

Title of Report:

Scrutiny review into the reasons for the apparent prevalence of homelessness amongst young families in West Berkshire.

Report to be considered by:

Overview and Scrutiny Commission

Date of Meeting:

Purpose of Report:

To outline the results of the investigation into the apparent prevalence of young families in West Berkshire who are facing homelessness.

Recommended Action:

That the Overview and Scrutiny Commission endorses the recommendations for the consideration of the Executive.

Background Documents:

Minutes of meetings, and papers submitted during meetings of the Task Group. (available from Strategic Support).

Task Group Chairman

Name & Telephone No.:

Councillor Quentin Webb – Tel (01635) 202646

E-mail Address:

qwebb@westberks.gov.uk

Contact Officer Details

Name:

Elaine Walker

Job Title:

Principal Policy Officer (Equality and Diversity)

Tel. No.:

01635 519441

E-mail Address:

ewalker@westberks.gov.uk

Executive Report

1. Introduction

1.1 In November 2012 the Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission undertook a scrutiny review into homelessness. Recommendation 12 from the review was:

“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.”

1.2 At its meeting of 10 December 2013, the Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission agreed to commence a review as recommended.

1.3 This report sets out the findings and recommendations from the review and provides details on its Terms of Reference and methodology.

2. Terms of Reference

2.1 The terms of reference for the review were to conduct a review into homelessness in young families in West Berkshire and in particular:

- i) the prevalence of homelessness in young families;
- ii) the reasons for young families becoming homeless;
- iii) the strategic approach and operational practice for managing young homeless families;
- iv) to consider the opportunities available for reducing the numbers of young families reporting as homeless.

2.2 Recommendations arising from the review are to be reported to the Executive for consideration.

3. Methodology

3.1 The review was conducted by a cross-party task group, working with Council Officers and representatives of other organisations. The members of the task group were Councillors Quentin Webb, Sheila Ellison, Tony Vickers and Paul Bryant. Councillor Webb was elected as the Chairman.

3.2 The task group held meetings as outlined below:

Meeting date	Meeting focus
3 March 2014	<p>Agreement of review subject and scope.</p> <p>Background information received including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Definition of young family ▪ Previous scrutiny activity ▪ Statistical data ▪ Legislation ▪ Council processes
31 March 2014	<p>Gathering of evidence from organisations and individuals who might become involved with clients at risk of becoming homeless.</p> <p><u>Witnesses:</u></p>
28 April 2014	<p>Gathering of evidence from organisations who are, or have been, involved with homeless young families.</p> <p><u>Witnesses</u></p>
19 May 2014	<p>Gathering of evidence from internal services.</p> <p>Consideration of evidence and formulation of recommendations.</p> <p><u>Witnesses</u></p>

3.3 The following witnesses contributed to the review:

- (a) West Berkshire Council Officers
 - i) Mel Brain – Housing Strategy and Operations Manager
 - ii) Cathy Dodson – Housing Options Team Leader
 - iii) Dave Wraight - Young person housing panel
- (b) Councillor Roger Croft, Executive Member for Housing
- (c) Health Visitor – Samantha Knight
- (d) Family Resource Service - Jo Watts

- (e) Children's Centres, Victoria Park - Debbie Rowe
- (f) Step by Step - Marie Glover
- (g) Two Saints
 - i) Meriel Colbert-Owen
 - ii) Chloe Lyons

3.4 The Task Group wished to report their concern that some of the witnesses invited had not taken up the offer to attend.

3.5 The group had hoped to hear the experiences of someone who had been homeless but had not been successful in finding an appropriate witness within the timescale of the review. The Task Group did not consider that this had been detrimental to the outcomes of the review.

4. Acknowledgements and thanks

4.1 The Chairman and Members of the Committee would like to acknowledge and thank all those who supported and gave evidence to the review.

