
TITLE: HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY PRESENTATION

Committee: Development and Transport Committee

Date: Tuesday 20th November 2012

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[M142]

1.0 ISSUE

1.1 Consideration of the issues to be considered in the development of a new homelessness strategy for the district.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION(S)

2.1 Members are requested to consider and feed back to the Head of Housing their concerns and proposals to deal with homelessness, statutory duties to the homeless and the increasing cost of interim accommodation in the district. Proposals will be incorporated into the draft homelessness strategy which will be presented to this committee for endorsement on Monday 3rd December 2012.

3.0 BACKGROUND/OPTIONS

3.1 East Cambridgeshire District Council made fundamental changes to its homelessness and housing advice service in 2008, changing the focus to work to prevent people from becoming homeless by focusing on early flexible intervention, housing advice and mediation, and less on taking homelessness applications and crisis management. This strategy worked well in an environment in which the housing problems of the majority of people who approached the council could be resolved by finding solutions in the private rented sector, and from 2008 to early 2011 use of bed and breakfast and homelessness acceptances fell to a record low.

3.2 From early 2011, however, the combined effects of the economic recession, a very buoyant property market with very high rents in nearby Cambridge and nervousness of private sector landlords about changes to welfare benefits led to a crisis in homelessness and a sudden increase in the need for interim accommodation to meet the Council's duties to people becoming homeless, and by 2012 the Council was spending around £30,000 a month on bed and breakfast accommodation.

3.3 This presentation sets out these issues and suggests a plan of action to deal with the crisis and to enable the Council both to meet its statutory obligations

to homeless people and to be able to offer a form of housing solution to those to whom the Council owes no duty. It includes some detailed policies to mitigate the cost to the Council of dealing with homeless families and their possessions, and a programme of actions to increase the amount of interim hostel-type accommodation available to the Council. The presentation also looks at the potential risks to the service and to the Council in the future

- 3.4 The Homelessness Act 2002 placed a duty on local authorities to review the extent of homelessness in their district and to produce a strategy that will fulfil the following aims:
- To prevent homelessness
 - To ensure that there is sufficient accommodation available for people who are, or who may become, homeless
 - To ensure there is satisfactory support for people who are, or who may become, homeless, or who need support to prevent them from becoming homeless again.
- 3.5 The *Housing Act 1996*, *Homelessness Act 2002*, *Homeless (priority need for accommodation) (England) order 2002*, the CLG *Homelessness Code of Guidance 2005/6 edition* and other legislation and case law impose duties on local authorities towards people who are homeless or who are threatened with homelessness. The authority is required to carry out investigations to determine whether a duty is owed to any homeless person. These investigations can sometimes be extensive and time-consuming. They need to determine whether a person or a family is:-
- Eligible for recourse to public funds
 - Actually homeless
 - In a priority need group
 - Not intentionally homeless
 - Has a local connection to the area
- 3.6 If the staff believe that a person approaching the authority may meet these criteria certain duties are owed. These may range from a duty to provide only advice and assistance to a full duty to find permanent accommodation. While investigations are under way people are sometimes placed in interim accommodation, usually a hostel or bed and breakfast accommodation. Where there is a duty to provide permanent accommodation this is discharged through agreements with Registered Social Landlords (Housing Associations). From 9th November 2012, *sections 148 and 149 of the Localism Act 2011* enabled local authorities to use the new power that will allow them to end the main homelessness duty with a private rented sector offer without the applicant's consent. Such an offer would have to meet the requirements of the *Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) (England) Order 2012 (SI 2012/2601)*.
- 3.7 If the criteria in 3.5 are not met the authority may have other duties or no duty at all. East Cambridgeshire District Council can work with these people to find

other solutions, and works to prevent as many cases of homelessness as possible.

- 3.8 The Housing Aid and Advice Department deals with between 1500 and 2000 enquiries a year. Many of these are routine enquiries about tenants and landlords' rights and responsibilities, or about the different options available to home seekers in the district. However, over 200 homeless applications (with all the associated investigation work) are dealt with every year, and the number of cases in which homelessness is prevented has been growing steadily.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS/EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 4.1 An Equalities Impact/Needs/Requirement Assessment is not required for this presentation but will be required for the Homelessness Strategy which will be presented to committee on 3rd December 2012.

- 4.2 The financial implications and risks to the council of failing to take action are serious. Bed and breakfast use is more than five times the use in 2010/11 and the costs to the council of extensive bed and breakfast use are prohibitive. The risks of judicial review are increasing as staff come under more pressure, and defending any county or high court action would incur significant costs.

- 4.6 There are no other financial implications arising from this report.

5.0 APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Presentation slides

<u>Background Documents</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Contact Officer</u>
	Room 117 The Grange, Ely	Jane Hollingworth (Position: e.g. Head of Housing (01353) 616236 E-mail: jane.hollingworth@eastcambs.gov.uk