

Committee: HEALTH AND HOUSING COMMITTEE

Agenda Item

Date: September 08, 2005

Title: MEETING HOUSING NEEDS

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Item for decision

Summary

This report advises the Committee of housing need issues within Uttlesford and suggests a way forward to address future homelessness and other housing provision. This report relates to the whole of the District. The report refers to the use of significant Council resources over a number of years.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Committee: -

1. Endorses the proposal outlined in the report to delay some lettings to assist homeless applicants.
2. Agrees to the formation of a working group to assess the long-term needs of the Council to provide emergency homeless accommodation.
3. Instructs Officers to concentrate on working with RSLs and other agencies to continue with the programme to provide social housing for rent within the District.

Background Papers

The following papers were referred to by the author in the preparation of this report and are available for inspection from the author of the report.

1. Housing Strategy Statement 2005-08
2. Homelessness Strategy
3. 30-Year Housing Business Plan 2005-06
4. PI's
5. Housing Data 2003-5

Impact

Communication/Consultation	There will need to be communication/consultation with partner agencies regarding recommendations 2 and 3.
Community Safety	More appropriate homeless accommodation could reduce some anti social behaviour.
Equalities	None.
Finance	There are significant resources relating to this issue.
Human Rights	None.
Legal Implications	Fulfil Council's statutory duties to provide homeless accommodation.
Ward-specific impacts	Across the district.
Workforce/Workplace	Could have impact on role of housing Team.

Situation

1. This report has been presented to members because the Council, as both a social housing landlord and as a housing enabler, is required to address local housing needs. The Housing Strategy Statement 2005-8, the 30 Year Housing Business Plan and the Homelessness Strategy are key Council documents in this context and explain the way the Council expects to tackle this significant issue.
2. The situation that has arisen relating to housing need shows that the problems can be placed into three groups, which are as follows:
 - (i) Homeless cases where the Council has a duty to assist with accommodation.
 - (ii) Housing Waiting List (HWL) applicants who have made an application to the Council for either a Council dwelling or to be nominated to a Registered Social Landlord (RSL). Currently there are 1,119 applicants on the HWL (this covers all types of need including transfers and includes people registered from outside the Uttlesford District).

The above are regarded as the local expressed housing needs.

- (iii) The estimate of other people who have some degree of housing need but have not or will not approach the Council for assistance.

3. With regard to the first two groups the numbers can be measured by way of their application to the Council. With regard to the last group, this is far more difficult to quantify. In this context, the Council has to rely on the Housing Needs Survey, which was last undertaken in 2002/2003 which was recently updated in 2004 and shows a shortfall of 570 units a year.
4. There is a large gulf between the expressed need and the estimated need. Work is being undertaken by Officers to try and establish more information trends within the overall figures, especially from those people currently resident within the District.
5. Because of the lack of specific accommodation for homeless families within the District, the Council often has to place families and single people, for whom it has accepted a duty to assist, into expensive Bed & Breakfast accommodation until suitable temporary or permanent self-contained accommodation is found. This is clearly an unsatisfactory situation and the Council is required to improve its performance at reducing the use of Bed & Breakfast especially as this is high on the Government's agenda. The Government also expects Councils to gradually reduce the numbers of people in other forms of temporary accommodation. There will be a report to a future meeting of the Committee on this issue.
6. There is now a new Government Order (Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) (England) Order 2003), which outlaws the use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation for families with children for periods of more than six weeks. Whilst the Council endeavours to meet this target it is the view of Officers that currently there is no realistic way that the Council will be able to meet the challenge of being in the top quartile for the performance indicator BV183a, which measures the length of stay of families with children in Bed and Breakfast. This is due to factors such as the lack of alternative emergency accommodation and is linked to the flow of vacancies within the Council and Housing Association stock.
7. The Committee may wish to note that it is projected that during 2005/6 97 new units for rent will become available working with RSLs. The provisional figure for 2006/7 is 124 and for 2007/8 the figure is 112. During this period approximately 140 shared ownership units are expected to also be developed.

Targets

8. The Council is endeavouring to help homeless people and applicants on the Housing Register in a number of ways. Accordingly, the Council as a landlord, has available:
 - (a) Council generated vacancies from within its own stock, which can sometimes be increased by transferring tenants at their request to more suitable accommodation. In 2003/4 the Council allocated a total of 210 vacancies and in 2004/5 there were 207 vacancies.

It should be noted that a number of these vacancies are sheltered housing units, which do not significantly help those applicants in the most housing need.