5. Definitions

5.1 A homeless person is a person who has no accommodation in the UK or elsewhere which is available for his/her occupation and which that person has a legal right to occupy

5.2 A person is threatened with homelessness if s/he is likely to become homeless within 28 days.

5.3 A young family is defined as a young person between the ages of 18 and 24 with one or more children.

6. Background

6.1 The authority has a statutory duty to assist people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness, according to the above definitions, and who meet each of the following five tests of homelessness:

- (a) Eligibility – whether the person is a British citizen or has a right to reside in the UK through their immigration status. A person not habitually resident in the UK may not be eligible;
- (b) Homeless – whether the person has access to habitable accommodation and a legal right to occupy it;
- (c) Priority need – for the purposes of this review, a young person with children would automatically qualify as having a priority need, whether or not any other priority indicators were present;

- (d) Intentionality – a person who deliberately did, or did not do, something that caused them to leave accommodation which they could otherwise have stayed in;
 - (e) Local connection – whether or not the person has a family or work connection to the area. If not, they may be eligible for homeless assistance in an area where they do have a connection.
- 6.2 The authority is required to secure accommodation for an applicant fulfilling all of these criteria. For an applicant who is found to be ineligible for a full housing duty, a decision review and an appeals process is in place.
- 6.3 The authority also has a duty to provide advice about homelessness and the prevention of homelessness.
- 6.4 No research had been identified that looks into the reasons why homelessness occurred; all available research focuses on the effects of homelessness on the individual and the wider community.
- 6.5 There is a significant negative impact to society and government resulting from homelessness which illustrates the importance of reducing the number of homeless young families. This is evidenced by external research which has shown that:
- (a) Each homeless household costs the government approximately £6,680;
 - (b) Children in bad housing are more likely to be excluded from school;
 - (c) Approximately 57% of homeless young people are not in education, employment or training (NEET). This is five times the number of young people of the same age in the general population.
- 6.6 In 2012, the Housing Service undertook a statutory review of homelessness in West Berkshire, and developed from this a Homelessness Strategy and associated actions. Identified actions include:
- (a) Working with young people in schools to intervene early by raising awareness of the realities of homelessness and signposting to relevant services that support and assist young people:
 - i) Identify key staff that will deliver the training;
 - ii) Ensure key staff have attended training for trainers;
 - iii) Agree and implement a timetable of sessions to be delivered across schools;
 - iv) Track the number of young people aged 16 and 17 who approach the Council for housing advice up to 24 months after receipt of training to monitor effectiveness of scheme and adjust / amend training where needed.
 - (b) Working with Children's Services and Connexions to develop a returning home or staying home 'virtual' team to provide early intervention to young people and families where breakdown appears to be a concern.

- (c) Continuing to work with Health Visitors, Social Workers and other professionals to educate them on housing options and homelessness to enable them to prevent homelessness by identifying early signs of problems and through early intervention
- 6.7 When a young family presents to the Housing Service, they receive an assessment to ascertain their eligibility, and this process includes a review of the different means by which homelessness could be prevented. Consideration would be given to negotiation, financial assistance, advice and support, or other appropriate measures.
- 6.8 Homelessness applications can be made in joint names, but it is more frequent for the application to be made in the female's name. Where a partner is present, they can be named as being allowed access to the accommodation.
- 6.9 Parents are responsible for their children until the age of 18. Until this age, the child has an implied licence to remain in their parent's home. A parent asking their child to leave represents a withdrawal of that responsibility. A person who is 'sofa-surfing' would not have a legal right to occupy the accommodation.

Agency Involvement

Young Person's Housing Panel

- 6.10 The Young Person's Housing Panel consists of multiple agencies working together to consider the appropriate placements and skill requirements for young people who were, or were at risk of becoming, homeless. Meetings are held monthly but virtual meetings may also be convened.
- 6.11 Young people being considered might be referred through a number of routes (eg the Youth Offending Team, but all would be known to the Housing Service if they were known by any agency, to be at risk of becoming homeless).

Health Visitors

- 6.12 Health Visitors visit new mothers once a baby reaches 10 days old, following their discharge from a midwife, and the health visitor would remain responsible for the child until the age of two and a half years. During this time 3 further planned development checks would take place. Only the first one or two checks would take place at the mother's home.
- 6.13 It was reported that health visitors would not consider the mother's housing situation during their visits unless an issue was flagged by the mother. However subsequently this was disputed and the task group were led to understand that health visitors do in fact undertake a rounded view of the mother's situation which would include an understanding of their housing arrangements.
- 6.14 Information is not shared between the different agencies unless concerns are raised, for example, child protection or domestic abuse.

Family Resource Service

6.15 The Family Resource Service (FRS) focuses on preventative measures such as parenting support in the home, facilitating parenting groups as well as domestic abuse and self harm awareness sessions.

