau relating to homelessness (including all financial advice), which are sent to the Executive Member for Strategic Support should be routinely made available to the Executive Member for Housing and his Shadow.</p> <p>Update: Quarterly monitoring reports are received from the CAB and the Head of Strategic Support is able to pass them onto the Portfolio Holder who can share them with the Shadow.</p> <p>This action has not been included within the Homelessness Strategy as it concerns data collection and does not contribute to the prevention of homelessness.</p>
<p>Recommendation 8: The Executive Member for Housing should work, through the Local Government Association, the Government and especially the Valuation Office Agency, to achieve transparency of the factors and values taken into consideration by VOA when setting the Local Housing Allowance and, if possible, an appeal mechanism.</p> <p>Update: This action was intended to be included in the Homelessness Strategy and the officer apologises that this was overlooked. Notwithstanding this, work to address action this pre-dates the OSMC Special Meeting and is being continued, in liaison with the MP. At the request of the Portfolio Holder Housing, Richard Benyon, MP, recently wrote again to the VOA. A response is awaited from the VOA.</p>
<p>Recommendation 9: The Executive Member for Housing should develop and implement a plan to heighten awareness of the causes and impacts of homelessness, particularly how</p>

it might be prevented and what help is (and is not) available.

- Raising the awareness of all those whose work may bring them in contact with homelessness on the role of other organisations
- The location of leaflets, including with partner organisations (for example Newbury Town Council, Thames Valley Police, libraries and detached youth workers)
- The engagement of young people from before they enter the workforce, including through secondary schools, in financial and housing-related education
- The content and language of leaflets. Assistance is available through Two Saints from people who have previously been homeless

Update: These actions form a core part of the Homelessness Strategy Action Plan. A new suite of leaflets has already been developed and published and Connexions are providing training in schools on matters relating to housing and homelessness.

Recommendation 10: The Executive Member for Housing should ask Newbury Town Council to consider the provision of lockers to allow rough sleepers to store their possessions (for example sleeping bags) securely during the day.

Update: The Portfolio Holder has written to Newbury Town Council and a response is awaited.

This action has not been included within the Homelessness Strategy as it does not contribute towards prevention of homelessness.

Recommendation 11: The Executive Member for Housing should ask the Volunteer Centre West Berkshire to establish closer links with Loose Ends to ensure that any shortages of volunteers and other resources to enable them to provide a better service to their clients are met urgently and effectively.

Update: Shortly prior to the OSMC, the Housing Service arranged a meeting with Loose Ends to discuss how best to work with each other but Loose Ends failed to attend. An offer was made, both at the OSMC Scrutiny day and subsequently, for a Housing Options Officer to provide a surgery at Loose Ends for the benefit of their clients. This offer has not been accepted to date but remains open. It is considered that it is for Loose Ends themselves to establish links with the Volunteer Centre should they require the assistance of the centre.

This action has not been included within the Homelessness Strategy as it does not contribute towards prevention of homelessness.

Recommendation 12: Further investigation should be undertaken into the reasons why West Berkshire seems to have a very large proportion of young families facing homelessness whose friends and extended family are unwilling or unable to provide them with temporary housing/accommodation.

Update: The Housing Service agrees that it would be beneficial to have a better understanding of the reasons why young families are asked to leave home by family and friends and would suggest that this may be an area for further scrutiny rather than for the Homelessness Strategy Action Plan.

3. Part B of the Call-In

2.2 Part B of the call-in asked four specific questions, each of which is answered below.

2.3 Question 1: What Council resources go into the homelessness forum? The Homelessness Forum is a multi-agency group with a primary focus on both strategic issues, but also covering current operational issues, relating to homelessness. The Council provides staff resources to ensure representation at the Forum and proactively works with the relevant agencies to implement identified actions.

2.4 Question 2: Do other agencies attend? Yes, this is a multi-agency forum and includes representatives from Two Saints, the DAAT, Turning Point, DWP, TV Police, CMHT, Probation, West Berkshire DA Service, the DA Reduction Co-ordinator, Creative Support, Bromford Housing Group (Fountain Gardens), the PCT, Revenues & Benefits, the Housing Service and Contracts & Commissioning.

2.5 How often does it meet? The Homelessness Forum has just been re-constituted and will meet quarterly.

2.6 Do other agencies send reps to meetings this Council hosts that relate to homelessness? Yes. The Housing Service is a core member at a wide range of multi-agency groups that focus on issues that may result in, or arise from, homelessness. These include, but are not restricted to, MAPPA, MARAC, AD SG, Young Persons Housing Panel, MH Housing Panel, Offender Management Group, Integrated Offender Management Group, Domestic Abuse Forum and Child Protection Conferences.

Appendices

There are no Appendices to this report.

Consultees

Local Stakeholders: *

Officers Consulted: June Graves, Head of Care Commissioning, Housing & Safeguarding

Trade Union: *