- (b) RSL vacancies where the Council has nomination rights. In 2003/4 61 applicants were nominated and in 2004/5 the figure was 106.
 - (c) Working with RSLs and other parties, the Council (both the Housing and Planning Departments) provide a programme of new affordable housing within the District as part of new housing developments.
9. It is now Council Policy to negotiate on a site-by-site basis 40% affordable housing on new sites of 0.5 hectares or more or 15 units or more. In rural settlements affordable housing may be sought on smaller sites if appropriate.
10. The Council usually has nomination rights to a high proportion of any social housing for rent units that are created. Clearly shared ownership, key worker and discounted private sector market housing assists some of the people who are unable to meet their accommodation needs in the open market but have not expressed a wish for Council assistance. However, previous housing needs surveys have demonstrated that the greatest need is for social housing to rent and it is anticipated that this remains the case.

Options

11. In order to address these issues in a more proactive manner, I am proposing to manage empty units generated from within the Council's stock, in a different way with the aim of having several units available at any one time for housing homeless families (who are usually the highest pointed applicants) without hopefully the need to use bed and breakfast to the same degree.
12. This proposal will inevitably impact to a small degree on the Council's empty property (void) figures. Accordingly, the proposed changes will need careful monitoring by both Officers and the Committee to see if it achieves the objective.
13. Sadly, the problems for single homeless applicants going into long term Bed & Breakfast will still be severe because of the lack of specific emergency homeless accommodation or suitable move on accommodation.
14. I feel therefore, that this may be an appropriate time for the Committee to start considering, in a structured way, the long-term requirements, of the Council, to deal with emergency or short-term homelessness accommodation. Accordingly, a way forward would be to have a small group of Members (2 Liberal Democrats, 1 Conservative and 1 Independent), a Tenant Forum representative and Officers investigate this issue and in due course to report back to the Committee on their findings and observations. It should be noted that the financial implications and the

- ability to find a site for any form of purpose built accommodation, if it was thought necessary, would be very difficult. Clearly partnership working with appropriate care agencies would be needed and a key task would be to investigate the funding issues.
15. In recent months, several Members of the Council have expressed an interest in the Council directly building new housing for rent. There is no legal reason why Councils should not do this. However, advice has been sought from the Housing Corporation, as that is the agency that would approve any available grant.
 16. The main points raised by the Housing Corporation outlined that before a grant was considered, the following would be required:
 - Improve quality through meeting scheme development standards, high HQI scores, very good eco homes rating, high levels of design quality.
 - Be deliverable, availability of land and whether planning permission has been gained.
 - Contribute to sustainable communities and regional and sub regional strategies.
 - Value for money, will be tested using grant per unit and grant per person.
 - Section 106 sites, funding will be provided to a site if it delivers more affordable housing outputs or a different mix than would have been possible without the input of grant.
 - The Housing Service must be regarded as a 3 star service to be able to apply for housing Corporation grant.
 17. On examination of the criteria and in view of the fact that the Housing Service is currently regarded as 2 star, it is extremely unlikely that the Council could successfully bid for grant.
 18. The Council could use its own capital reserves to build houses to rent. It is understood that this is being promoted by a very few Councils, who are in a very healthy position regarding their capital receipts. This is clearly a complex issue which would, if thought appropriate, need careful further consideration by the Council. It should be noted that the number of units that could be provided per £million pounds, would be very few and the Council would then have very limited ability to address other capital projects.
 19. The whole issue of the use of capital and the Council's debt free status will be thoroughly reviewed by the Council's new Chief Accountant who will join the Council in August. A subsequent report will then be submitted to a future meeting of the Resources Committee.

20. I therefore feel that the Council's Officers should concentrate on achieving as much social housing for rent within the existing framework.
21. However, an exception to this could be for the Council to be proactive and imaginatively consider the use of identified garage sites (the subject of a later report on the agenda) for the further provision of housing to rent.

Pay-Offs/Penalties

22. If the recommendations are agreed it would indicate that the Council is addressing major housing issues and this could result in better provision for families in need in the future. It would be addressing the homelessness in different ways and address the Government's agenda.
23. There could however be strong local opposition to any new initiative, which would require careful handling.
24. If no action were taken the existing arrangements would continue which are gradually becoming untenable.

Risk Analysis

25. The following have been assessed as the potential risks associated with this issue.

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigating Actions
Delay some lettings could have revenue impact	LOW	LOW	Could result in better housing for homeless.
New homeless accommodation could be expensive to provide and not be fully used.	MEDIUM	HIGH	Needs very careful planning i.e. full commitment of the Council
Provision of new affordable housing by Council very expensive without grant.	MEDIUM	HIGH	Need to progress small schemes one at a time.