6.16 The FRS also offers family mediation aimed at helping families to identify ways in which they could improve living together.

Children’s Centres

6.17 Children’s centres provide support and signposting for any issues relating to families, including health wellbeing and safeguarding.

Two Saints

6.18 Two Saints provide a variety of services for those needing housing assistance. Provision ranges from emergency accommodation, resettlement units, floating support, outreach work and advice on budgeting or debt management.

Step by Step

6.19 Step by Step is a charity organisation providing a number of services to young people in Hampshire, Surrey and West Berkshire.

6.20 West Berkshire Council commissions Step by Step to provide supported lodgings, where a young person lives within a household to gain life skills and enable independent living. This can include mother and baby placements.

7. Findings

Prevalence of Homelessness in Young Families;

7.1 In November 2012, it was reported that the biggest group of people accepted by the Council as being owed a full housing duty were young people with families, and the proportion was reported to be significantly higher than national averages. It was explained that families and friends were unable or unwilling to continue to accommodate them. To put this statement into context:

	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	01/04/14 – 20/05/14
WBC Homelessness Acceptances	53	54	54	9
WBC Homelessness Acceptances for Young Families	24 (45%)	21 (38%)	19 (35%)	5 (56%)
National comparison	30%	30%	N/A	N/A

(The data for 2014/15 should be considered cautiously, as insufficient time has passed to establish with certainty whether this reflects an upward trend.)

It follows therefore, that to equal national percentages West Berkshire would need to reduce the number of homelessness acceptances amongst young families by approximately 5 families a year.

- 7.2 West Berkshire has a higher number of full duty housing cases for young families than neighbouring authorities, however, the information gathered by different local authorities would not allow for an accurate comparison at this level.
- 7.3 Temporary accommodation might be offered to a homeless young mother (where a full duty had been accepted or enquiries were underway) to assess her skills to manage living alone (e.g. budgeting) which would not be possible if she was helped to find private rented accommodation or housing via the Housing Register. This would be counted as a homelessness acceptance for statistical purposes.

Reasons for Young Families Becoming Homeless

- 7.4 There were considered to be two broad reasons for young families becoming homeless:

Conflict within the family home:

- (a) Non-compliance with rules set by parents. Case law has shown that quite strict rules set by parents would be considered to be reasonable, and some authorities might consider homelessness in these circumstances to be intentional. This is not automatically the case in West Berkshire;
- (b) Parenting and housekeeping styles may differ sufficiently that the parents may feel unable to house the young family;
- (c) Parents agreeing to house the young family for a short period may feel the length of stay has exceeded that agreed;
- (d) Anecdotal evidence suggests that there has been an increase in domestic violence, including within step-families. In addition, changes to the family set up resulting in step parents, can alter family loyalties, and can result in a lower tolerance for the actions of the young family.

Misunderstanding of the measures available to the Council:

- (e) Some families believe that allowing their home to become 'overcrowded' will enable them to be awarded a greater number of housing needs points, thereby setting an expectation that a larger house will be made available to them. However the length of time taken for this process can be unexpected and lead to an unwillingness to continue to house the young family;
- (f) Families were not believed to be open and honest about their reasons for asking a young family to leave, and might state reasons that they think will achieve their aim of obtaining good housing for their child through the Council;
- (g) Young people do not take responsibility for their likely eviction once it became apparent, and do not comprehend the reality of their situation;

(h) More people are becoming aware that eligibility for accommodation is not automatic, however the progress of spreading this message is slow.

7.5 Following eviction from the family home, young families can continue to experience difficulty in maintaining a home or placement for the following reasons:

(i) The Housing Service finds that it needs to invest a significant amount of time to assist young families in accomplishing simple tasks that they are not prepared for;

(j) Young families often do not have the necessary skills to live independently, lacking basic knowledge such as budgeting, nutrition or maintaining the home. These skills are often learned within the family, so if the parents do not have these skills they cannot pass them on;

(k) Where parents of a young person do have the necessary skills, they are taking on this role in the family home, preventing the young person from preparing for independent living. The stress of living independently unexpectedly exacerbates the lack of knowledge.

(l) Training in some skills is available through Sovereign or the Citizen's Advice Bureau; however this may not be available to everyone.

