

WIRRAL COUNCIL

CABINET

23RD JUNE 2011

SUBJECT:	REVIEW OF HOMELESS SERVICES IN WIRRAL
WARD/S AFFECTED:	ALL
REPORT OF:	INTERIM DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE SERVICES
RESPONSIBLE PORTFOLIO HOLDER:	COUNCILLOR GEORGE DAVIES
KEY DECISION? <i>(Defined in paragraph 13.3 of Article 13 'Decision Making' in the Council's Constitution.)</i>	YES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 The purpose of this report is to:

- provide Members with an overview of the current successful Homeless Strategy 2008-2010 and action plan and;
- to seek Members' approval to commission a review of homelessness in Wirral to ensure the new Homeless Strategy reflects the significant impact of changes in homeless services and the economic climate and policy over recent years.

1.2 Completing a review of homelessness will assist in meeting one of the Council's Corporate Priorities to significantly 'prevent and alleviate homelessness' by continuing to focus on the continuous evaluation and improvement of homeless services to meet local needs. The Council's Homeless Service has benefited from significant investment over recent years to respond to the issues identified in the last Homeless Review carried out in 2007.

1.3 Local Authorities are required to consider the local housing needs within their individual areas, including those of homeless households, to whom Local Authorities have a statutory duty to provide assistance. Under the Homelessness Act 2002 there is a statutory requirement for the Council to produce a Homeless Strategy informed by a comprehensive review of all forms of homelessness in their area.

1.4 A new Homelessness Strategy is required to be published within the period of five years beginning on the day on which the last Homelessness Strategy was published (which was 26th June 2008). The aim is to ensure that Local Authorities take a comprehensive and strategic approach to the management and prevention of all forms of homelessness in their areas. Commissioning a complete review of homeless services and provision in Wirral and developing and implementing a new Homeless Strategy are also action targets which have been identified as needed to be completed within the Housing Strategic Plan, which is the subject of a separate report to Members.

1.5 Following the last homelessness review the Council's Homelessness service was re-branded as a Housing Options service with a focus on prevention of homelessness. Operationally it is reported that Council's Housing Options service has seen a

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significant rise in demand with a 57% rise in housing and debt advice cases opened during 2010/11 compared with the previous year. The number of statutory homeless acceptances increased by 51% in 2010/11 which reflects the national picture which has seen an increase in homeless acceptances in three consecutive quarters for the first time since 2003. Further work is required to understand the reasons for this and how to best respond. Consultants would work with officers and key partners to explore these issues in more detail to inform a new Homeless Strategy.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION/S

2.1 It is recommended that Members:

- a) note the achievements of the successful 2008-2010 Homeless Strategy and;
- b) approve engaging consultants to carry out a review of homeless services in Wirral to inform the development of a new Homeless Strategy for the borough.

3.0 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

3.1 The Homeless Act 2002 requires Local Authorities to adopt a strategic approach to homeless issues by completing a comprehensive review of all forms of homelessness in their area and publishing a Homeless Strategy every five years.

3.2 Wirral's last comprehensive review of homelessness and homeless services was carried out in 2007 and the outcome of this review informed the basis of the 2008-10 Homeless Strategy which as a result focused on four strategic themes:-

- Understanding homelessness and housing need
- Preventing homelessness
- Increasing access to choice of housing
- Providing appropriate support.

These themes have ensured that working with our partners, homeless services in Wirral have continued to develop and improve to reflect local needs.

3.3 Since the current strategy was implemented there has been an 89% decrease in the number of statutory homeless acceptances. The Housing Options team successfully prevented homelessness for 1,199 cases between April 2008 and March 2011.

3.4 During this time and in particular more recently, members will be aware of the significant difficulties and uncertainties which people have faced as a result of both the downturn in the economy and the subsequent impact on the housing market as well as changes currently taking place around the future of social housing and the welfare benefits system.

3.5 As a result of the changes and uncertainties facing people both now and in the future, officers believe it is important to obtain a comprehensive assessment of the likely extent of homelessness in Wirral in the future and to evaluate the services available. It is important that this review again determines the effectiveness of homeless services and measures their impact upon homeless prevention and relief, and identifies any gaps or improvements needed in the current services provided.

3.6 A review carried out by consultants would be seen to be independent by partners and service users and would look at where services need improving or developing, identify if required the need to refocus and shift resources. Consultants would in their independent capacity engage with hostels, service providers, partners and service users. It is intended that the outcome of the review will inform the development of the new Homeless Strategy and associated strategic action plan.

4.0 BACKGROUND AND KEY ISSUES

4.1 Robson Rhodes (previously known as Grant Thornton) were commissioned by Wirral to carry out its last Homelessness Review in 2007.

