

Title of Report:	Review into homelessness – Terms of Reference
Report to be considered by:	Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission
Date of Meeting:	26 November 2012

Purpose of Report: To outline to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission proposed Terms of Reference for a review into homelessness in the district.

Recommended Action: Amend, if necessary, and approve the Terms of Reference for the review.

OSC Chairman	
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Executive Report

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report introduces the review into the approach being taken to dealing with homelessness within the district. It sets out the agreed Terms of Reference and provides background.

2. Terms of Reference

- 2.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission agreed at its meeting of 30 October 2012 that it would conduct a review into the approach by statutory and other agencies to homelessness in West Berkshire and in particular:
- The extent or prevalence of homelessness in the District;
 - The strategic approach taken to preventing and responding to homelessness;
 - The operational practice;
 - Consider what might be done further to improve how homelessness is dealt with; and
 - Report to the Executive with recommendations as appropriate.

3. Methodology

- 3.1 The Commission is sitting as a full body to conduct the review. The outline of the meeting is shown in the table below.

Start time	End time	Item	Witnesses
0930	0935	Opening/preliminaries	
0935	1030	Scene setting <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Definitions• Causes• Duties• Trends Strategic approach and governance structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Head of Housing – June Graves• Housing Strategy and Operations Manager – Mel Brain• Executive Member with responsibility for Housing – Councillor Roger Croft
1030	1045	Break	
1045	1245	Agency involvement <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Role/activity• Challenges• Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• WBC Housing• Thames Valley Police – Superintendent Robin Rickard• Sovereign South + West - Kelly McArthur and Matthew Hensby• Newbury Town Council – Councillors Gabrielle McGarvey and Martha Vickers

Start time	End time	Item	Witnesses
1245	1315	Lunch	
1315	1445	Agency involvement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role/activity • Challenges • Opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health visitor – Ann Cox • Citizens Advice - Judy Kelley and Susan Capner • NACRO - Richard Collins • Shelter - James Merritt • Loose Ends - Maja Howgate • Two Saints - Meriel Colbert-Owen
1445	1500	Break	
1500	1600	The view from homeless people	
1600	1630	Summing up and formulation of recommendations	
1630		Close	

3.2 Invitations were also provided to the Department of Communities and Local Government and the National Housing Federation but they were unable to provide witnesses.

4. Previous activity

4.1 At its meeting of 31 July 2012 the Commission carried out an initial examination of the topic. The minutes of this meeting are shown at Appendix A.

5. Recommendation

5.1 It is recommended that Members of the Commission carry out scrutiny into the topic, as set out in the Terms of Reference for the review.

Appendices

Appendix A Extract of the minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission meeting of 31 July 2012

Consultees

Officers Consulted: June Graves, Head of Housing; Mel Brain, Housing Strategy and Operations Manager

Extract of the minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission meeting of 31 July 2012

(Councillor Franks declared a personal and prejudicial interest in Agenda item 11 by virtue of the fact that he was employed by Sovereign Housing Association. As his interest was personal and prejudicial he determined to take part in the debate but would not vote on the matter).

(Councillors Vickers, Brooks, Rendel, Holtby, Johnston and Goff declared an interest in Agenda item 11 by virtue of the fact that they were landlords. As their interest was personal and not prejudicial they were permitted to take part in the debate and vote on the matter).

David Lowe introduced the item explaining that the issue of homelessness had been raised at the Commission's meeting of 17 April 2012, and subsequent meetings had resulted in a request to invite the Portfolio Holder for Housing, Officers from the Housing Service and representatives of Sovereign Housing Association and the Citizens Advice Bureau to this meeting in order to discuss the issues that were leading to homelessness and consider possible solutions.

Councillor Vickers informed the Commission that the question had initially been raised due to a concern regarding the accuracy and clarity of the numbers of people presenting as homeless and those being assessed to be homeless. The figures indicated a four fold increase in those to which the Council owed a duty of care which was at odds with the 11% being reported. It was confirmed that the 11% referred to an increase in homeless preventions and not homelessness approaches.

Councillor Roger Croft informed the Commission that for the year 2010/11, 14 people or households were assessed as being homeless compared to 53 the following year. This represented an increase of 29 people or households.

The Chairman asked what was being done to halt the increase.

Councillor Webster commented that whilst it was interesting to be informed of the number of people to whom the Council had a duty to assist, her concern was for those who presented themselves as homeless, but who did not meet our criteria to be classed as homeless.