7.6 Families were reluctant to engage with agencies to consider ways in which the young family could remain in the family home, for example mediation, Family Group Conferencing, or points maximisation. Parents are adamant about young people leaving the home immediately which gives little opportunity to explore alternative options.

7.7 Many families, who had evicted their child from the family home, maintained an active interest in them ensuring that they were provided with accommodation.

Strategic Approach and Operational Practice for Managing Young Homeless Families

7.8 The Housing Service operates practices that could result in a greater number of homeless applications being accepted in West Berkshire than in some other authorities:

(a) The West Berkshire Housing Team act to reflect the law, and do not act as 'gatekeepers' to available accommodation;

(b) Applicants not found to be owed a full housing duty were actively encouraged by the Housing Service to request a review of the decision.

7.9 Once a young family has been provided with reasonable and suitable accommodation, their social housing points would be reduced to reflect their accommodation status, and they are therefore in less pressing need of more permanent housing.

7.10 The majority of young families did not have agency involvement (other than routine) prior to becoming homeless which meant it was not possible to assess their risk of becoming homeless prior to it happening. However, the effects of becoming homeless and perhaps housed alongside other homeless people, were known to be negative and might result in agency involvement, for example relating to substance misuse or domestic abuse.

- 7.11 There was an emerging need for mother & baby placements and commissioning at Bramblings had been changed to accommodate the demand.
- 7.12 Housing information leaflets are posted on the Council website, but are currently not widely available in print, with most likely to only be seen by those in immediate need of housing advice.

8. Conclusions

- 8.1 The actual numbers of young homeless families have reduced and there is little actual difference between national and local proportions; however the long term impact on these families and their children, and the resulting societal cost remain significant.
- 8.2 It is likely that the way in which the Housing Service operates, inflates the number of homelessness acceptances above that of other areas.
- 8.3 All agencies appear to be functioning appropriately according to their remit and no pressing issues have been forthcoming; however there is further scope for better inter-agency working.

Accommodation

- 8.4 There is a need for more supported accommodation placements for young families. This would enable families to remain together, would provide support whilst learning the skills needed to live independently, and would allow support to transition effectively from pregnancy to beyond birth. This could be achieved by making changes to existing accommodation or through the commissioning process.

Skills and Knowledge

- 8.5 Further information would be useful to understand the extent to which Connexions are delivering information in a school setting, for example which schools receive the information, and whether the delivery is being evaluated.
- 8.6 There is a need for further skills training for young people prior to them moving away from home. Skills training should provide the message that individuals should take responsibility for their own and their family's welfare.
- 8.7 The provision of skills training would assist in the long term by providing young people with skills to be passed on to their own families.

Information and Communication

- 8.8 Information about the options available to people when considering moving away from home, or about the Housing Service, is not widely available and is currently directed towards people already in need.
- 8.9 There is a need to manage the expectations of parents, and of young families with regard to the options available to the Housing Service.

8.10 Contact with the Council should be made at the earliest opportunity in order to allow consideration of mediation or other prevention measures, or to help put together a housing plan.

8.11 Young families at risk of becoming homeless are not identified early enough.

9. Recommendations

9.1 The following recommendations are proposed for submission to the Executive:

- (a) The Head of Housing should review what information is made available within secondary schools and Academies in order that pupils are made aware of the realities of homelessness, the options available to those made homeless, and possible actions to avoid homelessness.
- (b) The Head of Housing should review whether all secondary schools and Academies in West Berkshire are providing information about homelessness to their pupils.
- (c) The Portfolio Holder for Education should write to the head teachers of any schools found not to be delivering homelessness materials, to encourage the inclusion of educational information as set out in recommendation 1.
- (d) The Head of Housing should review what information is available to members of the public to advise them of the options available when considering moving away from home or about the Housing Service, in what format it is provided, and in what locations, in order to reach a wider audience.
- (e) The Head of Housing should assess the range of skills required for a young family to live independently, and ensure that information, training and support is available to enable this.
- (f) The Head of Housing should investigate ways to secure more supported accommodation placements for young families.
- (g) The Head of Public Health should develop the role of midwives and health visitors to enable them to identify young families at risk of homelessness, once the health visitor function transfers to the Council in 2015.

Appendices

There are no Appendices to this report.