4.2 The review identified key recommendations, which were addressed through the Homeless Strategy 2008-2010 and included the following findings and actions:

- Wirral Homelessness and Housing Advice team - A substantial gap in housing options available and insufficient resources for staff was identified.
 - Investment in the Housing Options and Homeless team enabled a refocus towards prevention work and lead to the successful prevention of homelessness for 1,199 cases between April 2008 and March 2011 and a reduction in statutory homeless acceptance of 89%. This has resulted in substantial savings on the cost of temporary accommodation.
 - A Private Sector Liaison Officer was appointed to reduce homelessness resulting from rent arrears and tenancy breakdown and increase working with the private rented sector.
 - Accredited landlord properties are now advertised through Wirralhomes with private rented homes also being used to prevent homelessness and discharge the Council's statutory homeless duty, assisting to alleviate pressure on the social housing stock.
 - The Government's Mortgage Rescue scheme was implemented to assist households facing repossession. Between December 2009 and November 2010, 1,642 households were given advice on financial or debt issues. During 09/10 and 10/11, 159 households followed the Mortgage Rescue route, with 27 eligible households assisted to remain in their homes under an affordable tenure.
 - No 16 or 17 year olds have been placed in Bed and Breakfast accommodation since April 2009.
- Partnership – it was identified that people with housing need, often require medical assessments and or support.
 - Partnership working has enabled a more holistic approach to homelessness with specific initiatives between health. and housing developed.
 - Projects have been developed to respond to homelessness and the impact this has on a person's health. These include a Hospital Link worker who has been appointed to improve the hospital discharge process for homeless people; an outreach mental health service to improve access for homeless people to mental health services and a practitioner to provide surgeries at local hostels and drop-in centres.
- Access to permanent housing – an annual review of allocations was recommended.
 - The Housing Priority Panel was mainstreamed to assist vulnerable adults to move-on from supported or temporary accommodation and between April 2009 and January 2011, 109 individuals were re-housed.
 - Visiting support services also supported over 230 individuals to maintain or sustain independent living.

- Strategic planning – the need to understand the strategic connection between social care and housing policies was identified.
 - The Strategic Homeless Group was established in November 2008 to oversee and drive forward the delivery of the Homeless Strategy Action Plan (2008-2011) and to achieve decision making to take forward Wirral's wider strategic homeless agenda.

4.4 Despite the success of the existing strategy, as a Local Authority we cannot be complacent, with further work still to be done. The development of the new Homeless Strategy and action plan will ensure that Wirral and its partners are best placed to respond to the changes taking place which impact on homelessness.

4.5 In particular, initial discussions with the Strategic Homeless Group (who have overseen the process of driving forward the existing strategy) have identified the following issues which they feel need to be considered as we develop the new Homeless Strategy:

- Responding to increasing demand for housing advice.
- Issues arising from drugs and or alcohol misuse.
- Mental health – including access to services, assistance, links with health and the evaluation of impact of the Mental Health Worker.
- Residents with complex needs in social housing sector.
- Responding to the national strategy to end rough sleeping.
- The need to consider how homeless people access health services and live more healthy lives.
- A review of the sustainability of move-on accommodation and the isolation felt in the community following move-on from supported accommodation.
- The link between homelessness and insecure housing and child safeguarding issues.

It is anticipated that there will be many other issues which need to be considered in the review.

5.0 RELEVANT RISKS

5.1 Carrying out a comprehensive review of homelessness and using this to inform and produce a Homeless Strategy is in accordance with the Homelessness Act 2002. Therefore if this is not carried out Wirral Council will be in breach of its statutory requirements and would be the subject of legal challenge.

6.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

6.1 The option to conduct the review using in house staffing resources has been considered. This however, would not be considered good practice as an internal review would not be as effective, objective or independent particularly as it needs to review all homeless services provided in Wirral including those provided in house by the Council.

6.2 The review therefore needs to be independent to be able to establish if services need to be improved, developed and/or there is a need to refocus and shift resources from existing services being provided. Consultants would in their independent capacity, be able to engage with hostels, service providers, partners and service users and provide a truly independent review of the current services and set clear recommendations for change.

7.0 CONSULTATION

- 7.1 Consultation would take place with partner organisations and services as part of the Homeless Review.

8.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR VOLUNTARY, COMMUNITY AND FAITH GROUPS

- 8.1 A Homeless Review will positively affect the general public, Housing Associations, local enterprises, local services, and voluntary and community organisations. Many of the homeless services in Wirral are carried out by voluntary, community and faith groups therefore consultation would take place with these bodies as part of the review.

9.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: FINANCIAL; IT; STAFFING; AND ASSETS

- 9.1 Officers within the Strategic Housing Division of Corporate Services would commission the review and work with the consultants to complete the review.
- 9.2 The 2007 Homeless Review cost £40,183 and it is estimated that the next review would cost in the region of £45,000 with the cost of the review being met from the Housing Strategy Annual Research Budget.
- 9.3 There are no IT or assets implications arising from the report.

10.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 There is a statutory requirement for the Council to produce a Homeless Strategy under the Homelessness Act 2002 based on the findings of a review of all forms of homelessness in the area.

11.0 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 The needs of vulnerable and marginalised groups will be considered as part of the review and will be addressed within the Homeless Strategy. It is a key objective of the current Strategy to ensure that those at risk of homelessness or currently homeless have equal access to opportunities, and would continue to be so in the new Strategy.
- 11.2 The Homeless Strategy aims to reduce poverty, isolation and exclusion by meeting local needs and assisting to provide access to appropriate accommodation.
- 11.3 Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)
- | | |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| (a) Is an EIA required? | Yes - on the new Homeless Strategy |
| (b) If 'yes', has one been completed? | No |

12.0 CARBON REDUCTION IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1 None known.

13.0 PLANNING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

- 13.1 None known.

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APPENDICES

REFERENCE MATERIAL

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Wirral Homeless Review - Joint Meeting (Housing and Community Safety/ Regeneration and Planning Strategy) Overview and Scrutiny Committees	5 th December 2007
Homeless Strategy 2003-2008 - Cabinet	24 th July 2003
Wirral's Homeless Strategy 2008-2010 - Cabinet	26 th June 2008