

Cherwell District Council

Executive

3 November 2014

Housing Strategy Priority 5: Homeless Prevention Action Plan Update

Report of Head of Regeneration and Housing

This report is public

Purpose of report

To update the Executive on the progress of the Homelessness Prevention Action Plan 2013-2015.

1.0 Recommendations

The meeting is recommended:

- 1.1 To approve the update of the Homelessness Prevention Action Plan which takes account of learning from the current year's plan, and reflecting Cherwell District Council's application for the Gold standard accreditation for homelessness services.
- 1.2 To approve for the 2015/16 financial year, the ring-fencing of the homeless grant monies provided as part of the Council's general financial settlement awarded by central Government.

2.0 Introduction

- 2.1 The Housing Strategy 2012-17 explains the "journey" which Cherwell District Council has taken from high levels of homelessness acceptances and consequent high use of expensive, private sector temporary accommodation to today's position where despite austerity cuts to services, the number is much reduced and the type of accommodation improved. The number is consistently below the target of 43, and households are able to live in purpose built, well managed accommodation.
- 2.2 In order to react flexibly to changing circumstances, in 2013 and in particular the substantial and challenging welfare reforms, a Homelessness Prevention Action Plan was produced to focus on the detail needed to carry out the actions in the Housing Strategy. The attached Homelessness prevention action plan shows the progress which has been made and updates the plan for 2015-16. This update was recommended in the report to Executive on the Homelessness Prevention Action plan 2013.

3.0 Report Details

- 3.1 The Action Plan links into the requirements of the Governments Gold Standard Programme.
- 3.2 The Government has issued a challenge to Local Authorities to reach a Gold Standard for homelessness services. Working towards the Gold Standard for services in homelessness is part of the Regeneration and Housing Service Plan. This is part of our homelessness prevention ethos, as the Challenge is designed to help stem future increases in homelessness and rough sleeping by encouraging local authorities to deliver comprehensive preventative services for all clients - not just the families and very vulnerable individuals who would otherwise be owed a statutory duty.
- 3.3 One of the steps in achieving the Gold Standard is taking part in a process known as a Diagnostic Peer Review (DPR). Local Authorities have been encouraged to form groups of 3 or more to carry out a "critical friend" assessment of each other's homelessness service to make sure the best outcomes are being achieved for customers. Receiving feedback on our service will help us to:
- identify key strengths and weaknesses by highlighting good practice
 - identifying gaps in provision or poor customer service
 - make recommendations for service improvement
 - develop effective improvement plans to help maximise the potential to prevent homelessness wherever possible
 - make the best use of current resources.
- 3.4 We are working with the other local authorities in Oxfordshire to carry out Diagnostic Peer Reviews which will enable us to take the next step in meeting the challenge. This involves 10 steps and as they progress through them, Local Authorities can be awarded a bronze, silver or gold standard.
- 3.5 Cherwell is very keen to meet the requirements for Gold Standard (which can be achieved using existing resources) and will be the first District in Oxfordshire to undertake its Diagnostic Peer Review (DPR) in October 2014. The results of this review will then give an indication of the timeframe it will take for us to proceed to meet the Gold Standard.

Partnership approach

- 3.6 The Homelessness Prevention Action Plan 2015-16 continues to maintain a strong focus on partnership. As services respond to the reduction in Council (District and County) funding, best value for money will be achieved by working together on our joint aims. The introduction of the full suite of welfare reforms has been delayed but there will be effects on tenancy sustainment as the freeze on benefits comes in, as well as the failure of local housing allowance to keep pace with rent increases.
- 3.7 The plan is being, and will continue to be monitored by a steering group of statutory and voluntary sector partners, ensuring buy in from all parties and streamlining a joined up approach to holistic homelessness prevention.

Challenges to Homelessness Prevention

- 3.8 The national agenda of the Coalition Government has resulted in a demand for local authorities to offer “more for less” by working more efficiently in a time of reduced funding. For homelessness services, this is at a time when demand is increasing due to changes to welfare benefits. Although the nation is beginning to see signs of economic growth, in Cherwell we are still challenged by lack of skills leading to unemployment, part time or zero hours contracts leading to housing instability, and the failure of wages to keep pace with rents and house prices.

A holistic approach to Homelessness prevention

- 3.9 Through the homelessness prevention action plan services are directed to a holistic approach which tackles the deep causes of homelessness, rather than a crisis response. Homelessness prevention is a more cost effective approach than crisis management (Research by Heriot-Watt University calculated the cost of preventing someone from becoming homeless was £1,700 compared with the £5,300 cost of helping someone after they become homeless). It is also a far better approach for the individuals and households concerned, many of whom are very vulnerable and also include families with children .It contributes significantly to the protection of vulnerable children as well as providing help to the wider community.
- 3.10 The homelessness prevention action plan is based on evidence about the households who present as homeless. This has resulted in a wide range of tools to prevent homelessness including work to improve budgeting, reduce debt and improve employment prospects.