Mel Brain responded that the Council would owe a duty to assist approximately one third of those presenting as homeless. However the Council worked with many more households who required housing options and advice, not just those who were homeless. In 2011/12, approximately 2900 households had approached the housing service for advice and assistance. For those who were homeless or threatened with homelessness, the primary focus was prevention, for example through negotiations with landlords, mortgage rescue, or help in paying rent arrears. If homelessness could not be prevented and was likely within 28 days, a homelessness application could be taken. Mel Brain commented that the proportion of people being assessed as homeless was small in comparison to the number being helped by the service. June Graves informed the

Commission that the assistance given to people requesting advice was proactive and recorded.

Jan Rothwell (Citizens Advice Bureau) presented information indicating an increase in the number of people threatened with homelessness, those actually homeless, and those requesting access to accommodation. The Citizens Advice Bureau had found that in many cases, the trigger for homelessness was the breakup of a relationship (including between parents and children) or loss of employment. The key barrier to preventing homelessness was a lack of affordable housing in the area. Jan Rothwell reported that in the first quarter of 2012/13 there had been 21 homeless people seeking advice and 69 people who were staying with friends or family. This trend appeared to be continuing with five homeless people seeking advice in July.

Jan Rothwell informed the Commission that the role of the Citizens Advice Bureau was to advise clients of their options and which organisations could help them. In certain circumstances small amounts of money could be made available.

Jim Holah (Sovereign Housing Association) reported to the Commission that his organisation was involved at both ends of the homeless cycle. As landlords, they could be the cause of homelessness if people were defaulting on rent payments despite assistance offered by Sovereign to enable people to maintain their tenancy. Also, Sovereign were a supplier of housing to those assessed by the Council as being homeless. Councillor Webster asked what assistance was given to tenants who were in danger of defaulting on their rent. Jim Holah responded that when tenants notified them of a potential issue early on, Sovereign would provide advice and support around Housing Benefit or debt advice as appropriate. It was recognised that rent arrears mounted quickly and those most at risk of being evicted were people who did not request assistance early. Councillor Webster asked whether Jim Holah had a view as to the future situation regarding homelessness related to redundancy in particular. Councillor Webster hoped to use the expectations of Sovereign to provide a proxy for private landlords and thereby form a greater understanding of the total level of homelessness in the area in the future. Jim Holah replied that whilst eviction figures for the previous year had reduced, Sovereign had identified the Welfare Benefit Reform programme as presenting a significant risk in the future, and in addition to further redundancies it was expected that there would be more homelessness.

June Graves agreed that the Welfare Reform Bill was likely to have a significant impact on homelessness, and suggested that people would be most affected on the anniversary of their assessment. June Graves indicated a further risk that had been identified, that of slow growth in home ownership meaning that people were staying in private rented property for longer, reducing the available properties which kept prices high. A further issue was the need for smaller, more affordable houses in the future.

Councillor Vickers expressed a desire to find more options to assist those finding themselves homeless and suggested lobbying for a change in local housing allowance. Councillor Goff asked how many people would have nowhere to go that night. Mel Brain responded that previous rough sleeper counts had estimated there were likely to be around six people but that there was a direct access hostel and people could register for a room. In addition, an emergency plan was in place during extreme weather meaning that no-one needed to sleep rough when the weather fell below a certain temperature. Mel Brain went on to inform the Commission that those the Council had a duty to assist was set out in legislation. Factors that might prevent the Council from accepting a

homelessness duty included their immigration status or being at fault for losing their accommodation.

Councillor Rendel raised a concern that whilst the Core Strategy required the inclusion of affordable housing in developments of several houses, it was possible for a developer to later apply for an exemption to this rule on the basis of the development not being viable. Councillor Rendel suggested that the high cost of land in West Berkshire contributed to this.

The Chairman asked Councillor Vickers for a proposed recommendation. Councillor Vickers commented that not all relevant organisations were present including Two Saints and Loose Ends. Councillor Vickers therefore proposed a further half day meeting to include other agencies, where possible solutions could be discussed. Councillor Croft advised the Commission that the proposed Homelessness Strategy was to be consulted on in the coming months and that this might form a foundation for discussion. The Commission supported this proposal and requested that all members of the Commission be involved.

Councillor Webster requested that the discussion include consideration of the Section 106 affordable housing programme finances. June Graves responded that this budget was currently over committed and further monies were awaited.

The Chairman suggested that Sovereign Housing Association and the Citizens Advice Bureau continued to be involved in discussions along with service users who could share their experiences. Jim Holah expressed his interest and requested to be involved in the structure of the day. He proposed discussions around the implications of the Welfare Reform Act, Universal Credit, Bedroom Tax and any other upcoming risks. Jan Rothwell also expressed a wish to be involved in the discussion.

Councillor Webster requested that the day be held soon in order to fit with the budget setting timetable.

RESOLVED that the Housing Service involve members of the Commission and external agencies in the consultation programme for the proposed Homelessness Strategy.