Resources for homelessness prevention

- 3.11 In order to avoid expensive temporary accommodation it is essential to continue to invest in front line services at the Council and through our partners. We provide outreach services for victims of domestic violence to remain in their homes if it is safe for them to do so .We work in significant partnership in both Banbury and Bicester to provide services for vulnerable singles to prevent them sleeping rough as far as possible. We provide general family support to build family resilience to prevent family break up which is often a root cause of homelessness. We also support education and skills training to improve opportunities for those disadvantaged who need skills to access training and employment. The homelessness prevention action plan sets out a co-ordinated approach by the agencies working in this field in Cherwell, to avoid duplication and to produce synergy from our actions.
- 3.12 The funding from Central Government to provide homelessness prevention activity in the district is no longer ring-fenced. Local Authorities have been advised by the then Housing Minister, Grant Shapps, that the money should be retained for homelessness prevention at least until the end of the current parliament. In Cherwell, we use the funding for external partnerships who can deliver through grant agreements. Their performance is monitored regularly to ensure the outcomes are achieved or exceeded. These partners have made a major contribution to Cherwell’s ability to maintain performance and reduce the need for temporary accommodation. They will play a large part in our bid for Gold Standard.

- 3.13 The partnerships have been reviewed as directed by the Housing Strategy 2012-17, Chapter 5 and grant agreements have been modified to take account of the changing environment. Not only do the grants made by Cherwell District Council enhance our partners' ability to reduce homelessness, but they can also assist organisations in leveraging in other funding, as they demonstrate the Council's support.

4.0 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

- 4.1 It is through adopting this Action Plan that the Council makes clear its commitment to the homelessness prevention agenda to both central Government and its partners across the statutory and voluntary sectors
- 4.2 The Homelessness Prevention Action Plan is a result of a review of the previous action plan as directed by Chapter 5 of the Housing Strategy, which requires a review of partnerships.
- 4.3 The adoption of the Homelessness Prevention Action Plan is an important step on the Council's journey to achieving Gold Standard for Homelessness Services, and all that lies behind that award.

5.0 Consultation

Public consultation	The actions derive from the Housing Strategy which was subject to the full consultation procedure.
Registered Providers operating in Cherwell and statutory and voluntary agencies providing services for vulnerable people	A public event was held on 24 September attended by many of the partner organisations who work with people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and Registered provider partners who work with us on tenancy sustainment.
Council members	Other partners were contacted by email. Council members were invited to the "Stronger through partnerships" event on 24 September. The plan has been emailed to Council Members for comment.

6.0 Alternative Options and Reasons for Rejection

The following alternative options have been identified and rejected for the reasons as set out below.

Option 1: Not to endorse the Homeless Action Plan 2015/16 which also requests continued ring-fencing of the DCLG element of council grant for homelessness prevention. This has been rejected as it will lead to an increase in statutory duties to

homeless and an increase in spending on provision of expensive temporary accommodation

7.0 Implications

Financial and Resource Implications

- 7.1 The DCLG grant is an unring-fenced grant so the council has discretion over where it can apply that funding. £99,000 DCLG grant included in the overall grant allocation to the Council by CLG is for homelessness provision as part of the 2014-15 budget. The Council will not formally set its 2015-16 budget until February 2015. However the current Medium Term Revenue Plan allocates this same amount for homelessness funding for 2015-16 through to 2019-20.

Comments checked by:

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Legal Implications

- 7.2 The Council has a statutory duty to provide homeless services including the provision of temporary accommodation to qualifying households.

Comments checked by:

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Risk implications

- 7.3 If the Council does not continue to support a homeless prevention approach to delivering its services, it may face an increase in provision of temporary accommodation which may be a significant increased cost to the Council. This will, if and when necessary be escalated from the local strategic risk register (managed at service level) to the corporate risk register.

Comments checked by:

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8.0 Decision Information

Key Decision

Financial Threshold Met: Yes

Community Impact Threshold Met: Yes

Wards Affected

All

Links to Corporate Plan and Policy Framework

- District of opportunity
- Thriving communities
- Sound budgets and customer-focussed council

Lead Councillor

Councillor Debbie Pickford, Lead Member for Housing

Document Information

Appendix No	Title
1	Homeless Action Plan 2015/16
Background Papers	
None	
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